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Phenomenological Study on Veteran Resource Center (VRC) in
California Community Colleges

A Dissertation by

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Chapman University

Orange, CA

Attallah College of Educational Studies

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

December 2023

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October 2023

Phenomenological Study on Veteran Resource Center (VRC) in
California Community Colleges

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This is certainly the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice this moment and be glad in it. I dedicate this work to God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ the Son.

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돌아보면 15년...녹록치않은 여정이였습니다. 정말 많은 일들이 있었네요. 지금까지의 노력들이 앞으로 어떤 열매를 맺을지, 그리고 지금 어느곳으로 향하고 있는지 저는 아무것도 모릅니다. 그저 하나님 보시기에 아름답고 그분께 영광돌려질 열매가 되기를 기도합니다. 감사합니다.

Thank you for everything.

Sincerely,

Darl Park

ABSTRACT

Phenomenological Study on Veteran Resource Center (VRC) in California Community Colleges

by Darl Park

Since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the largest student veteran enrollments have taken place at community colleges. Student veterans are considered *at-risk students* due to their high attrition rates in higher education. There is a lack of literature regarding the experiences of staff responsible for providing support services to student veterans in higher education. Veterans Resource Center (VRC) is the one-stop center for student veterans to help them navigate administrative processes and address any concerns toward degree completion. Thus, VRCs play a major role in student veterans' academic success, and further exploration of their experiences and voices is needed.

This study seeks to illuminate the knowledge, expertise, and understanding of the professional practices of VRC staff members in California Community Colleges, where student veterans' transition takes place the most. Phenomenology served as the guiding methodological framework. The interview was the principal data collection method, which consisted of 15 participants. Findings indicated that student veterans are more prone to experience non-academic hardships than their peers. Mitigating all aspects of each student's personal issues may be outside the scope of influence of any campus service provider. Nonetheless, VRCs strive to enhance student veterans' quality of living and learning. Moreover, being able to identify these hardships and plan for mitigating their intensity can be achieved through a proper referral for where to seek additional help.

Implications for policy include the current California Community College VRC funding formula's equity gap and how it results in insufficient VRC funding and staffing. Furthermore, it is critical to improve understandings of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, military-affiliated students and dependents, stigmatization of disability, and the transition experiences of student veterans who are not using the GI Bill. As a result of this study, program administrators/directors may better explain how their staff might experience difficulties and potentially improve their service-delivery model. Not all student veterans need the same support, and it is imperative to understand that student veterans' needs may vary from context to context.

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1 Introduction

In 2015 alone, approximately 200,000 student veterans enrolled in college for the first time (Jenner, 2017; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). The largest enrollments (43%) are at community colleges (Flink, 2017). And yet, Cate et al. (2017) reported a 28% attrition rate among 850,000 student veterans who left their higher education programs without certificates or degrees between 2009 and 2015. Furthermore, Lim et al. (2018) asserted that student veterans are considered *at-risk students* in higher education due to their 51% overall attrition in higher education.

To address this concern, academic literature on student veterans has burgeoned during the past decade; however, previous research studies have largely focused on academic performance, mental health, and how student veterans personally experience the transition from military to college. As a result, there is limited information about how different institutional strategies can be implemented to facilitate specific aspects of student veterans' transitions across campuses. In that context, several studies underscore the importance of the Veterans Resource Center (VRC) as the hub of support for student veterans to help them navigate administrative processes and address any concerns toward degree completion (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Summerlot et al., 2009;). Additionally, the point person at VRCs may advocate and rectify issues on campus for student veterans, not just serve as a certifying official (Ford et al., 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; Kirchner, 2015; Vance & Miller, 2009).

Thus, VRCs may serve as the one-stop center with streamlined programs and services for student veterans. Certainly, we cannot assume that all student veterans need the same support, and it is imperative to understand that student veterans' needs may vary from context to context.

Moreover, it is crucial to implement those needs at the institutional level. In that regard, this study seeks to explore and identify the specific difficulties college staff experience while providing services to student veterans. Furthermore, the study seeks to illuminate the knowledge, expertise, and understanding of the professional practices of VRC staff members who work with student veterans with disabilities in California community colleges. It is vital to understand and interpret how they describe the experience of providing services (and facilitating the transition process) toward student veterans with (or without) disabilities.

To that account, the first chapter of this paper will include: a) the Relationship between the GI Bill and Higher Education, b) the History of Veterans Resource Centers (VRC) in California, c) Student Veterans with Disabilities, and d) the Problem Statement.

Relationship between GI Bill and Higher Education

Historically, the GI Bill led millions of student veterans to college. Through the years, student veterans have contributed different experiences, goals, and interests to classrooms; this phenomenon is still relevant to this date (Summerlot et al., 2009). This section will discuss the history of the GI Bill and how it affected characteristic differences among student veterans of previous war eras.

History of GI Bill

According to Livingston et al. (2011), the initial relationship between higher education and the military began with the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 during the Civil War. This law required military training as part of the curriculum at institutions, which helped the creation of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) in 1916. And yet, the unemployment rate of veterans with service-connected disabilities was twice as high as that of non-disabled veterans due to the lack of training programs and college attrition. Thus, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act

of 1918 was passed to provide academic and vocational training to student veterans with disabilities; however, there were several conflicts between veteran students and state/local agencies due to vague languages written in the law. As a result, the training was only available to student veterans with severe disabilities (Madaus et al., 2009).

To remedy the conflict, the Disabled Veterans Act of 1943 introduced a vocational rehabilitation program for World War II veterans, and in June 1944 (a year later), President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the GI Bill of Rights, in order to assist World War II veterans in transition to civilian life (Gordon et al., 2016). At that time, student veterans were estimated to be 52% of the total college population in 1946 (Madaus et al., 2009). Moreover, the relationship between higher education and the military has been more facilitated and stronger as approximately two million veterans entered college after World War II in the 1940s and 1950s. Ten years after the end of World War II, 12.4 million veterans directly utilized the GI Bill (Cate et al., 2017).

In addition, during the Korean War, college attendance was a justification for draft/conscription exemption from military service. In 1973, the US military ended the active draft and became an all-volunteer force (AVF) (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Such a transition to AVF affected military recruitment efforts because they had to develop incentives for recruitment. As a result, the US military enhanced educational benefits. At that point, the number of veterans who entered colleges became much more overwhelming. Accounting for 70% of the total male college enrollment in the nation, colleges were not ready for such an influx of veterans onto their campuses (this phenomenon may still be relevant and inherent to this date).

At that time, colleges made the following efforts to counter this influx of student veterans (which started with World War II veterans): a) they hired additional faculty members as class

sizes increased b) they offered accelerated programs; c) admission practices were more flexible; d) military experiences were transferrable to academic credits; and e) family housing needs were accommodated (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). On the other hand, the Veterans Administration (VA) paid the benefits directly to the student veterans instead of paying the school or institution. Subsequently, it was the veteran's responsibility to budget their benefit according to the needs of their desired studies, which may include: tuition, books, and living stipend (Cate et al., 2017). Today, the Post-9/11 GI Bill is paid to both institutions (with tuition) and veterans (with living stipends).

GI Bill Today

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (also known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill) is one of the most significant events for student veterans (Cook et al., 2009). The Post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect on August 1, 2009. This program offers nearly 2 million service members education support in higher education. Tuition and fees are paid directly to the institution, and a monthly living allowance is paid directly to student veterans. The monthly living allowance amount equals the basic allowance for a junior non-commissioned (E-5) officer. Additionally, a \$1,000 annual stipend for books and supplies is provided, and if the veteran relocated from a rural area, a one-time payment of \$500 may also be provided. Finally, this benefit can be transferred to a spouse or dependent child (Gordon, 2014).

So, who is eligible for the post-9/11 GI Bill? There must be 90 days of active duty service after September 10, 2001; one must also be honorably discharged or medically discharged (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). Veterans have fifteen years to use thirty-six months of entitlement. Additionally, the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) expanded the definition of disability and eligibility for services and accommodations

to include *thinking* and *concentration* as part of physical/mental impairment that *limits one or more major life activities*. This account is important because mental health issues (e.g., PTSD, depression, and anxiety) have become the most prevalent among military veterans in later years of warfare.

Furthermore, according to Rumann and Hamrick (2010), the 1991 Persian Gulf War era initiated large-scale deployments for combat missions. For that reason, reserve/guard personnel's mid-term withdrawals from college have soared. In order to encounter such enrollment discontinuity patterns, federal law extended student loan deferments and also preserved Pell Grant eligibility of deployed reserve/guard who attended colleges. These provisions still cover current student veterans because military forces serving in the "War on Terror" consist of a large proportion (710,418 members as of 2009) of activated reserve/guard units.

War on Terror

On August 31, 2021, President Biden announced the end of the war in Afghanistan, also known as Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which began on October 7, 2001. Eleven years ago, on August 31, 2010, President Obama announced that Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) had ended. Although approximately 50,000 US soldiers remained in Iraq as a transitional force under Operation New Dawn (OND), OND also came to an end on December 15, 2011. On October 15, 2014, Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) was designated in Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State (IS) of Iraq. Notably, the public's reception toward US soldiers and veterans has changed over time within the context of past warfare (Flink, 2017). Comparably, disability and its stigma among student veterans have also significantly changed because mental health issues (e.g., PTSD, depression, and anxiety) have become the most prevalent during the Wars on Terror era. Flink (2017) further asserted that it is important to consider each warfare separately to better

understand how veterans' disabilities and stigmas have evolved because each military conflict is unique.

Student Veterans of Previous Eras

Student veterans of different eras experienced different educational circumstances. For example, student veterans of the Vietnam War era started to experience different challenges because: "anti-war activism and anti-military activism did not originate with the Vietnam War" (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 26). In the Vietnam War, approximately 8.5 million soldiers served, with over 153,000 returning with injuries (VA, 2008). Unprecedentedly, student veterans at the time did not want to identify themselves as military-affiliated because they could be victims/targets of protest (Summerlot et al., 2009). Similarly, fewer Korean War veterans enrolled in colleges due to anti-war activism and anti-military activism, which bloomed during the Vietnam War (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). It is estimated that 5.7 million troops have served in the Korean War, with over 100,000 returning from service with service-connected injuries. A lower percentage of student veterans with disabilities used educational benefits during the Korean War, because educational benefits were reduced, and it no longer covered the full costs of college tuition (Madaus et al., 2009); educational benefits were later increased back via the Vietnam Era Veteran's Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974.

In sum, Korean War and Vietnam War veterans wanted to maintain a low profile as students to avoid unstable public sentiment. On the other hand, there was less commotion and controversy during the post-Vietnam Cold War era because there was just indifference/disinterestedness in the military in public (Summerlot et al., 2009). As a result, colleges reduced the programs that supported student veterans; mutually, the presence of student veterans on campuses declined. According to Elliott (2015), less than 1% of the US population

has served in the military in the past ten years since 2011. Thus, Elliott asserted that educating the public about military service may increase civilians' interest and openness toward veterans. At the same time, considering the variation to the injuries (both physical and mental), the public's reception and the transition experiences of the military to civilian life would be prerequisites to re-establishing the relationship between higher education and the military.

Student Veterans of Today

It is estimated that more than two million student veterans who served during the War on Terror will be eligible to pursue college education (Gordon et al., 2016; Madaus et al., 2009; Vance & Miller, 2009). In 2011, student veterans represented 4.9 percent of all 23.1 million undergraduates (Radford et al., 2016), and it increased from approximately 500,000–925,000 between 2005 and 2011 (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). This is one of the largest higher education expenditure operations in the world, equaling \$578 million by the US military (Ford et al., 2009). In 2015 alone, approximately 200,000 Student veterans enrolled in college for the first time (Jenner, 2017; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). The largest enrollments (43%) are at community colleges (Flink, 2017). Bailey et al. (2019) admonished the possibility of how the quality of student veterans and their average academic success may decline due to the influx number of student veterans using the post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. For that matter, Cate et al. (2017) reported a 28% attrition rate among 850,000 student veterans who left their higher education programs without certificates or degrees between 2009 and 2015.

To that account, Lim et al. (2018) asserted that student veterans are considered *at-risk students* in higher education due to their 51% overall attrition in higher education. Additionally, according to Vacchi and Berger (2013), student veterans complete four-year degree programs at a

rate 70 percent lower than their non-veteran peers, and approximately 60 percent of student veterans complete two-year college degree programs than non-veterans. Therefore, the attrition rate among student veterans must not be overlooked. Degree attainment only occurs when a student fulfilled all requirements to be conferred a certificate or degree by a college or university, and it is an indicator of future earnings for the individual (Cate et al., 2017).

History of Veterans Resource Centers (VRC) in California

Therefore, colleges and universities started to initiate campus support services in response to student veterans' transitional issues. One of their most significant implementations was the Veteran Resource Center (VRC). The program was designed to reconnect military and academics with specialized services for student veterans. According to McBain et al. (2012), 71 percent of colleges offer programs and services for student veterans with a dedicated office. Among those colleges nationwide, the California Community Colleges has the largest system of higher education in the US, with 73 districts and 115 colleges, enrolling approximately 89,000 student veterans each year (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2018b). Thus, I will be focusing on the California Community Colleges for this study.

In 2010, the California Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) created a project with the California Community Colleges High Tech Center Training Unit (HTCTU) and developed the Veteran Resource Center Pilot Program with 15 colleges (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2014). The goal of the project was to "combine a veteran's lounge for camaraderie with assistive technology to facilitate academic success and a wellness program to assist in psychosocial reintegration" (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2014, p. 4). To recapitulate, the emphasis was heavily on academics, wellness, and camaraderie.

According to the Chancellor's Office (2014), they wanted to create veteran-friendly campuses throughout the California Community. And yet, college System Veteran-friendliness is a context-specific phenomenon; what works for one campus may not work for the other (Vacchi & Berger, 2013). Thus, they reviewed the project's first year of activity through Disabled Student Programs and Services (under the Student Services and Special Programs Division). As a result: a) an online training guide to assist in the VRC implementation was developed, and b) six VRC sites (unspecified in the document) were removed from the project. In 2013, the Chancellor's Office (2014) revisited and reviewed the remaining nine VRCs (Long Beach, Santa Monica, Fullerton, Foothill, San Francisco, Merced, Cuesta, Pasadena, and Grossmont). Again, their mission was to encourage colleges to implement specialized support services for student veterans. They may include: referral services to other programs, counseling, peer support, mentoring/tutoring, computer accessibility, and financial aid.

The Chancellor's Office (2014) review concluded with the following takeaways: a) there is a need for categorical/minimal funding at the state level for VRCs regardless of their sizes; b) enough space to facilitate recreational/camaraderie and academics separately is preferred; c) staff dedication, commitment, and appreciation were always fully present on all sites; d) level of the resources and amenities are determined by the level of authority, the umbrella department and staffing, for example, when the Dean is in charge of the program the VRC program, there is better access to college funding and space, on the other hand, the DSPS umbrella has more leverages over technology presence and quicker processing time for financial aid; e) the technology training for staffs is a prerequisite to the additional grants; f) VRC are the locus of bright and energetic future leaders; and g) student veterans are not willing to utilize Disability

Student Programs and Services (DSPS). The last notion is specifically described in the following:

For almost two generations (GenX and the Millenials), children with disabilities and special services are words often used in the same sentence...[thus] lack of understanding of disability, our lack of technology, our perception of perfection which has led to poor or misguided treatment of student veterans...[whom] seeking anonymity unwilling to accept help that comes with a label and a public persona much different than that of soldier, warrior, or hero...as a result, the DSPS office and the VRC will most likely never be co-located and in many cases, convincing returning veterans with disabilities to use DSPS service will remain a challenge.” (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, 2014, p. 52)

Subsequently, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors approved \$8.5 million in grant funding to support and expand VRCs (approximately 90 of the 114) within California community colleges college (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, 2018b). The grant was awarded directly to eligible colleges; 20% of the appropriation was allocated at the base funding, and 80% of the appropriation was allocated based on the total number of student veterans certified for VA education benefits (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, 2018a). The average 2017-18 Allocation amount was approximately \$40,000 per school (shown in Appendix A). The funding required VRCs to meet the standards established by the Chancellor’s Office, which may include structure, services, and staffing; moreover, VRCs were required to have one full-time equivalent certifying official, a director/coordinator, and an academic counselor, and complete Mid-year and Year-end reports (California Community

College Chancellor's Office, 2018a). The Budget Act of 2020-21 funding is projected to be \$10 million. (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2020).

Still, Jenner (2017) emphasized that it is critical to apply sensitivity to variation in the importance of social integration and institutional support for student veterans (with adult roles and family responsibility). Although linking military status to detrimental academic outcomes has not been clearly identified (Barry et al., 2014), Durdella and Kim (2012) argued that student veterans had lower college grade point averages and lower levels of belonging when compared with civilian students. Additionally, Arthur et al. (2007) reported that 24 percent of veterans reported alcohol abuse issues, 27 percent reported depression, and 43 percent reported problems with anger and other mental health issues. To that account, military veterans are the largest population of individuals with disabilities in the US (Gerber, 2001).

Student Veterans with Disabilities

Veterans of today's generation are more likely than veterans of previous wars to survive due to advances in medical service delivery and armor technology (DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Gerber, 2001). Although there are fewer wartime deaths, it results in tremendous increases in veterans with disabilities. It is estimated that 40% of veterans may have acquired various service-connected disabilities (Grossman, 2009). Further, student veterans are twice as likely to have a documented disability than their non-veteran peers (Wurster et al., 2013), and they have specific disabilities (exception of vision) at higher rates than their civilian peers (Radford et al., 2016). It should also be mentioned that student veterans with disabilities have less time to learn to navigate the school system compared to their non-veteran peers with documented disabilities who have experiences seeking accommodations from their secondary schools. (Vance & Miller, 2009).

To address this concern, academic literature on student veterans has significantly prospered during the past decade and the public's interest in the welfare of returning veterans with disabilities (Lim et al., 2018). And yet, there are some fears and stigmas accompanied. The stigmatization and fear of mental health issues often follow veterans transitioning to civilian and academic life (Flink, 2017). Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) represented some of the most formidable challenges faced by student veterans. For example, 20% of returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan reported that they experienced symptoms of PTSD (Ghosh & Fouad, 2016), and individuals affected by PTSD have the highest risk of suicide compared to all other mental disorders (Galovski & Lyons, 2004). The amount of traumatic combat exposure predicts PTSD symptoms, leading to more complications in daily functions (Elliott et al., 2011). PTSD is negatively correlated with GPA (Barry et al., 2014). Symptoms of PTSD lead to more problems with social relationships, alcohol usage, and isolation; it is most strongly associated with feeling discriminated, isolated, criticized, and uncomfortable on campus (Elliott, 2015; Vacchi & Berger, 2013).

Moreover, veteran students with PTSD reported difficulty spending a long time in close proximity with peers in confined/constricted classrooms (Osborne, 2014). In contrast, social support is associated with fewer symptoms of PTSD (Elliott, 2015). Subsequently, a dual diagnosis of PTSD with another diagnosis (e.g., traumatic brain injury, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and substance dependency) may compound even more negative outcomes (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012).

Unfortunately, PTSD has become a familiar term not only in the military but also to the public when describing mental illnesses related to military veterans involved in the wars in the Middle East (Flink, 2017). Conversely, there is often a self-stigma associated with seeking help

within military culture, making self-advocacy even more challenging for student veterans (Bonar & Domenici, 2011). "The most difficult task for any veteran to overcome may be learning that it is acceptable to need help and even more important to seek help when needed" (Vacchi & Berger, 2013, p. 2). While it is crucial to acquire a civilian version of the skills necessary to succeed in academic integration and social development (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011b), student veterans often mask their needs even though their needs may be simple to address (Vacchi & Berger, 2013). Furthermore, they often decide not to disclose their military identity because if no one knows they are veterans, it is all right to ask for help or may feel like they have better access to help (Osborne, 2014; Vacchi & Berger, 2013). Simultaneously, they also struggled to mask their disabilities as well.

In that context, student veterans were less likely to report their disabilities, access disability resources, and seek counseling services (or request accommodation) on campus than their civilian peers. (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Madaus, 2009). This issue becomes even more complicated when they do not receive official diagnoses in seeking formal treatment. (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Tanielian et al., 2008 reported that less than 50% of student veterans receive any mental health treatment. Most importantly, student veterans' invisible disabilities are not just limited to PTSD, which may include, but are not limited to: traumatic brain injury, anxiety disorder, mood disorder, cognitive disorder, and personality/behavioral disorder.

For that matter, student veterans also avoid seeking mental health services because it is a sign of weakness; thus, they are afraid of losing the respect/trust of their peers and ultimately harming their career aspirations (Ghosh & Fouad, 2016; Gordon et al., 2016; The Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2017; Vacchi & Berger, 2013). In that regard, the self-stigmatization of student veterans is heavily contingent upon seeking help rather than their

disabilities and functional limitations. Moreover, a sense of shame stemming from social stigma exacerbates depressive symptoms and social alienation, and further, it increases treatment non-compliance (Gordon et al., 2016). Thus, veterans suffering from invisible disabilities not only ignore their disabilities but also avoid disclosing their disabilities to support staff (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

Thus, social camouflage is a phenomenon of student veterans' inadvertent and intentional social disengagement. It is inadvertent due to their lack of control over the difficulty of fitting in (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al.; Elliott et al., 2011; Koenig et al., 2014; Livingston et al., 2011; Osborn, 2016; Rumann et al., 2011). At the same time, student veterans voluntarily isolate themselves due to their lack of a sense of belonging (Boettcher et al., 2017; Jones, 2017; Livingston et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012). Elliott et al. (2011) asserted more alienated student veterans tended to have more symptoms of PTSD. In sum, the needs of an invisible population can be difficult to identify and also easy to overlook (Bonar & Domenici, 2011). Furthermore, it is even more difficult to support an invisible population who wants to remain unnoticed (Livingston et al., 2011).

Problem Statement

High attrition rates and low reported rates of bachelor's degree attainment among student veterans are a serious concern (Jenner, 2017). Furthermore, many aspects of their complex transition experiences are not well understood by higher education community members (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). According to Tanielian et al. (2008), approximately 20% of returning veterans from the war on terrorism experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or major depression, while 19% have experienced traumatic brain injury (TBI). Still, less than 50% of those individuals received any mental health assistance/treatment.

Radford et al. (2016) found that a higher percentage of student veterans (18 percent) than their non-veteran peers (13 percent) reported their disabilities. The stigmatization of such invisible disabilities may complicate the transition experience for student veterans (Flink, 2017; Kirchner, 2015). Especially, student veterans experience difficulty self-identifying their disabilities even when they require accommodations at colleges. Evidently, various veteran-specific services/programs exist at higher education institutions, but student veterans still often struggle with their transitions (Mendez et al., 2018). In 2008, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) announced that traditional means of support might not work with student veterans because many student veterans with disabilities have little experience seeking services for their disabilities, and mutually, many colleges do not have experience accommodating their needs (Madaus et al., 2009).

Nonetheless, only a few colleges (22 percent) provide such transition assistance for student veterans (Cook et al., 2009). Additionally, "[student veterans'] job placement after graduation was reported to be much less of a concern at institutions without a dedicated [veterans] office (8 percent)" (McBain et al., 2012, p. 39). Conversely, Ghosh and Fouad (2016) asserted that student veterans encounter challenges in terms of career decision-making and career choices because they may not have fully developed vocational identities associated with occupational engagement. Thus, student-veterans are also likely to experience challenges finding employment (Gordon et al., 2016; Hamrick & Rumann, 2013), and institutions must be fully sensitive to challenges student veterans encounter upon both arriving on campus and at graduation/transfer.

Again, veteran-friendliness is a context-specific phenomenon; what works for one campus may not work for the other (Vacchi & Berger, 2013). In that context, how well do service

providers in higher education feel that they are prepared to serve the current (and in flux number of future) student veterans? Is there enough data to inform/propose any policies (or programs) to meet the special needs student veterans in higher education? What are they currently doing (and not doing) for student veterans? How does each campus program work together toward serving this population? If the current attrition rate prevails, why is the current program not effective? Moreover, a further understanding of how disability professionals could facilitate making the campus more accommodating to student veterans is necessary. Can they do more than just wait for the student veterans to self-identify their needs? (Vance & Miller, 2009).

The existing studies on student veterans' transition to higher education provide important insights into the phenomenon of student veterans with disabilities. Nonetheless, they are predominantly concentrated on student veterans' first-hand experiences on how they differ from their non-veteran peers (or traditional students). Furthermore, there is a lack of studies on invisible disabilities and how these transitions are conceptualized within the cultural aspects of reintegration with student services.

This gap is perhaps further reflected in the relative scarcity of research on the service provider's perspective in higher education. Thus far, relatively few researchers have examined in that scope. As the influx of student veterans continues, there is a need to understand how to best serve and support their academic, emotional, social, and psychological needs as they transition to college (Flink, 2017). Only understanding student veterans' first-hand experiences within higher education may not be enough.

There is a lack of literature regarding the experiences of staff responsible for providing support services to student veterans in higher education, and further exploration of such experiences and voices is needed. Previous research studies have predominantly focused on

academic performance and mental health and how they personally experience the transition from military to college. To illustrate this point, there are various qualitative studies discussing student veterans' first-hand experiences with their transition (Ackerman et al., 2009; Bauman, 2009; Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Boettcher et al., 2017; Cate et al., 2017; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott, 2015; Elliott et al., 2011; Ghosh et al., 2019; Ghosh & Fouad, 2016; Glasser et al., 2009; Jones, 2013; Koenig et al., 2014; Mendez et al., 2018; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Olsen et al., 2014; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Also, there were several quantitative studies on faculties and staffs' perceptions toward student veterans (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2016a; Gordon et al., 2016b; Vance & Miller, 2009), and it is important to point out that none of those studies were qualitative research; all of them utilized descriptive surveys only. Although existing studies provide important insights into the phenomenon of student veterans with disabilities, very little research has been conducted that examines the experiences from the perspective of the support service provider (or staff) in colleges, especially within the Veteran Resources Center (VRC).

Currently, VRC's job duties and responsibilities are being overextended to another level. If VRC only processes required documentation to certify the GI Bill, it might be insufficient to fully support the influx of student veterans enrolled in colleges (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot et al., 2009). Again, the current literature is dominated by explorations of the perspectives of student veterans, mostly with disabilities, about their college experiences, and there is a scarcity of studies on student veterans' service provider's (including VRC) perspectives. As a result, there is limited information about how different institutional strategies can be implemented to facilitate specific aspects of student veterans' transitions across campuses. In sum, more understanding of student veterans' needs that require attention from higher

education institutions is crucial. Thus, this study seeks to explore and identify the specific difficulties VRC staff experience while providing services to student veterans with disabilities. In that context, the question, “How do VRC staffs in California community colleges describe their support work toward the academic success of student veterans?” is the over-arching focus of this phenomenological (heuristic inquiry) research.

Furthermore, the study seeks to illuminate the knowledge, expertise, and understanding about the professional practices of VRC staff members who work with student veterans with disabilities in California community colleges. It is vital to understand and interpret how they describe the experience of providing services (and facilitating the transition process) toward student veterans, especially for those with service-connected disabilities. By fulfilling this gap, the finding of this study seeks to offer recommendations for policy, practice, and future research to contribute to future support services for student veterans. Ultimately, as a result of this study, program administrators/directors may better explain how their staff might experience difficulties and potentially improve their service-delivery model.

2 Literature Review

The process of transitioning from military to civilian life is difficult, especially when enrolling in college. This in itself can be considered a significant life transition for those veterans (Bodrog et al., 2018; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014). Many factors influence student veterans at risk of leaving college before completing their degrees when compared to their civilian peers: the gap of time between discharge and college enrollment, institutional support, re-adjustment to civilian culture, and their service-connected disabilities.

According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2021), the total estimated number of US veterans is 19,541,961 as of 2020. Among them, approximately 16 million veterans have served during previous wars, including World War II, the Korean War, the Gulf War, and the Vietnam War; however, these categories are not mutually exclusive, as veterans may have served in multiple periods. Approximately 5 million veterans are receiving the VA disability compensation. Based on military casualty statistics, exclusively during the years 2000 to 2014 (Fischer, 2010), there were 164,817 soldiers diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), 207,282 with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and 1,573 with major limb amputation. The statistics consist of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the primary war zone duty for veterans attending colleges today.

The experience of war may leave an unforgettable mark on veterans' lives over the course of their transitions (Koenig et al., 2014). And yet, student veterans bring unique experiences, knowledge, skills, and codes of behavior to campus. In that context, meeting each veteran student's educational needs presents challenges at every level, and "there is no consistent panacea institutions can use to perfectly support all students in this community" (Griffin &

Gilbert, 2014, p. 91). We cannot assume that all student veterans need the same support, and it is imperative to understand that student veterans' needs may vary from context to context. It is also crucial to implement those needs at the institutional level.

However, previous research studies have largely focused on academic performance and mental health. There is limited information about how different institutional strategies can be implemented to facilitate specific aspects of student veterans' transitions across campuses. There is a gap in the understanding of student veterans' needs in resources and in the psychological and social aspects that require attention from higher education institutions. Moreover, there is a lack of understanding on how the support service offices (e.g., Veterans Resources Centers, Disability Student Services, and Health Centers) are currently succeeding (or failing) in meeting the complex needs of student veterans.

Definition of Student Veteran

Throughout the literature, there were numerous intermingled, inconsistent terminologies used to describe student veterans; they still have not yet reached a consensus. As a result, it does not yield consistency and accuracy to the literature base. Aside from the literature, there is a need to identify this student population with a more comprehensive definition because "using different labels at different campuses that refer to different populations depending on the campus creates a problem when referring to this unique student subpopulation in national dialogue" (Vacchi & Berger, 2013, p. 107).

Vance and Miller (2009) used the term wounded warriors, referring specifically to students who served in the Middle East wars, including but not limited to, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and Operation Desert Storm (ODS). Also, wounded warriors may or may not have self-identified some type of disability and

accommodation (regardless of official diagnosis verified by the Department of Veterans Affairs). And yet, Bonar and Domenici (2011) admonished that labels like a wounded warrior or disabled vet may paint an inaccurate portrait and imply that they are deficient and/or incompetent.

Radford (2009) refers to military undergraduates. Barry et al. (2014) argued that the term military undergraduates was inadequate and non-inclusive because it failed to include those veterans/service members who are pursuing a graduate program. Therefore, Barry et al. (2014) designated the term Student Service Member/Veteran (SSM/V) to include “all former and currently active military personnel participating across the entire spectrum of higher education” (Barry et al., 2014, p. 32). Later, Radford et al. (2016) changed the term to military students for those students who were veterans or were military service members on active duty or in the reserves. Similarly, Student-Veterans and Service-Members (SVSM) were suggested by Arminio et al. (2015) by including “students who are serving in active duty or in the National Guard/Reserves, as well as veterans of the US Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard” (Arminio et al., 2015, p. xiv).

There are several other terms suggested in the literature, including military-affiliated students and veteran students. Vacchi and Berger (2013) argued that veteran students might just be students who have been on campus for a very long time and suggested student veterans instead. Barry et al. (2014) argued that the term student veterans was not inclusive enough because the term “veteran” only applies to those who completed their military service. Thus, it excludes the Reserve or National Guard currently attending colleges. Contrary to the criticism, Vacchi and Berger (2013) focused more on the clash of culture between academia and the military, not just legal implications and entitlements. They wanted to be inclusive to the following population who experience difficulty with socialization and friction of cultures from

the military service: “wartime and non-wartime veterans of active duty, Reserves, and National Guard, current and former members of those services, and those currently serving on active duty” (Vacchi & Berger, 2013, p. 106).

Vacchi and Berger (2013) highlighted that defining this student population should focus more on the clash of culture between academia and the military, not just legal implications and entitlements. Thus, “A student veteran is a student who is a current or former member of the Active Duty Military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience or legal status as a veteran ” (Vacchi, 2012, p. 17). Although they wanted to be inclusive to those who experience difficulty with socialization and friction of cultures from the military service, the current institutional funding formula (at least in California) is solely based on the entitlement certification status of the student. Therefore, this study employed the term *student veterans* for former US military members, regardless of deployment status or combat experience with legal status as a veteran. In that regard, this definition excludes dependents (and significant others), National Guards, and Reservists. Instead, they were defined as *military-affiliated students* because they are mostly not counted toward the state’s funding criteria as non-certified GI Bill recipients. To that end, this study implies that the terminology of this student subpopulation should remain inclusive and consistent.

Literature Review Method

I aimed to provide an overview of existing literature addressing the following research questions: a) are there emerging themes of practical transition concerns toward student veterans in college?; b) what research methods were mostly used?; and c) have different research methods produced different outcomes? The initial intent of this investigation was to identify empirical investigations examining the associated transition issues of student veterans with disabilities in

higher education; however, there was a scarcity of literature on that specific topic. Thus, I have broadened the scope of the topic to student veterans in general and searched scientific literature through education databases, including ERIC, SAGE, Google Scholar, JSTOR, JPED, and ProQuest Education Journals. Terms such as student veterans, military student, service members, transition, GI Bill, military, and wounded warriors were combined with higher education, college, university, post-secondary education, and veteran studies. Additionally, references of included studies were trace searched to identify additional publications of relevance to reach concentric circles.

Currently, most studies on veteran transition focus on topics other than education (Wheeler, 2012). Also, a vast number of earlier research related to this topic were conducted following World War II and the Vietnam War (Olsen et al., 2014). To be included in this review, the study must: a) report findings from data (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method) specific to student veterans in higher education, which may include public two-year colleges, public four-year universities, private, not-for-profit colleges, and universities, and vocational/technical institutions; b) be peer-reviewed; and c) be published in the US. Non-data-based commentaries, editorials, and organizational reports were excluded; instead, they offered insights during this paper's discussion.

In order to address and focus on the student veterans of today's generation (e.g., Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) era), results were limited to studies published between the years 2008 and 2021. Most importantly, the paper's initial main focus was student veterans with disabilities (as stated earlier), and yet, service-connected disability issues were not the main focus of most articles in this review (due to the scarcity in the literature). Nonetheless, they were naturally revealed during the study. In that

context, this systematic review highlights several important issues on student veterans' transition experiences. Studies solely linking veteran status to health risk behaviors (or detrimental outcomes) were omitted in this review. Although they were related to higher education, they did not focus on student veterans' transition experiences in particular. For example, student veterans' Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was associated with: a) lower GPA (Barry et al., 2012a; Dudella & Kim, 2012), b) binge drinking (Barry et al., 2012b; Whiteman & Barry, 2011), c) suicide (Rudd et al., 2011), d) physical fights (Widome et al., 2011a), and e) increased health risk behaviors (Widome et al., 2011b). To that end, 27 studies were selected for this review.

It should be noted that three studies among the selected literature were conducted by the collaboration of various associations (e.g., American Council on Education, Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, National Association of Veterans' Program Administrators (NAVPA), American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and Student Veterans of America). Their peer-review statuses are unknown at this time. Although their peer-review status was not confirmed, the three studies were included in this review because they were the only nationwide quantitative studies available.

Literature Review Results

Of the 27 studies selected, 18 studies focused solely on student veterans as participants (10 qualitative interviews, seven quantitative surveys, and one mixed-method); four studies focused on faculties/staffs (all quantitative); and five studies focused on both student veterans and faculties/staffs (three qualitative and two quantitative). Appendix B is constructed to extract relevant information, including study design and significant summaries (chronologically listed).

Consistent themes across the literature have demonstrated that the student veteran population is not a homogeneous group. Their transition to higher education differs from traditional students' transition, and it is one of the major obstacles to their degree attainment. While most of the qualitative studies were institution-specific, most of the quantitative studies examined campuses across states (including undergraduate programs at public two-year colleges, public four-year universities, private, not-for-profit colleges and universities, and vocational/technical institutions). Essentially, emerging themes of practical transition concerns, most of which related to the following themes: a) *Assets and Liabilities*, b) *Social Relationships*, c) *Academic Interactions*, d) *Institutional Structure*, and e) *Support Services*.

Assets and Liabilities focused on the student veterans' personal strengths from their military experiences and their weaknesses due to their service-connected disabilities. *Social Relationships* addressed how student veterans' personal relationships outside the campus affect their transition. *Academic Interactions* included relational difficulties with campus community members (e.g., faculties/staffs and non-veteran peers) as non-traditional students. *Institutional Structure* discussed the current school systems and policies toward student veterans. Finally, *Support Services* examined public and academic programs for student veterans, including the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Veterans Resources Center (VRC).

Assets and Liabilities

Student veterans are not a homogenous population, and their personal strengths and weaknesses differ from individual to individual. While the transition from military to civilian culture is a specific risk factor for student veterans, solely focusing on these challenges may fixate toward a deficit mindset (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Therefore, focusing on the strength of student veterans will take precedence before delving into potential challenges they might

experience. First, this section will discuss how student veterans' military service experiences positively influenced their academic experience (*assets*). Then, it will describe how their strengths may translate into liabilities in academic settings. Finally, student veterans' service-connected disabilities will be discussed, specifically toward how it adds another layer of complexity (and imminent/inexorable *liability*) for leveraging effective support services.

Student Veterans' Strength

Before discussing student veterans' strengths, it should be explicitly noted that "college re-enrollment was not only anticipated, it required a deliberate choice on the part of veterans" (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010, p. 450). Furthermore, the media's frequent delineation of student veterans as primarily traumatized or possibly dangerous groups draws a misleading picture of this cultural group (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Cook & Kim, 2009). Conversely, student veterans have unique strengths which they can bring to the college community by translating their military training into the classroom (Mendez et al., 2018; Wheeler, 2012). Student veterans connected their previous military work ethic directly to their success in college in terms of their a) maturity, b) leadership, and c) self-sufficiency.

Maturity. Most veterans established unique and positive developmental experiences during their military service (Osborne, 2014). For example, serving overseas (traveling around the world and experiencing other cultures) was a unique experience. Their level of maturity exhibited by their worldview was different compared with their non-veteran peers in college (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; DiRamio et al., 2008; Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2017). Moreover, youthful habits (including procrastination, distraction, and nonchalance) had to be unlearned during military training (Vacchi & Berger, 2013). And yet, although this matured them and allowed them to have a broad and insightful perspective (and global awareness), it

exacerbated the age gap they felt with non-military peers (Flink, 2017; Jones, 2017; Livingston et al., 2011; Olsen et al., 2014; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

Leadership. Although student veterans were chronologically and mentally older than their non-veteran peers, they were also trained to be leaders and mutually reliant team members (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Olsen et al., 2014). During the military, they applied critical leadership and decision-making skills in intense situations (Osborne, 2014), and their leadership role and teamwork abilities were welcomed in the class. Counterintuitively, this gave rise to a critical issue. For example, Lim et al. (2018) reported that faculties believed that encouraging student veterans to take on leadership roles in class would facilitate student veterans' transition. And yet, the study revealed that student veterans did not embrace the civilian notion of leadership because they struggled to deal with uncommitted team members (usually non-veteran students). Thus, their concept of leadership was often different from those of civilian college students. The situation got worse when they decided not to report their hardship to the faculty because such help-seeking behavior (to find an alternative solution) is a sign of weakness in military culture, where pride and self-sufficiency are highly valued.

Self-sufficiency. A strong sense of self-sufficiency can be beneficial, but it can also be detrimental. Student veterans' aversion to seeking help and support was explained by self-sufficiency; it was often solely on their shoulders to resolve the issue (Livingston et al., 2011; Osborne, 2016). Additionally, student veterans were less likely to request academic support. They were much less willing to self-identify because they came from a military culture that expected self-sufficiency and resourcefulness (Livingston et al., 2011; Osborne, 2016; Vance & Miller, 2009). In addition, Livingston et al. (2011) described that pride impacted disclosure, as student veterans were not inclined to announce and use their veteran status to receive preferential

treatment. Furthermore, such military value may equate disability with being less self-sufficient, which may also explain why some student veterans were reluctant to seek accommodations (Osborne, 2016). Interestingly, the self-stigmatization of student veterans is heavily contingent upon seeking help rather than their disabilities and functional limitations.

Nevertheless, there is often a stigma associated with seeking help within military culture, making self-advocacy even more challenging for student veterans (Bonar & Domenici, 2011). “The most difficult task for any veteran to overcome may be learning that it is acceptable to need help and even more important to seek help when needed” (Vacchi & Berger, 2013, p. 2). Student veterans were less likely to report their disabilities, access disability resources, and seek counseling services (or request accommodation) on campus than their civilian peers (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Madaus, 2009). Instead, student veterans often mask their needs even though their needs may be simple to address (Vacchi & Berger, 2013).

The social stigmatization also follows veterans as they transition to civilian life, adding challenges in the classroom (Flink, 2017; Kirchner, 2015). The stereotype that most veterans have some mental health issue is prevalent among the public (Kirchner, 2015). The public may also believe that veterans are the ones who are responsible for their disabilities because they obtained them during the service (Flink, 2017). Stigma is not the only reason why student veterans are not seeking mental health services. For example, veterans, especially those with newly acquired injuries, have only begun to establish a basic understanding of how their disability may affect their life and schooling (Ford et al., 2009; Madaus et al., 2009). Thus, student veterans had less time to learn to navigate the disability support system on campus compared to their civilian peers with disabilities who learned to seek accommodations since secondary school (Vance & Miller, 2009).

Additionally, most veterans are unaware of their rights as students with disabilities because they have little knowledge of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Ackerman et al., 2009; Madaus, 2009; Osborne, 2016). As a result, student veterans often decided not to disclose their military identity because if no one knows they are a veteran, it is all right to ask for help, or they may feel like they have better access to help (Osborne, 2014; Vacchi & Berger, 2013). Simultaneously, they also struggled to mask their service-connected disabilities.

Service-Connected Disability

Military veterans are the largest population of individuals with disabilities in the US (Gerber, 2001). Veterans of today's generation are more likely than veterans of previous wars to survive due to advances in medical service delivery and armor technology (DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Gerber, 2001). Although there are fewer wartime deaths, war results in tremendous increases in veterans with disabilities. It is estimated that 40% of veterans may have acquired various service-connected disabilities (Grossman, 2009). Also, student veterans reported specific disabilities (except visual impairment) at higher rates than their civilian peers (Radford et al., 2016). Thus, service-connected disabilities, including psychological and physical injuries, emerged as critical issues for student veterans throughout this literature review. Notably, issues regarding service-connected disability were not the main focus of most studies. They were found to be revealed during the research process.

At present, reliable national data for both the incidence and prevalence of service-connected disabilities is not available. The currently available statistics only address major disabilities, and they do not include miscellaneous conditions, including burn injuries, vision impairments, military sexual trauma, and learning disabilities. (Osborne, 2016). Contrary to a

common misconception, veterans do not recover naturally from their psychological disorders over time. “Long-term individual and societal costs from those who do not recover can result in lost productivity, reduced quality of life, homelessness, domestic violence, strain on families, and suicide” (Vance & Miller, 2009, p. 18). Furthermore, other personal life events (including divorce, parenthood, and losing a loved one) impeded academic endeavors (Osborne, 2016).

Disability services offices and health centers on campus play a crucial role in providing counseling services to student veterans (Elliott et al., 2011; Flink, 2017; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014). According to McBain et al. (2012), 84 percent of participants offered counseling to assist student veterans. And yet, several studies discussed staffing and training deficiencies that campus community members need to address to support student veterans with disabilities (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011). In sum, student veterans with disabilities require integrated academic and disability accommodations to reintegrate into college successfully (Cook et al., 2009).

Social Relationships (Off-Campus)

Existing studies have shown college education inevitably requires socialization for student veterans, a quintessential element to their difficult transition process (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011a; Wheeler, 2012). Moreover, social support emerged as a key factor associated with fewer symptoms of depression, PTSD, and negative experiences on campus (Elliott, 2015).

The social relationships of student veterans (outside the campus) can be categorized into three parts (and phases): a) Pre-military relationships, b) Camaraderie during the military experiences, and c) Post-military (transfigured and new) relationships. This section will also discuss how student veterans construct and achieve multiple senses of identity that incorporate their experiences of social relationships (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Pre-military Relationship

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011a) described pre-military relationships consisting of family and friends before student veterans join the military. They view student veterans as loved ones, not only as a soldier or a student. Although family/friend support positively influenced student veterans' higher education transition experiences, it is outside the scope of campus community members' influence (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011a; Jones, 2017). Notably, emotional separation/departures were experienced from loved ones and close friends when joining the military, and this should be considered the first major transition of student veterans' experience (Bauman, 2009; Osborne, 2014).

The Camaraderie during The Military Experiences

Upon joining the military, soldiers' lives depend on their comrades, especially during their deployment. They create a sense of interdependence, emotional closeness, bond, and tight-knit social support, which is unlikely to occur in other places (Koenig et al., 2014; Naphan & Elliott, 2015). However, upon discharge from the military, this strong sense of community and camaraderie is lost (Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Osborne, 2014). Again, while in the military, soldiers felt separated from their pre-service loved ones; however, upon their return home, veterans felt separated from the camaraderie they developed during their military service (Bauman, 2009; Koenig et al., 2014; Osborne, 2014).

Thus, student veterans experience a constant sense of separation and transition. Koenig et al. (2014) asserted that this phenomenon might create a psychological gap between the meaningful places and people (regardless of location) in student veterans' lives. As a result, veterans typically feel closer to other veterans than civilians because they miss the cohesion of their military camaraderie; it is difficult to replace that feeling, especially in college. Therefore,

most veterans associate with other veterans in college based on their shared experience (Wheeler, 2012).

Post-military (Transfigured and New) Relationships

Veteran students reported challenges with resuming (and initiating new) relationships (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). During their military services, families and friends at home have inevitably continued their relationships with one another, and it may create isolation upon veterans returning home (Koenig et al., 2014). Upon returning home, student veterans may find that their pre-military peer group has academically advanced or graduated, but their academic standing has remained unchanged (Bauman, 2009). As a result, they became older than their new academic cohorts. Moreover, friends and familial relationships may become a challenge to maintain because veterans felt that their service experience caused such significant changes, and they experienced difficulty relating to others (Elliott et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012). In short, “they could not resume friendships with people who had not changed at all” (Wheeler, 2012, p. 783). Mutually, family and friends also experience difficulty understanding veterans’ experiences (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Furthermore, veterans’ survival skills (e.g., extreme vigilance) were often perpetuated despite the absence of external threats. Although such skill would have been highly valued in the combat zone, it became maladaptive at home, which ultimately contributed to mental health problems. (Koenig et al., 2014). Their mental wounds of military service become even more detrimental when veterans receive word of the deaths of their fellow servicemen in the warzone (Glasser et al., 2009). Feelings of guilt, frustration, and isolation may sometimes had them consider going back to the war zone where a sense of camaraderie was gratified (DiRamio et al., 2008). As an alternative, veterans may force themselves into community activities (e.g., church)

to find another source of collective camaraderie (Koenig et al., 2014). And yet, civilian society may become a frustrating circumstance for veterans because it is now much more difficult for veterans to earn a similar level of trust and responsibility from civilian society (Vacchi, 2012).

As discussed earlier, veterans may also become victims of stereotypes based on how civilian society defines and categorizes them because of their limited scopes (Boettcher et al., 2017). Many people view veteran students as a traumatized and possibly dangerous group (Cook & Kim, 2009; Osborne, 2016). For example, veterans may be offended by people who presume expert knowledge of the war and the questions posed by civilians, such as did you kill anyone during combat? or did you see anyone get blown up into pieces? (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Social Identities

In the military, dominant values determined norms and expectations and may force servicemembers into pre-assigned identities (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011a), which are no longer applicable in civilian society. Veteran status is only one aspect of a person's identity. And yet, in order to rectify the social relationship issues, veterans are required to renegotiate their senses of selves before renegotiating their relationships with others (Boettcher et al., 2017; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Therefore, veterans need to incorporate multiple social identities such as student, partner, parent, co-worker, employee, and member of a religious organization (Boettcher et al., 2017; Jones, 2013). Notably, these multiple identities may compete/contest with one another, especially in academic settings (Boettcher et al., 2017; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Academic Interactions

Academic interactions of student veterans function as a critical conduit for civilian socialization. It can facilitate (or hinder) cultural integration and academic success (Jenner, 2017; Lim et al., 2018). Thus, this section will discuss academic interactions of student veterans mainly

in three parts: a) student veterans as non-traditional students, b) interactions with campus community members, and c) financial hardships.

Student Veterans as Non-traditional Students

Studies in this review described the characteristics of veteran students as non-traditional students as the following: a) they are generally older and share many of the same characteristics as other adult learners (Boettcher et al., 2017; Cate et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2009; Elliott, 2015; Glasser et al., 2009; Vacchi & Berger, 2013); b) they have to balance irregular work schedule, family, academic commitments (Cate, 2016; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Radford 2009); c) they may have service-connected disabilities and may continue serving in the National Guard or reserves (Cate, 2016; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Elliott, 2015; Osborne, 2014; Radford 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011b); d) they are more likely to be first-generation college students with less knowledge about navigating the college environment (Wurster et al., 2013); e) they experience a gap in their engagement with the education system because they have a primary identity as something other than a student (Jenner, 2017; Olsen et al., 2014); f) nearly 20 percent of them are single parents (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2017); and g) they tend to come from families with lower income levels than their non-veteran peers, and they have weaker academic/financial preparation and aspirations (Durdella & Kim, 2012).

As described above, cultural gaps and competing responsibilities/obligations make non-traditional students less likely to succeed in college (Bailey et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2018). In regard to the cultural gap, student veterans experience difficulty transitioning from a structured, fast-paced, collective, and shared purpose in military culture to the unstructured, slow-paced, less direction, competitive, autonomous college environment. The longer the military service, the

deeper the military culture is embedded; student veterans are prone to interpret their college experiences through a military-cultural lens (Durdella & Kim, 2012).

Campus Community Members

In addition, faculty members and staff were often found not to be sufficiently knowledgeable concerning veteran-related issues despite their efforts to be helpful (Persky & Oliver, 2011). Moreover, many student veterans experienced being called on (or openly slandered) in class with anti-military bias and open criticism of military service/government (stemmed from personal political views and opinions) by academic faculty members on campus (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011; Glasser et al., 2009; Gordon et al., 2016; Jones, 2017; McBain et al., 2012; Moore, 2017; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Summerlot et al., 2009). In some cases, faculty members referred to the US soldiers as terrorists, baby killers, and torturers (Ackerman et al., 2009; Elliott et al., 2011). These challenging experiences were exacerbated when student veterans did not know to whom they should report/express their frustration acknowledged from such upsetting faculty comments (Elliott et al., 2011; Glasser et al., 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014).

To mitigate this issue, providing professional development opportunities for faculty members and staff has been discussed to improve veteran-friendly learning environments (DiRamio et al., 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011a; Gordon et al., 2016; Kirchner, 2015; McBain et al., 2012; Osborne, 2014; Persky & Oliver, 2011). Faculty members should not ask student veterans to share their perspectives on an issue as a veteran during class discussions or other public forums (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Not only does this violate anonymity (DiRamio et al., 2008), but also, it would be unsound to force one individual to speak on behalf of the overall military structure.

As discussed earlier, student veterans are older than their non-veteran peers, and age differences can create social distance for student veterans. Additionally, student veterans unanimously expressed frustration over academic interactions and social support from their civilian peers due to their lack of maturity, commitment, respect, discipline, and task cohesion in the classroom (DiRamio et al., 2008; Glasser et al., 2009; Jones, 2017; Livingston et al., 2011; Mendez et al., 2018; Olsen et al., 2014; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). For example, student veterans would expect their classmates to share the responsibility during a group project. When this did not happen, “student veterans felt irritated, left the group, or did most of the project themselves out of frustration” (Lim et al., 2018, p. 302).

Although student veterans reported difficulty connecting with their non-veteran peers, this does not mean they did not want a connection. Alternatively, they were able to connect with more motivated non-traditional peers (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Student veterans tended to broaden their definitions of “peers” and sought more opportunities to congregate with other student veterans who have had similar experiences. Furthermore, they wanted to validate their own experiences through their veteran student peers because “you just can’t relate unless you have been there” (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 11). Thus, the student veteran peer mentorship (or transition coach) program was suggested by several studies (DiRamio et al., 2008; Glasser et al., 2009; Summerlot et al., 2009).

The development of veteran-specific student organizations was recommended in the literature. It promoted interaction opportunities with low cost and modest commitment (Kirchner, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). In contrast, several studies also reported a lack of student organization for veterans in higher education (Cook et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Glasser et al., 2009). This was not due to a lack of institutional support.

Instead, there was not enough interest by student veterans to sustain the organization with the following: a) the organization could not sustain itself persistently because committed members were transitory due to graduation, transfer, or attrition (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014); b) student veterans were less likely to live on campus or show up at an event that did not directly connect with their academic goals ((Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Livingston et al., 2011); c) not all student veterans wanted to maintain their military culture and identity (Moore, 2017; Vacchi & Berger, 2013); and d) student veterans often have other priorities (such as families and employment) that take precedence over organization activities (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Durdella & Kim, 2012; McBain et al., 2012; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). To summarize, not all student veterans wanted to preserve their military cultural identities and values; they desired to be less dominated by the military culture. Most importantly, it is difficult to promote extracurricular engagement due to financial (and time) constraints from both family and work.

Financial Hardship

Financial concerns can make the transition experience more challenging. Although the GI Bill has historically led millions of veterans to college, financial issues related to housing/living allowances and tuition/educational expenses became consistent themes among most studies in this review. The Post-9/11 GI Bill (the current military educational benefit) covers tuition (the full cost of public, in-state tuition, and prorated rates for private schools), housing (based on the cost of living where the school is located), and books/supplies (up to \$1,000 per school year). Nevertheless, the consensus was that military educational benefits did not provide enough resources to attend college full-time without working with the rising cost of tuition. Notably, transitioning veterans no longer receive military assistance directly in housing, childcare, and transportation (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011b).

Furthermore, student veterans' financial responsibilities were not limited to tuition because they were more likely to have dependents and family obligations (Elliott, 2015; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; Jenner, 2017; Wurster et al., 2013). Wurster et al. (2013) pinpointed that student veterans receive their housing stipends only when they are enrolled in classes, and they cannot receive those funds during academic breaks. "It is likely difficult to get a job for a 4-week semester break, especially one that will pay well enough to support dependents" (Wurster et al., 2013, p. 130). This challenge may lead to two possible amends: student debt and institution choice.

As a result, student veterans had to carry education debt to address their unmet financial needs despite receiving GI Bill benefits (Cate et al., 2017; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014). Also, "veterans tend to select institutions based on financial considerations rather than institutional reputation, selectivity, or proximity" (Durdella & Kim, 2012, p.111). Implicitly incentivizing (or restricting) veterans to attend public college (where they have state residency status) limits the opportunity for student veterans with potentially underfunded (or low-quality) public higher education institutions (Jenner, 2017).

Institutional Structure

Supplementing the financial consideration, student veterans tended to enroll in colleges for reasons related to proximity, familiarity, convenience, and an institutional focus on non-traditional students as well (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Vance & Miller, 2009). The majority of student veterans attend public community colleges (Vacchi & Berger, 2013). Yet, several student veterans reported that their campuses were less supportive of their needs, and colleges did not understand their needs in the following: a) lack of military appreciation and expertise on campus;

b) difficulties with credit transfer issues; c) deployment policies on campus; and d) transitioning in-and-out.

Military Appreciation and Expertise on Campus

Most student veterans reported a lack of military appreciation on campus (Livingston et al., 2011). The more liberal institutions were considered more anti-military (Osborne, 2014). In addition, student veterans expressed that their colleges were not prepared to assist veterans due to the lack of knowledge and expertise within the campus (Flink, 2017; Glasser et al., 2009; Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2017; Vance & Miller, 2009). Most college campuses have few or no first-hand experiences with military culture despite their good intention (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). As a result, veterans tend to prefer community colleges located near military bases; such campuses are more helpful in assisting/supporting veterans with financial, academic/disability accommodations, and credit transfer issues. (Vance & Miller, 2009).

Credit Transfer Issues

The application of military credits toward academic degree programs created unique challenges in facilitating student veterans' transitions. Student veterans often noted challenges with credit streamlining (getting course credit for military experiences or previous work at other institutions) due to inconsistency or unfair allocation. Subsequently, student veterans often felt that they had to start over as if nothing was accomplished (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). For example, "21 years of schooling...and they give you three credits for physical education and three credits for management" (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014, p. 86).

Conversely, colleges were not comfortable making different policies for student veterans. To illustrate, one of the campus administrators explained, "they will kind of want me to . . . give them a degree, for everything that they've done [in the military]. I always tell them, then maybe

the military can give you a degree” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014, p. 86). Additionally, the military may also set inappropriate expectations for credit transfers (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011a; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014).

Deployment Policies on Campus

Unpredictable deployment schedules in the military have interrupted student veterans’ academic pursuits, including housing, financial aid, and academic schedules (Ghosh & Fouad, 2016; Summerlot et al., 2009). Specifically, they have to wait for an upcoming academic term to begin college (Bauman, 2009). Typical deployment lasts up to eighteen months; nevertheless, without knowing the precise release date from deployment, it is difficult to transition back into the academic setting, especially when they are subject to reactivations and re-deployments (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

Transitioning In-and-Out

Similarly, Army Basic Combat Training (BCT) lasts nine weeks (not counting the time spent in reception) when first joining the military. During this length of duration, much effort is spent on training citizens to become soldiers. Yet, veterans receive no re-training (similar to BCT’s duration) to acculturate back to civilian life when they transition out of the military (Koenig et al., 2014; Vance & Miller, 2009). Also, many student veterans tend to rush right into college after discharge, not allowing themselves an adjustment/preparation timeframe (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011a). As a result, they are prone to encounter academic challenges (e.g., forgetting course content/concepts) due to insufficient academic preparation (DiRamio et al., 2008; Jenner, 2017; Livingston et al., 2011).

Although the college provided orientation programs and transition seminar courses, they generally focused on more traditional students, and student veterans did not find them helpful

(Gordon et al., 2016; Olsen et al., 2014; Wheeler, 2012). Thus, several studies recommended a separate orientation program (or a cultural transition program) specifically designed for incoming student veterans to assist their transition (DiRamio et al., 2008; Gordon et al., 2016; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Kirchner, 2015; Lim et al., 2018; Mendez et al., 2018; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

In summary, several studies mentioned a “veteran-friendly campus” (Ackerman et al., 2009; Cook et al., 2009; Vacchi & Berger, 2013). It refers to campuses where programs provide a welcoming or accommodating environment to assist with the transitions between college and the military. And yet, there is no universal definition (nor concept) about what it means for an institution to be veteran-friendly. The current model of a separate sphere (e.g., the VA handling only the service member/veteran issues while the college handles only the student issues) may not be an effective solution to student veterans’ transition issues. Instead, the support system must “integrate and reconcile a student’s various roles and experiences rather than separate or compartmentalize the sets of experiences, social roles, and, ultimately, personal identities” (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 30).

Support Services

Finally, support services for student veterans will be discussed. There are mainly two services available for student veterans: a) the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which handles educational and medical benefits; and b) the Veterans Resources Center (VRC) for academic support on campus.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

The VA is the only federal agency in the US responsible for assisting veterans with various problems (Gordon et al., 2016); however, their bureaucratic process is not easy to

understand/navigate. Almost all student veterans found themselves lost/mired when obtaining their VA educational benefits, specifically when they experienced difficulty with the timely issuance of the GI Bill benefits. Cate et al. (2017) explained the reasons for delays in processing VA payments in the following:

VA collects information related only to the amount and destination of the benefit, such as the student veteran's institution, enrollment status (part-time or full-time), and the amount of the disbursement. [Veterans Benefits Administration] VBA, acknowledging student veteran outcomes are important, determined the inclusion of additional mandatory reporting measures would slow the benefit payment process due to increased data entry and unfunded information technology requirements, thus hindering their ability to deliver benefits in a timely manner. (Cate et al., 2017, p. 14)

Nevertheless, with approximately six million veterans seen at the VA annually, veterans inevitably have to wait for services (Wheeler, 2012).

Veterans Resources Center (VRC)

Contrary to the VA, every study included in this review complimented the Veterans Resources Center (VRC) support on campus. According to McBain et al. (2012), 71 percent of colleges offer programs and services for student veterans with a dedicated office. Also, several studies underscore the importance of creating a specific point person for student veterans to help them navigate administrative processes and address any concerns toward degree completion (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Summerlot et al., 2009). Additionally, the point person may advocate and rectify issues on campus for student veterans, not just serve as a certifying official (Ford et al., 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; Kirchner, 2015; Vance & Miller, 2009). Moreover, navigating multiple offices can create confusion. Thus, VRCs may serve as the

one-stop veterans' center with the following streamlined programs and services for student veterans: a) administrative services, b) academic support, and c) counseling services.

Administrative Services. In addition to administering GI Bill benefit programs for student veterans, VRCs can assist student veterans with other administrative services. They may include: a) registration processes and financial aid (Vacchi & Berger, 2013); b) career exploration (Summerlot et al., 2009); c) referrals to education/tutoring centers (Johnson, 2009); d) consolidating student records; e) resolving deployment-related administrative issues (e.g., course withdrawals, and financial aid refunds); and f) keeping in contact with the students while they are deployed (Ackerman et al., 2009).

Academic Support. Vacchi and Berger (2013) explained that academic advising might take place during the initial transition to campus. They may include: a) formulating academic plans, b) explaining the transfer credit process, and c) navigating prerequisite courses toward the desired degree. Also, VRCs may serve as the Safe Haven for mentorship programs and support groups by creating a veteran-friendly space on campus (Elliott et al., 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; Lim et al., 2018; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Vance & Miller, 2009). These spaces may provide flexibility for student veterans who come and go (as they feel comfortable), especially when connecting with other student veterans (Boettcher et al., 2017).

Counseling Services. Since most student veterans are unaware of Disability Student Services (DSS), the VRC may also connect/refer student veterans to DSS on campus (Madaus, 2009). In some cases, counseling services from DSS or mental health centers may not have a specifically trained staff to address veterans' physical and mental disabilities (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014). Therefore, the VRC may appoint a designated health professional in their office, offering specialized counseling services to supplement the need (Ackerman et al., 2009; Cook et al.,

2009).

VRC's Challenges. There are two major challenges for VRCs: a) outreach and keeping accountability; and b) budgetary constraints due to lack of funding. As discussed earlier, veterans often do not self-identify, and it is difficult to support those who want to remain invisible (DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011). Also, veterans with disabilities were less likely than civilian students to seek disability resources and accommodation (Madaus, 2009). Participating in the VRC program is strictly voluntary. In other words, if student veterans did not identify as veterans when seeking services, they could not be tracked by the VRC (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014).

Therefore, several studies highlighted the importance of developing outreach strategies to attract student veterans. For example, the traditional method of providing services by waiting for students to self-identify their needs may not be as effective; thus, the VRC staff should be proactive in making an effort to collect data and track their students' progress (DiRamio et al., 2008; Vance & Miller, 2009). For that reason, veteran status needs to be included in the student unit record (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Subsequently, VRC staff expressed their frustration with insufficient funding to mitigate this challenge (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; McBain et al., 2012). At present, many VA certifying officials are often clerical (or support) staff, and their hands are already full of documenting GI Bill certifications. As a result, they experience limited time and opportunities to expand their role on behalf of student veterans (Summerlot et al., 2009). Conversely, Vacchi and Berger (2013) refuted that it is unrealistic to expect a large number of student veterans to utilize VRC because student veterans desire less dependency on regular contact with their veteran peers (so that they could be less dominated by the military culture). In that context, the lack of funding on campus

and issues related to identifying and tracking student veterans creates a vicious cycle.

Furthermore, lack of funding may create an uneven quality of VRC services, as they may vary from institution to institution (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Several student veterans reported great variation in the quality of the VRC, and they expressed a need for increased/improved VRC services (DiRamio et al., 2008; Glasser et al., 2009; Jones, 2013). Student veterans expressed frustration in consistently obtaining their educational benefits promptly while accepting the frustration due to a lack of staffing (Glasser et al., 2009; Wheeler, 2012).

At this time, there are no consistent college policies and procedures for veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009), and meeting all student veterans' needs may be a difficult goal to achieve (Kirchner, 2015). Nevertheless, Vacchi and Berger (2013) asserted that when student veterans no longer spend a lot of time in VRC lounges, it does not mean that the VRC is a negative environment; rather, it suggests evidence of a successful transition to college. All the while, VRC's job duties and responsibilities are being overextended to another level. If the VRC only processes required documentation to certify the GI Bill, it might be insufficient to fully support the influx of student veterans enrolled in colleges (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot et al., 2009).

Literature Review Limitations

Limitations of this review may include: a) most studies relied on participants' self-reported data, and non-response bias is likely to come from those who are more socially isolated and could not participate in the study (or institutions that offer little to no services for student veterans may not have participated in the study); b) most qualitative data collection was limited to one institution; c) the participating institution's military connection (e.g., close proximity to the military base) influenced participants' experiences at the research site; d) there were no

longitudinal studies; and e) there are no qualitative studies focusing on faculty members and staffs.

Furthermore, both physical and psychological service-connected disabilities are the repercussions of combat exposure, and both should equitably be examined (Ackerman et al., 2009; Barry et al., 2014). Although most literature discussed predominantly psychological injuries, it is equally important to consider those who acquired physical injuries. Most importantly, even if a veteran does not obtain a documented disability determined by the military, it does not mean that the individual does not have a disability under the ADA and Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act (Madaus et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, veterans with dishonorable discharges (not eligible for military benefits) may still enroll on college campuses. Also, more focus on Military Sexual Trauma (MST) is necessary. While prone to be underreported, approximately one-third of all women on active duty experienced sexual assault while serving in the military (US Department of Defense, 2012; Vacchi & Berger, 2013). Lastly, there is currently no research on VRC staffs' experiences toward providing services for student veterans' transition in higher education.

As described in this review, copious qualitative studies discussed student veterans' first-hand experiences with their transition, and there were sparse qualitative studies on faculty and staff's perceptions of student veterans. Although existing studies provide important insights into the phenomenon of student veterans with disabilities, very little (or almost no) research has been conducted on how different institutional strategies are implemented to facilitate student veterans' transitions across community colleges. There is a gap in understanding how the current support service offices, including the VRC, are currently succeeding (or failing) in meeting the context-sensitive needs of student veterans. It is important to understand VRC staff's knowledge,

expertise, perspective, and understanding about their professional practices in terms of what and why they are doing (or not doing) concerning student veterans.

3 Methodology

This chapter will describe the main concepts of phenomenology, key historical figures of phenomenology, and their theoretical frameworks (descriptive and interpretive phenomenology). Next, I will discuss how phenomenology, as a heuristic inquiry, may be applied to study the experiences of support service providers (e.g., Veteran Resources Center [VRC], Disability Student Services [DSS], and health centers) in California community colleges as a research methodology.

Phenomenology has its roots in philosophy and psychology, and it emphasizes the subjective experience of the individual (Bolton, 1979; Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Peoples, 2020). It describes/interprets how the situated body makes sense of a phenomenon (Wolff, 1999). The study seeks to understand the *essence* of a phenomenon *as lived* from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Bolton, 1979; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Peoples, 2020). Thus, meaning-making is crucial within the construct of experience, and researchers construct a meaningful reality through data analysis (Peoples, 2020). Reality is not an objective concept that exists entirely outside of what we know/think; instead, it is understood in the context of consciousness (Bolton, 1979; Peoples, 2020).

Furthermore, the research rejects the notion of a dichotomy between subject and object (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Grenier, 2019) because “an object is only perceived within the meaning of experience of an individual” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). Thus, it focuses on the interaction between the two by addressing questions about common, everyday human experiences (Bolton, 1979; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Peoples, 2020). Conversely, phenomenological research is not aimed at directly solving social problems; instead, it

illuminates and reveals the complexities of different experiences/phenomena (Peoples, 2020), and it certainly informs our understanding as we try to solve problems. The phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection (Merriam & Grenier, 2019), and the personal understanding of phenomenological philosophy is a prerequisite.

Combination of the *Critical* and the *Empirical*

Bolton (1979) described that the phenomenological method combines *critical* and *empirical*. It is critical as it attempts to formulate judgments about the experience. It is also empirical, for it returns to the primitive data of experience. To fully achieve both concepts (abstracted from essence), critical reflection upon the essential nature of experience is the central foundation of this study. Phenomenology is not a method; rather, it is a way of inquiry (Dall'Alba, 2009).

Thus, prior to (and during) the research, the researcher must explore his/her own experience of prejudice, perspectives, and assumptions. (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). These dimensions of experience must not influence the research. Thus, they are either suspended, set aside, or made explicit during the inquiry process to allow an intrinsic system of meaning (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Historical key phenomenological figures endorsed this process very differently; they will be discussed later in detail. In addition, the researcher also must engage in: a) *Phenomenological reduction*, b) *Horizontalization*, c) *Imaginative variation*, and d) *Synthesis*.

Phenomenological reduction requires a researcher to intentionally suspend his/her judgment before delving into the studied phenomenon (Peoples, 2020). This process is also known as bracketing, and the goal is not to eliminate potential biases but to set them aside to focus on the analysis of experience. Also, the researcher has to constantly return to the data to comprehend the inner structure and meaning of the experience (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Horizontalization is a data analysis process of weighting equal value to all aspects of data. During the initial stage of data analysis, the researcher will be laying out all the data. Once every perception is granted equal weight, it can be clustered into themes. During this stage, any repetitious or unrelated statements are removed, and non-repetitive constituents of experience are linked thematically to achieve a full description of an experience. According to Moustakas (1994), it is the process of an interweaving of person, conscious experience, and phenomenon; thus, qualities are recognized and described.

Imaginative variation focuses on explicating the structures of experience more distinctively. It requires reviewing the data from diverging perspectives and other frames of reference (Moustakas, 1994), as it is often described as a mental experiment. Along with *Phenomenological reduction* and *Horizontalization*, *Imaginative variation* aims to examine how a particular phenomenon presents itself to the researcher's consciousness. Finally, *Synthesis* is a process of integrating and constructing textual/structural descriptions of the phenomenon to illustrate the experience's unified statement. In sum, the researcher must utilize his/her intuitive understanding of the research findings to portray these findings using narrative depiction. Again, prominent phenomenological figures have endorsed these processes differently, and they will be further discussed in the next section.

Historical Key Figures

The role of foundational philosophers/theorists is crucial in phenomenological research. Each of them espouses different data analysis procedures based on a particular philosophical framework (Bolton, 1979; Peoples, 2020). Therefore, this section will discuss the main historical key figures of phenomenology and their philosophical frameworks. They are mainly divided into

descriptive phenomenology and interpretive phenomenology (Peoples, 2020). This paper will also discuss the tension/feud between them.

Descriptive Phenomenology

In a descriptive philosophical framework, the definition of *essence* focuses on how the conscious (in the lived experience) manifests as an object of reflection. This segment will discuss the following key figures in descriptive phenomenology: Edmund Husserl and Clark Moustakas.

Edmund Husserl

Edmund Husserl is considered the founder of phenomenology. His central tenet is to *return to the things themselves* (Dall’Alba, 2009). He asserted that phenomenology was presuppositional; thus, there can be no other usage of theoretical frameworks; nothing can be assumed in Husserl’s lenses (Bolton, 1979; Peoples, 2020). Husserl’s principal themes may include: a) *Intentionality*, b) *Bracketing*, c) *Reduction*, d) *Noesis /Noema*, and e) *Horizon*.

Bolton (1979) and Peoples (2020) concisely summarized Husserl’s five principal themes in the following: *Intentionality* is the principal theme within Husserl’s philosophy. It focuses on how the very act of fundamental consciousness bonds us to the thinking we think about. Also, it is our awareness of looking at something through the fundamental property of consciousness. *Bracketing* was once called phenomenological vigilance, and it is the suspension of trust in the objectivity of the world. The goal is not about eliminating biases entirely. Rather, it is about suspending them or setting them aside in order to focus on a particular phenomenon. *Reduction* is an intentional process of conducting bracketing to focus on the analysis of experience. It is important to emphasize the intentional consciousness during this process as the phenomenologists may free themselves from the conventional comprehension and achieve a holistic standpoint.

In that context, *Noesis* refers to intentional acts. It also pertains to the act of its interpretation. On the other hand, *Noema* is the sense of an act that is being thought about. Compared to *Noesis*, it is the ideal essence of the character, not the actual content. *Horizon* is a concept of taking multiple reference points to an experiential structure. Moreover, it is a present experience that cannot be suspended/bracketed because you are currently in it right now. Thus, “when we look at something even though we suspend our judgments to try to get this pure essence of something we come to the horizon, and the horizon is the understanding that we have” (Peoples, 2020, p. 30).

The aphorism “a stranger in a strange land,” is often used to describe Husserl’s bracketing. To counter an array of culturally prescribed meanings, Husserl asserted that one must suspend all other understanding or presupposition to appreciate the authentic phenomenon; thus, using another theoretical framework is prohibited (Bolton, 1979; LeVasseur, 2003; Peoples, 2020). Peoples (2020) explained that, for Husserl, all human thinking was thinking something because they constantly prescribe an ending to their thinking. Husserl also believed the act of knowing makes an objective existence (independent of ourselves) become subjective as we name it, and the name becomes the clamp between the person and the object. To summarize, “the more people thought about their thinking, the more they could know something clearly” (Peoples, 2020, p. 31).

Clark Moustakas

According to Creswell (2007), Clark Moustakas coined the term transcendental/psychological phenomenology, and he “focused less on the interpretation of the research and more on a description of the experiences of participants” (p. 59). Moreover, he took Husserl’s concept of bracketing to a subsequent level. Similar to Husserl, Moustakas refers to

transcendental as “everything perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). However, although Husserl believed that viewing the self can be separate from the phenomena, Moustakas did not.

Moreover, disparate from Husserl, Moustakas valued the researcher’s personal knowledge as a foundation for exploring a phenomenon (Sultan, 2019); thus, the researchers must rely on their intuition and imagination while conducting a holistic approach to arrive at the essence. Also, Moustakas established the systematic/structured steps (or guidelines) to utilize a *textural description* (what participants experienced) and a *structural description* (how participants experienced it in terms of the specific context) during the data analysis to convey the essence of the phenomenon; (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, he coined the following terms: a) *horizontalization*, b) *indwelling*, c) *tacit knowing*, and d) *reflexivity*.

Horizontalization is a process of going through interview transcriptions and highlighting significant statements (Creswell, 2007; Sultan, 2019). It is important that all statements are equally valued during this process. Furthermore, a broad exploration of the universal meanings and the experience of the study sample is required because the main focus of this segment is to list every key sentence (in the interviews or other data sources) about how individuals are experiencing the topic. *Indwelling* is a dialogical/relational interaction between the researcher and participants (Sultan, 2019). The researcher is not just making observations of external stimuli with no feelings. Rather, the researcher must embody the inquiry process and establish a sense of connection. Thus, directing the focus both inward and outward is crucial to seeking a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon to conceive the experience holistically.

Tacit knowing is an implicit knowledge that lies beyond what may be readily observed/articulated (Sultan, 2019). It involves a revelatory process for an implicit understanding

within its various dimensions when there are no direct sources to draw information about phenomena. Therefore, researchers may use their intuitions and personal experiences when selecting a topic of the study, research questions, and data collection in order to “make sense of experiences whose complexity transcends what the objective domain can accommodate” (Sultan, 2019, p. 89). *Reflexivity* acknowledges the researcher’s own self-awareness through an initial subjectivity statement within an autobiographical context (Creswell, 2007; Sultan, 2019). There is an interpretive approach to autobiographical writing by acknowledging the impact of the study on the researcher, participant, and reader. Ultimately, the stance of a study is positioned based on the researchers’ personal experiences, cultures, and traditions.

In summary, Moustakas did not draw distinctions between inner and outer experience. He emphasized the open-ended, holistic, and flexibility of the phenomenological approach; furthermore, scientific inquiry is not about gaining certainty but searching for meaning; it is not about finding proof but emerging awareness (Sultan, 2019).

Interpretive Phenomenology

This section will discuss the following key figures in interpretive phenomenology: Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Notably, they have established personal relationships with some of the previous historical figures (as they share the same era); however, they hold a different point of view on the phenomenological approach. In essence, they attempt to reach (and achieve) similar goals and outcomes.

Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger branched off from his mentor, Husserl, and created hermeneutic phenomenology in his ground-breaking work, *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962). In contrast with Husserl, Heidegger asserted that we could never bracket our experiences because there is no

way to separate ourselves from being within the world. The state of being within the self (or being each person/self), established by the ubiquitous structures of everyday life, is called *Dasein* (Peoples, 2020; Shalin, 2010).

According to Heidegger, *Dasein* is “the impersonal, taken for granted, unreflexive attitudes” (Shalin, 2010, p. 8). He valued interpretive knowledge as a premium to practical activity and placed great emphasis on constitutive moods; hence, our *Dasein* is attuned according to prevailing moods, which are never the same day to day (Shalin, 2010). Additionally, he also believed that the interpretation is never presupposition-less because there will always be prevailing fore-sights, and fore-conceptions, among the knowing agent. In sum, he wanted to make these fore-structures as part of the *things themselves*.

Therefore, to Heidegger, authentic existence is seized. “As long as the knowing agent remains oblivious to its presuppositions and moods, it persist as an “inauthentic”...it is loaded down with the legacy of the ‘past’ which has become unrecognizable” (Shalin, 2010, p. 10). Since we cannot suspend our presuppositions completely, Heidegger constructed the hermeneutic circle. It is a *spiral* process (rather than *orbit*, which tends to get back to the same point) of explicitly revising our biases, understandings, or judgments; thus, interpretation is a constant revision (Peoples, 2020).

Thus, Heidegger wanted to make personal biases/judgments explicit before analyzing the data (Peoples, 2020). For example, there are many standard terms used in the military, and if the participant said “latrine,” the researcher knows that he/she is referring to the restroom. Husserl would probe with the question to clarify what “latrine” means as a stranger in a strange land. Conversely, Heidegger would explicitly disclose their prior military experiences beforehand so

that “latrine” is acquainted with other possible biases. In sum, Heidegger is putting “biases in front of consciousness so that one knows what biases to suspend” (Peoples, 2020, p. 34).

In that respect, Heidegger believed that all understanding is circumscribed by its time. Furthermore, similar to Gestalt psychology, he asserted that the whole influences the individual parts, and the individual parts influence the whole because the object may change the researcher’s personal comprehension and vice versa (Heidegger, 1971).

However, Heidegger’s philosophy is often criticized, not because he lent his intellectual powers to the fascist circle of understanding (and national socialism during the Nazi era) but because of his redundant emphasis on language/textual analysis as the central point of the phenomenon. In sum, textualized formats, by themselves, cannot fully capture the holistic essence because they tend to distort voices (Shalin, 2010).

Hans-Georg Gadamer

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, further developed his mentor’s concept of the hermeneutic circle through his work, *Truth and Method*. Similar to his teacher, Gadamer asserted that “a person modifies the nature of understanding by this constant process of renewed projection” (Peoples, 2020, p. 34). However, he declined to follow Heidegger, who equated everydayness with inauthenticity and focused on an individual’s history-bound attitudes (Shalin, 2010). Instead of regarding *prejudice* as obscuring/stultifying, Gadamer wanted to devise a strategy to become conscious of the prejudice and maneuver it to achieve enlightenment because we are historical beings, and our prejudices are open to change (Shalin, 2010).

Specifically, Gadamer called this notion effective historical consciousness (Shalin, 2010). Our embedded assumptions (e.g., traditions and cultures) are shaped over the passage of time, and our surrounding history may continuously and inevitably affect the interpretive process.

Thus, we should be fully conscious of the historical background before encountering and revising our traditions within the hermeneutic circle. Moreover, the critical segment of Gadamer's hermeneutics is: "distinguishing the true prejudice, by which we understand, from the false ones by which we misunderstand" (Shalin, 2010, p. 12). People (2020) summarized: as the process of interpretation and revision continues, a lens is created, and a new understanding of a phenomenon may be achieved by looking through each lens (which may change through revisions).

So far in this chapter, I have discussed the main concept of phenomenology and how and why historical key figures espoused their stances toward this inquiry. Again, phenomenology is not a method; rather, it is a way of inquiry (Dall'Alba, 2009). The next section will discuss how this way of inquiry can be applied to the research on support service providers for student veterans in higher education.

Phenomenological Study on VRC Staff Members in Higher Education

The Veterans Resources Centers (VRC) provide academic support to student veterans on a college campus. They facilitate student veterans' navigation of administrative processes and address any concerns toward degree completion. VRCs may serve as the one-stop veterans' center with streamlined programs and services for student veterans, including administrative services, academic support, and counseling services. Per the literature review, there were two major challenges for VRCs: a) outreaching and keeping accountability; and b) budgetary constraints due to lack of funding. Since veterans often did not self-identify, it was difficult to support those who wanted to remain invisible (DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011). Also, veterans with disabilities were less likely than civilian students to seek disability resources and accommodation (Madaus, 2009). Participating in the VRC program is strictly voluntary. In

other words, if student veterans did not identify as veterans when seeking services, they could not be tracked by the VRC. (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014).

Subsequently, VRC offices (from the literature review) expressed their frustration with insufficient funding to mitigate this challenge (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; McBain et al., 2012). At present, many VA certifying officials are often clerical (or support) staff, and they manage an overwhelming number of GI Bill documentation and certifications. As a result, they experience limited time and opportunities to expand their role to meet the needs of student veterans (Summerlot et al., 2009). Furthermore, lack of funding may create an uneven quality of VRC services, as they may vary from institution to institution (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Several student veterans reported great variation in the quality of the VRC, and they expressed a need for increased/improved VRC services (DiRamio et al., 2008; Glasser et al., 2009; Jones, 2013). Student veterans expressed frustration in consistently obtaining their educational benefits promptly while accepting the frustration due to a lack of staffing (Glasser et al., 2009; Wheeler, 2012).

Currently, VRCs' job duties and responsibilities are being overextended to another level. If the VRC only administers the required documentation to certify the GI Bill, it might be insufficient to fully support the influx of student veterans enrolled in colleges (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot et al., 2009). All the while, the current literature is dominated by explorations of the perspectives of student veterans, mostly those with disabilities, about their college experiences. There is a scarcity of studies on the VRCs' perspectives. It is vital to understand and interpret how they describe the experience of providing services (and facilitating the transition process) for student veterans. On that note, there is a possible clash (or tension)

between the perspectives of student veterans and VRCs. Thus, studying both phenomena simultaneously under one study would be difficult.

For that matter, Bourke et al. (2000) explained that despite the anonymity provided, if interviewees believed that monitoring performance measures are conducted, the interviewee might feel hesitant to participate, as the research may be perceived as a watchdog. In that context, if the service providers (e.g., VRC staff) and their recipients/beneficiaries (e.g., student veterans) are concurrently asked about their experiences with the quality of services, service providers could be hesitant to participate in a study that monitors their performance. To that account, the current study intends to focus solely on the college staff members' self-assessment of their service provision to student veterans (including Veteran Resources Center [VRC], Disability Student Services [DSS], and health center).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological (heuristic inquiry) research is to illuminate the knowledge, expertise, and understanding about professional practices of VRC staff who work with student veterans in California community colleges. By interviewing them, I will describe/explore the phenomenon of their current overall experiences (which may include successes and challenges) when providing services to student veterans in academic settings. Thus, respectively, I want to know what they are currently doing (or not doing) for student veterans.

As a result of this study, program administrators/directors may better explain how their staff might experience difficulties and potentially improve their service-delivery model. In sum, the question, "How do VRC staff members in California community colleges describe their

support work toward the academic success of student veterans?” is the overarching focus of this research study. There are five sub-questions to articulate the main question:

1. What are their perceptions of the systems and practices to support student veterans?
2. What are their experiences around the structures, processes, and norms?
3. How do they perceive their interactions with other campus offices aiming to serve student veterans?
4. What difficulties and challenges, if any, do they perceive in their work?
5. How do they perceive their activities and interactions with student veterans with disabilities in particular?

How Understanding the Lived Experience Will Help Resolve the Problem.

Interviews may provide deeper insights into the intricate interactions of the population’s experiences (Peoples, 2020). Although interviews are used in various other qualitative practices, the emphasis of this study is on the exploration of experiences. Therefore, this phenomenological investigation is best suited to exploring and identifying the specific difficulties VRC staff members experience while providing services to student veterans. Understanding the lived experiences of VRC staff in academic settings may help program administrators create better service delivery models by offering a clearer understanding of this population’s individual experiences. By illuminating this phenomenon, this study may add rich information for future administrators/decision-makers to their program development.

To provide me with a description of the phenomena under study, I chose research participants from whom I could receive first-hand descriptions of services being provided to student veterans in college settings. The description provided by these responses reveals the lived

meanings and provides a discursive means of unveiling, examining, and understanding during the inquiry (Nelson, 1989).

Methodology

In this section, I present the research methods design and rationale and my role as the inquirer. I will discuss the selection of participants and instrumentation, along with data analysis procedures. For this research, I intend to use phenomenological methodology because it allows me to illuminate authentic descriptions and meanings of lived experiences related to VRC staff in community college settings (Peoples, 2020). It is aligned with the holistically phenomenological research model. It is also the best method for investigating/exploring the human living experience (Sultan, 2018). Most importantly, this study will strictly follow ethical procedures to protect the rights/welfare of participants as subjects in the research based on the approval of Chapman University's Institutional Review Board's research protocols.

For this research, I intend to use phenomenological methodology because it allows me to illuminate authentic descriptions and meanings of lived experiences related to VRC staff members' knowledge, expertise, and understanding of their professional practices concerning student veterans. Moreover, it is the most suitable approach for this study compared to other qualitative methodologies. Similar to phenomenology, the method of Grounded Theory is also used to study the experience from the standpoint of participants. The end product of this approach is the theoretical understanding, which is "grounded-in" (or emerged from) the data (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Sultan, 2019); however, it is not appropriate for my study because building substantive theory through a group of themes that assimilate around a core theme (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Grenier, 2019), which is not the main focus of this research.

On the other hand, a Case Study approach is an inductive investigative strategy that defines the case in terms of the unit of analysis; concurrently, Ethnography is a socio-cultural interpretation of a particular cultural group (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Both methodologies were also considered because people's stories could be presented as narratives (similar to phenomenology). Even so, focusing only on experiences as lived (in accordance with phenomenological philosophy) does not fully meet the requirements of a single case, which may require a specific time, particular space, and significant instances/components (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Finally, there was no phenomenological (or qualitative) research found in the literature that examines the VRC staff members' knowledge, expertise, and understanding of their professional practices concerning student veterans. As previously discussed during the literature review, there were various qualitative studies discussing student veterans' first-hand experiences with their transition (Ackerman et al., 2009; Bauman, 2009; Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Boettcher et al., 2017; Cate et al., 2017; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott, 2015; Elliott et al., 2011; Ghosh et al., 2019; Ghosh & Fouad, 2016; Glasser et al., 2009; Jones, 2013; Koenig et al., 2014; Mendez et al., 2018; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Olsen et al., 2014; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

Also, there were several quantitative studies on faculties and staffs' perceptions toward student veterans (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2016a; Gordon et al., 2016b; Vance & Miller, 2009). It is important to point out that all of them utilized descriptive surveys only. Inarguably, existing studies provide important insights into the phenomenon of student veterans with disabilities. Nevertheless, phenomenological research has not yet been found on this topic, and this study may serve as a precursor for further explorations. In sum, phenomenology will be

the most suitable approach to illuminate authentic descriptions and meanings of lived experiences related to VRC staff in community college settings. It is aligned with the holistically phenomenological research model. It is also the best method for investigating/exploring the human living experience (Sultan, 2018).

Researcher Role

Per Sultan (2018), the researcher's role will be a "distant and detached bystander" (Sultan, 2018, p. 18), and there is no personal/professional relationship nor any position of power between the researcher and participants. The process of bracketing will be utilized, not in the context of Husserlian philosophy, but in Sultan's heuristic inquiry: "to enhance researcher awareness as to how to approach the research question and process of inquiry" (Sultan, 2018, p. 18). Although heuristic inquiry has its foundations in phenomenology (Sultan, 2018, p. 26), the purpose of bracketing is not to abstract the researcher from the research but to honor and take ownership of personal experiences. Thus, the researchers may: a) challenge/explore what they think they know; b) increase transparency and minimize deception and; c) reinforce the trustworthiness of the research. To borrow Sultan's words, "I do not bracket myself out of my research studies. Instead, I bracket myself into the process of inquiry" (Sultan, 2018, p.18).

Participants and Data Collection

The study seeks depth over breadth; thus, interviewing a larger number of participants is not feasible, considering the need to obtain detailed descriptions of the participants' first-hand experiences. To target a particular group of people (based on their lived experience of the phenomenon being explored), in-depth interviewing through purposeful sampling was utilized (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Sultan, 2018).

Sampling and Recruiting

The study sample was composed of VRC staff in California community colleges in Orange County, California. The location comprised one of the most diverse populations and cultures in the United States. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, potential respondents were identified through each institution's website. As a starting point of the inquiry, initial contact with prospective participants began via direct e-mail (included in Appendix D). The first participant referred additional prospective interviewees within the same VRC office and other campus VRCs.

Five campus VRC offices in Orange County were invited to participate, and four campuses accepted the invitation. Contingent upon the agreement to participate in the study, the thank you letter was sent (included in Appendix E). Prior to the initial meeting with each prospective participant, the purpose and design of the study were explained, and informed consent was obtained (included in Appendix C). The final data collection consisted of 15 interviews. The rationale for this number of sample sizes is not just to reach saturation when no more new data are obtained for further insight (Creswell, 2007) and to identify the holistic essence of the phenomenon being explored (Sultan, 2018).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Sultan, 2018) by choosing specific participants who meet the following criterion: they must be a VRC staff of a California community college who interacts with student veterans (with preference given to racial and gender diversity). Their previous student veteran experiences and military statuses were also preferred but not required; to that end, nine participants were veterans among 15 participants. Pseudonyms were utilized to protect participants' confidentiality, and their demographics as follows:

TABLE 1. Participant Demographics

Pseudonyms	Gender	Veteran?	Yrs of Service	Interim/Permanent	Full/Pt Time	Position
Alonzo	Male	Y	8	Permanent	Full Time	Counselor/Coordinator
Ben	Male	N	3	Interim	Full Time	Coordinator
Carmen	Female	N	21	Permanent	Pt Time	Certifying Official
Daniel	Male	Y	10	Interim	Full Time	Dean
Edward	Male	Y	5	Interim	Pt Time	Project Expert/Case Manager.
Frieda	Female	Y	3	Permanent	Full Time	Specialist
George	Male	N	11	Permanent	Full Time	Coordinator
Henry	Male	N	10	Interim	Full Time	Director
Irena	Female	Y	10	Interim	Pt Time	Counselor
Julian	Male	Y	3	Interim	Full Time	Specialist
Kate	Nonbinary	Y	3	Permanent	Pt Time	Specialist
Lori	Female	N	20+	Permanent	Full Time	Assistant Dean
Monica	Female	Y	7	Interim	Pt Time	Counselor
Nate	Male	Y	5	Permanent	Full Time	Specialist
Olivia	Female	N	15	Permanent	Full Time	Certifying Official

Notably, student veterans who are currently attending colleges and receiving VRC services were not selected as participants for this study. Jones (2013) argued it is possible that there may be a clash between VRC and student veterans. Therefore, VRC staff members may be concerned that such juxtaposition can make the institution *look bad* and get themselves into trouble if the student veteran were to complain about the VRC. Nevertheless, this research was designed to fulfill the gap of scarcity of research on the service provider's perspective in higher education. As previously discussed, there is a lack of literature regarding the experiences of staff responsible for providing support services to student veterans in higher education. The existing studies on student veterans' transition to higher education are predominantly concentrated on student veterans' first-hand experiences on how they differ from their non-veteran peers (or traditional students), and understanding student veterans' first-hand experiences on how they personally experience the transition from military to college is not the main goal of this study.

Interview Process

The interview was conducted through semi-structured protocols. Rather than being limited to a specific scripted set of questions, I started the dialogue and then allowed the participants to tell their stories and share their experiences (Creswell, 2007). Thus, I deviated from the interview guide when the opportunity arose to explore novel topics not originally included. This yielded the study a considerable depth as participants were encouraged to elaborate on particular issues, events, and experiences. Although phenomenological study endorses a natural, intrinsic flow of information, the interviewer must be cautious and sensitive toward going off on tangents to the point of reducing the ability of this study to accomplish study goals (Peoples, 2020; Sultan, 2018). Detailed semi-structured interview guides are included in Appendix F.

Furthermore, in a phenomenological study, personal experiences related to research can provide valuable insights into the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2007; Peoples, 2020; Sultan, 2018). Thus, the interviews also implemented a conversation model emphasizing social interaction and cultural transitions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This approach may also require additional space for various perspectives and novel questions as they emerge. To that account, I was able to ask additional questions to delve into the participants' experiences. The interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom meeting, with each interview ranging between 45-90 minutes. All interviews were recorded upon obtaining the participants' consent signed form (included in Appendix C). I transcribed recordings for the discourse of the participants representing the data in this study. The transcripts of the entire interviews were reviewed and audited in order to check for completeness and resolve any inconsistencies in the data.

Initial data collection focused on building rapport and getting to know the participants' backgrounds. Trust is important in the qualitative interview process in order to establish validity for a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Therefore, there was a particular focus on establishing trust with the participants because it is also crucial to be transparent with the researcher's roles, perspectives, and identities during this process (Boettcher et al., 2017). Additionally, I selected the interview site and method (e.g., via Zoom or in-person) for ease of access contingent upon participants' willingness to participate in this study.

Member Checking

Member checking was adapted to ensure the trustworthiness of thematic findings (Creswell, 2007). Member checking was employed in two phases: a) during the interview, I restated something said by the participant in order to ensure accuracy; and b) after the interview, the interview transcripts were sent to the participants asking for their verification and additional insights, if any. The reviews resulted in a few changes, most of which were corrections of military terminology or clarifications of their job duties.

Data Analysis/Coding

Due to the nature of the phenomenological/heuristic inquiries, there is no clearly fixed/determined/appointed guideline for the phenomenological data analysis (Bolton, 1979; Peoples, 2020). For instance, considering that the term *analysis* refers to breaking into parts, data analysis is not completely aligned with phenomenological study, which seeks to understand the phenomenon as a whole (Peoples, 2020). Thus, it is crucial not only to maintain the context of the *whole* but also, to preserve the fundamental meaning during data analysis in a narrative.

Peoples (2020) summarized the above notion: "phenomenological data analysis is the process of transcending the mundane nature of each description to reveal the essence of the

phenomenon” (p. 58). In addition, Creswell (2007), Peoples (2020), and Sultan (2018) proposed structured steps to write a thorough data analysis section capable of being replicated. Although Creswell and Sultan’s method is a revised version of Clark Moustakas, they emphasized that the researcher must highlight/demonstrate the chosen phenomenological method (e.g., transcendental, hermeneutic, etc.). The current research will espouse their data analysis strategies in the following steps.

My initial step was to describe personal experiences of the phenomenon through a positionality statement (Creswell, 2007); this was an attempt to set aside the researcher’s personal experiences to direct the focus to the participants in the study (I will discuss the positionality statement for this particular study later in this chapter). The second step was to read the entire transcript and remove repetitive statements or unnecessary filler linguistics (e.g., um, you know, well, etc.) (Peoples, 2020). The next step was to generate preliminary “meaning units” (Creswell, 2007; Peoples, 2020). Sultan (2018) called this process the *Theme Explication*. This process was conducted using NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2019).

According to Creswell (2007), the researcher must itemize and consolidate a list of significant statements about how participants are experiencing the topic to generate meaning units. Thus, I categorized meaning units as large groups of significant statements and a part of data containing a feature or train of the phenomenon. During this process, Creswell emphasized the following n: a) each statement must be treated as equal worth; and b) it must include both textural description (*what* the participant experienced) and structural description (*how* it happened). Finally, the textural and structural description was identified and specified toward answering the research questions.

The next step was to generate final meaning units (or themes) from the meaning units so that the research may delve into the understanding of each description/response from the participant (Peoples, 2020; Sultan, 2018). During this step, I synthesized final meaning units into situated narratives so that the meanings of each response could be thematically highlighted by employing direct quotes (Sultan, 2018).

The last step was to unify/composite participants' accounts (the data from the situated narratives) into a general narrative to focus on the "essence" of the phenomena and generate a general description (Creswell, 2007; Peoples, 2020; Sultan, 2018). The main focus was to discuss the implicit themes during the responses and unite them into a cohesive general description (Sultan, 2018). According to Creswell, this step represents the "essence" or the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study. In summary, I have discussed the research method design and rationale and my role as the inquirer. Henceforth, taking the first step of this study, I will proceed with my positionality statement.

Positionality Statement

Through a series of eclectic personal life experiences, I would like to share my unique previous experiences. I am a first-generation immigrant, a soldier/veteran of the United States Army, a survivor of Graves' disease, and a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. Furthermore, through a description of my previous experiences, I will delineate how they influence my current research interests. Being a Korean immigrant, I have fully acculturated into both Korean and US cultures, and I speak both languages fluently. After high school graduation, I wanted to protect my country, my new home. Therefore, I decided to join the United States Army, and this decision changed my life. During my military service, I witnessed many US soldiers with severe physical

and psychological issues. It made me want to help them; however, at the time, I did not realize that I was the one who needed the most help.

After my honorable discharge from the military, I was diagnosed with Graves' disease. It is a rare form of hyperthyroidism resulting from excess thyroid hormone production. One of the fatal symptoms is called Thyrotoxic Periodic Paralysis (TPP), a condition featuring attacks of muscle weakness and periodic paralysis in the presence of over-activity of the thyroid gland. It was the most painful and challenging sickness I have ever experienced. And yet, it gave me the capacity to truly understand what it feels like to lose self-control physically and mentally. Had I not suffered from this sickness, I would have never imagined the pain and agony of physical and mental immobility.

My hyperthyroidism was prolonged and led to other conditions (including diabetes mellitus and mood disorder), and I felt tremendous fatigue. As a result, focusing on my academic work became increasingly difficult during my undergraduate program. The campus provided no accommodation or assistance at the time. I started to lose my focus. Although I requested service-connected compensation to the Veterans Affairs (VA), my request was initially denied. They responded that there was no medical record to prove that the condition was directly related to the military service. I was shocked by their response. Furthermore, I also noticed many other veterans with disabilities were not being treated fairly. In particular, I remember seeing homeless veterans at the VA hospital ER room who wanted to get some cold air through air conditioning on hot summer nights.

As a result of witnessing and experiencing VA and campus services at the time, my commitment and dedication toward academics became stronger. After my undergraduate completion, I applied to the Master's program in Rehabilitation Counseling at California State

University, Los Angeles (CSULA). Since being accepted to the program, I have made academic progress through the tremendous support provided by faculty members at CSULA. They taught me the medical, psychosocial, and vocational aspects of disabilities and their rehabilitation processes. All the while, I have also made significant health recovery through prayers and spiritual support; I am a Christian-faith-based person who believes in the power of prayers.

Since 2011, I have been a Senior Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor at the California Department of Rehabilitation (DOR). Our agency's core mission is to advocate on behalf of people with disabilities and lead them to reach independence through meaningful employment. So far, I have opened (and closed) approximately 400 individual cases with 135 current clients. Having our office located in Anaheim, California, we are truly blessed by the experiences of working with clients with more various cultural backgrounds than any other place in the US.

Through my work and personal experiences, I have learned many things. But primarily, I have learned that in order to empower my clients with disabilities with meaningful employment, both curricular and pedagogical practices in higher education are crucial. Therefore, my research goal is to learn how higher education institutions can facilitate transition reintegration for student veterans with (and without) disabilities. I believe that my expertise will significantly contribute to overcoming barriers for those who have been historically underrepresented in our society and this particular project as well.

Conclusion

Phenomenology seeks to describe the essence in the context of how it functions (or is revealed) in the lived experience and how it manifests in consciousness as an object of reflection. It is a holistic method that allows for the enlightenment of implicit meanings. It emerged as a study of philosophy. Perception (or describing experience) is viewed as the primary source of

knowledge. Furthermore, there were various historical key figures contributed as building blocks to this research approach. The limitations of the phenomenological study may include small sample sizes, time constraints/limitations, and bias in the participant sample. Therefore, findings may not be easily transferrable.

There is a richness to each individual's experiences. This research approach has revealed (even before conducting the actual study) that there was no uniform formula applied in the VRC study. It also emphasized ensuring a good experience for both student veterans and VRC staff. Finally, by creating a facilitative service-delivery model (established from this study), program administrators/staff may be attuned to opportunities to intervene strategically with student veterans to meet their unique needs during their transitions. In essence, this study aimed for deepened awareness and meanings rather than certainty and proof.

4 Findings

The existing research literature described that the lived experience of twenty-first-century student veterans is complicated. To that account, previous studies acknowledged that Veteran Resource Centers (VRC) take a major role in student veterans' academic successes in higher education. Thus, this study focuses on VRC staff members' experiences and their perceived support work toward the academic success of student veterans. Phenomenology served as the guiding methodological framework as it focuses on participants' shared experiences (Creswell, 2007), and transparency is essential for the researcher.

In that context, a phenomenological researcher's first task is to find a topic and question with social meaning and personal significance (Moustakas, 1994). The over-arching focus of this research study is: "how do VRC staff members in California community colleges describe their support work toward the academic success of student veterans?" There are five sub-questions to articulate the main question:

1. What are their perceptions of the systems and practices to support student veterans?
2. What are their experiences around the structures, processes, and norms?
3. How do they perceive their interactions with other resources aiming to serve student veterans?
4. What difficulties and challenges, if any, do they perceive in their work?
5. How do they perceive their activities and interactions with student veterans with disabilities in particular?

The interview was the principal data collection method, and the final data collection consisted of interview recordings with 15 participants. Each interview was recorded and ranged between 45-

90 minutes. They were transcribed for the discourse of the participants representing the data in this study.

Using the data, phenomenology guided both the theoretical framework of this study and the analysis method. This approach was used to obtain comprehensive descriptions that “provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The data were coded using NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2019) as a thematic analysis comparing and contrasting salient elements in participants’ experiences and perceptions are major tenets of phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009). Data analysis has been organized based on research questions. Then, within each question, four themes were identified that represent the articulated experiences of the research participants.

The first section discussed participants’ perceptions toward their current campus systems and practices to support student veterans. Participants shared their difficulty maintaining academic and personal connections with student veterans mainly due to: a) student veterans’ mistranslated sense of self-sufficiency; b) lack of student engagement; c) arranging VRC orientation to outreach new students and graduates, and; d) those who are in school with a sole purpose of collecting their educational benefits (also known as *here for the money*).

The second section addressed participants’ experiences of their campus’ structures, processes, and norms. In consensus, participants emphasized that institutional mechanisms may require funding reform, and they may include: a) issues surrounding the current VRC funding formula in the California community college system; b) how the current funding has a paradoxical effect on student veterans and VRCs simultaneously; c) how VRCs are currently relying on non-institutional soft funds and grants, and; d) how VRCs experience limited staffing and space due to the funding issues.

The third section examined participants' perceptions toward their interactions with other resources aiming to serve student veterans. Participants shared that there are non-academic matters inhibiting student veterans, which VRCs may or may not be able to accommodate. They may include: a) campus climate surrounding other campus services and offices; b) student veteran homelessness and outside resources; c) matters in which VRCs cannot assist, and; d) how VRCs employ four-year university tours as an outside resource to increase student morale, retention, and commitment.

The fourth section explored the difficulties and challenges participants experienced and perceived during their work with their VRC. Mainly, there were four sub-themes that participants shared: a) military-affiliated students are often overlooked by the community programs; b) GI Bill is insufficient in duration and amount; c) students' living arrangements in Orange County, California, are extremely difficult; and d) COVID19 hampered student veterans' academic endeavors in distinctive ways compared to their non-veteran peers.

The last section specified how participants perceived their activities and interactions with student veterans with disabilities. Generally, participants shared that: a) it was beyond the reach/scope of VRCs when the student's disabilities were too severe; b) there was an internal and external stigma involved with military service-connected disabilities; c) veterans' benefits information was stringent, and they were not properly disseminated, and; d) VRCs and student veterans experienced and were enervated with the Veterans Administration (VA)'s bureaucracy. Table 1 summarizes the description of themes. Each section will be discussed in detail.

TABLE 2. Summary of Themes

1. What are VRC staff members' perceptions of the systems and practices to support student veterans?	
Components of the Theme:	Description:
Self-Sufficiency	Student veterans seldom recognize they need help and accept the help when needed.
Student Engagement	VRC endeavors to increase student engagement.
VRC Orientation	VRC orientation meetings should be mandatory to new student veterans.
Here for the Money	Some student veterans are solely interested in collecting GI Bills.
2. What are their experiences around the structures, processes and norms?	
Funding Formula	VRC funding is based solely on certified student veterans receiving the GI Bill.
Funding Paradox	Those not using the GI Bill do not feel the need to seek VRC service.
Soft Funds	VRC is reliant on soft funds and grants to maintain their funding level.
Staffing and Space	California VRC staffing requirements are rarely met due to insufficient funding.
3. How do they perceive their interactions with other resources and campus offices aiming to serve student veterans?	
Campus Services	Not all campus services were apt to serve student veterans' specific needs.
Student Veteran Homelessness	VRC strives to make connections to outside resources to counter student homelessness.
Things That VRC Cannot Help	There are student veteran's non-academic hardships that VRC cannot assist.
Tour to Four-year Universities' VRC	VRC arranged a tour of the prospective four-year universities to establish a connection.
4. What difficulties and challenges, if any, do they perceive in their work?	
Military Affiliated Students	Various military-affiliated student populations are often neglected.
Insufficient GI Bill	Thirty-six months of GI Bill may not be enough to cover the bachelor's degree.
Living Arrangements in OC	Making living arrangement in OC is much more difficult than expected.
COVID19	The pandemic was one of the biggest challenges participants have recently experienced.
5. How do they perceive their activities and interactions with student veterans with disabilities in particular?	
Severe Service-Connected Disability	Individualized services and resources for their disability traits/symptoms are crucial. □
External/Internal Stigma	VRC is committed to shifting of negative mindset associated with veterans with disabilities.
Lack of Disseminated Information	Many student veterans are disconnected from their resources and benefits.
VA Beauracracy	VRC and student veterans experienced difficulty interacting with the Veterans Affairs.

VRCs' Perceptions of Their Campus Systems and Practices

The first research sub-question discussed participants' perceptions of their current campus systems and practices to support student veterans. Participants mainly shared their difficulty maintaining academic and personal connections with student veterans. There are four themes in this section:

1. Self-Sufficiency: student veterans intentionally do not seek VRC services, partly due to their mistranslated sense of self-sufficiency from the military. Some student veterans may be too prideful to disclose that they need help. And yet, most of them do not realize that they may fall behind in their preparedness for college. Participants

- underscored the importance of assisting student veterans to recognize that they need help and accepting the help when needed.
2. **Student Engagement:** students must take the initiative to fully utilize their available resources. Participants discussed their difficulty in increasing student engagement because student engagement cannot be forced. VRC can only let student veterans make informed choices as adults. Correspondingly, student veterans must engage on learning how VRC would benefit their academic success and improvement.
 3. **VRC Orientation:** whether you are a new student or a returning student, you can only start the process by first visiting the VRC and learning what VRC has to offer. Therefore, participants are pursuing VRC-specific orientation meetings to disseminate/circulate their service information to new and returning student veterans.
 4. **Here for the Money:** few student veterans are solely interested in collecting their GI Bill. They are seldom interested in camaraderie or academic success in the first place. Participants shared their concerns about how these students are exploiting the current system and the challenges of interacting with student veterans.

Self-Sufficiency

Participants discussed that some student veterans intentionally do not seek VRC services, partly due to their sense of self-sufficiency. Some student veterans may be too prideful to disclose that they need help. Being fully aware of this phenomenon, participants made every effort to create a safe space and environment to ensure student veterans' privacy; whatever they disclose to VRC must stay with VRC. Still, coming from the mindset that help-seeking is a sign of weakness, student veterans do not want to be seen by others when asking for assistance.

Most student veterans do not realize that they may fall behind in their preparedness for college. George, a VRC coordinator, underscored that it takes skill to be a student, and if you are not aware that you lack those skills, you will fall behind; many student veterans tend not to take that advice seriously. He continued:

It is easy to get lost in crowd full of students who seem like they all belong there...I strongly believe that academic preparedness is a big part. So where do you get that skill? I think being with other students and teaching them how to look for resources and teaching them how to ask for help. I think that is a big first step.

This notion was extended when some student veterans did not seek academic tutoring. Alonzo, a former US Marine Corps veteran and a current VRC counselor, stated, “some students just don’t click with the material that they are learning.”

In addition, George explained the above notion further:

Being able to sit there and absorb information is a skill...Tutoring does not mean you are stupid or going to the math lab and the writing lab does not mean you are dumb. Like, it just means that you need help, and you are just learning how to write; how to do math; and how to learn again. Because studying is a skill...You have to know how to ask for help and know how to study.

Additionally, an inflated sense of self-sufficiency also may exhibit in the form of hypermasculinity. Irena, a female US Army veteran and a current VRC counselor, explained that some of her student veterans do not take her advice seriously because she is a female:

My experience as a woman veteran is a little different obviously than men. I do get students who I tell them, you know, these are the classes that you need to take and things like that and... and then they have to go to (the program coordinator) who is not a

counselor and hear it from him because he is a man. So that is part of our community...if they are not ready to hear it for me, then that is where they are at.

Daniel, a former Marine Corps veteran and a current dean of student services, echoed this phenomenon of a misguided sense of self-sufficiency in the following:

Many of our veterans feel like they can do everything and anything without help. So veterans tend to not ask for help, even though they could really benefit from it...many times [veterans] feel...I could survive without help...I do not need help now.

As stated above, participants struggled with having student veterans recognize that they need help and accept the help when needed.

In summary, most student veterans do not realize that they may fall behind in their preparedness for college without help. They may also overlook that learning and absorbing information takes a skill. Asking for help may be a sign of weakness in the military. In that regard, when participants interact with student veterans, they pay close attention to facilitating student veterans toward learning how to ask for help and study. Contrarily, they also struggle with student engagement.

Student Engagement

Participants discussed their difficulty in increasing student engagement. Students must take the initiative to utilize their available resources as much as possible. Since student engagement cannot be demanded nor forced, VRC can only let student veterans make informed choices. For instance, Daniel, the aforementioned dean of students, raised a \$2,000 scholarship from a local philanthropist. He created \$500 one-time scholarships for four recipients and disseminated the email to approximately 900 student veterans about how to apply for them.

Surprisingly, he was only able to grant two scholarships because only two students applied. In the end, those two students each got \$1000 as opposed to the \$500 as expected. According to Daniel, this is a prime example of how challenging it was to boost the student veterans' engagement. Moreover, George added that increasing student engagement was also very difficult with Zoom during the pandemic; this notion was applied to students in general, not just limited to student veterans. Some student veterans did not have classes in person; they did not have to reside in the city or even reside in California to maintain student status. George summarized that if the students are not available in person, it is more difficult to support them.

In addition, George mentioned that one of the major complaints that many campus organizations experience is that students generally do not read emails. Thus, they are in the process of implementing a texting service. It is being tested and piloted during the Summer of 2022 and could be implemented in the next fall semester upon approval. Similarly, at a different campus, Henry, a VRC director, finds a phone call to be the most effective way to reach his students:

I really am a big proponent of a simple phone call... that is probably the most effective way to break through to students...when the student gets certified, obviously, they have to give their phone number and their email...so that is the first way that we can get student information in terms of reaching out to them and contacting them.

Daniel explained that many student veterans refuse to be affiliated with the VRC; they just want that chapter of their lives to be done and over with.

Conversely, Henry emphasized that student veterans who participate and seek VRC advisement are the ones who are successful with transferring to four-year universities and, ultimately, completing their degrees. This is why student engagement is so important. Overall,

participants explained that their strategies to increase student engagement are limited. Ultimately, they are searching for ways so that student veterans feel the need/desire to come to the VRC because they want to, not because they have to.

Additionally, participants underscored that student veterans must be able to make a choice as an adult, and take initiative toward executing their decisions. Kate, a former US Army veteran, and a current VRC specialist, shared how she cannot force her student veterans to make the Veterans Administration (VA) benefit applications when they are not ready to do it, nor force them to make the phone calls to the VA. In that discussion, Daniel added the following:

I am a firm believer that as adults, right, regardless of their military affiliation or not, they should be able to make a decision...and one of the things that I really love about at least this college is that we believe in a philosophy that students have the right to fail. If students choose not to utilize their resources, that is their choice."

He further asserted how important it is to respect their choice. Therefore, it is crucial to let student veterans make an informed choice. Student veterans must be fully aware of how VRC would benefit academic success and improvement. It may start with knowing and learning how to ask for help by first visiting the VRC.

VRC Orientation

Participants underscored the importance of organizing VRC-specific orientation meetings to circulate their service information to new and returning student veterans. Student veterans also must be required to attend those orientations to be fully knowledgeable of their VRC services and resources. According to Edward, a former US Army veteran and a current VRC case manager, some student veterans tend to think they need to visit VRC only when they are experiencing issues or problems: "I think a big misconception with my role is that you only have

to come talk to me when things are bad. And that is a giant misconception.” Thus, some student veterans do not seek or visit VRC at all, even when they are new to the campus, because they are not experiencing hardships.

However, when student veterans face issues and problems, they do not know where to seek help. Edward elaborated further:

...everything in their life is fine when they start going to school, but we all know that that can change rapidly, maybe in a month or a semester or next year. They may run into something. Maybe they get a divorce. Maybe their mental health take has turned for the worst. Maybe they lost their employment that they had because they only going to school part-time they need their job. Some may need legal support. And it is real important that they know that this VRC offers things like that.

Edward asserted how imperative it is to proactively seek VRC services even when there are no hardships at the moment, so you know exactly where to seek help when in need. Furthermore, he underscored the importance of post-graduation follow-up in the following:

Where are your students now that they are gone? they came here and got their degree in air conditioning and refrigeration...Do you know if they are homeless today? Do you know if they are employed today? There is not a lot of follow-up after.

Nevertheless, this phenomenon does not apply to all campuses because every VRC has different functionalities in terms of funding and accountability. Alonzo further explained:

Every campus is different. None of us are the same that is probably one of the issues. And the support is different everywhere. So no one school is the same...[another college] serving about the same volume of numbers that we are, [their] program is getting millions of dollars, and we only got \$55,000. How does that make sense, right?

Regarding accountability, every California community college requires students to disclose their military-affiliated status to obtain an ID number for that campus. The information will be sent to the admissions office. Some admission offices would relay that information to VRC to facilitate the outreach, but some do not. Not all campuses are the same.

For example, Julian, a former US Marine Corps veteran, and a current VRC specialist, explained that his VRC has no way of identifying veterans unless they come to make the visit. His campus' admission office would not send their student veteran status to VRC as other campuses do. Thus, more time and effort must be dedicated toward outreach rather than the actual services there compared to other VRCs. This phenomenon of accountability can also be extended to student veterans' disability disclosure. They would not know whether a student veteran has a service-connected disability and may benefit from academic accommodation and resources unless the student discloses that information.

Again, not all campuses are the same; two colleges' admission offices (out of four campuses that participated in this study) would relay the student's military-affiliated status to VRC to facilitate the outreach. The rest of the uniformity (or inconsistency) toward this policy among colleges across the board are unknown. All in all, VRC is always open for student veterans and military-affiliated students. They serve as a safe haven for those in need of camaraderie and connection as well. Even so, it was found that not all student veterans desired such genuine and meaningful relationships, not just with others but also within themselves.

Here for the Money

Participants shared that some students are solely interested in collecting the GI Bill and are seldom interested in camaraderie or academic success. Specifically, Ben, a VRC coordinator,

mentioned that few student veterans take classes only to collect Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) on their GI Bill. He described further:

They just want the monthly housing allowance with no accountability from the VA and no accountability from the school. There's really kind of nothing stopping them from just coming in just to fail your classes. They exist. We do not like dealing with them...because we know they are here for the money. It is a common phrase among us. They are just here for the money.

Ben remembered about one student veteran in particular. The student started attending college in the spring semester of 2020 but did not pass his classes every semester. When Ben tried to mitigate this academic failure, the student perpetually provided inadequate excuses. And then, when the college placed academic probation on the student, the issue had to be formally addressed. Then, the student said, "you know, I'm just doing this for the money." Edward also addressed this phenomenon:

They do not care if they leave with the degree...when they come to do their education plan, they will tell you...I have a job, I am just here for the money...and some of them [already] have really good jobs, but who does not want that extra BAH (Basic Allowance for Housing)?

Edward explained that some veterans successfully transition into the civilian world with well-paid jobs without having to go to college. It is often overlooked that what they did in the military can be directly/fully transferrable without college training in the civilian world.

Thus, veterans do not always need a college degree to find a good job upon discharge. Again, this phenomenon is often overlooked as Edward continued:

Some people do important stuff in the military, and it translates directly. Some people came from great units where they had stuff like that prepared them to come out into the civilian world...now they got that good job, they realize..."everything's online, I ain't got to go to the campus. I can just cash this GI Bill out, 36 months"...around here it's a lot of money....It is a lot of money.

As Edward repetitively emphasized, it is a significant amount of money. According to Veterans.com (2022), the current Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) for full-time student veterans in Orange County, California, is \$3,354 per month. The Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is part of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33). It is housing compensation, in addition to the college tuition, based on their local cost of living by the ZIP code.

Although participants emphasized that there are very few student veterans who are "here for the BAH," Julian, who is at a different campus, also mentioned how those student veterans could navigate the system:

...they would just change their major. Yeah, there was one student in particular, he enjoyed the money. He was never really interested in getting a degree. He changed his major to art, and then he changed his major to something else.

The certification will not be revoked if the instructor verifies that the student stayed in the class and made a reasonable attempt to pass the class. Further, they are allowed to retake the course or change their major toward recertification at any time. To that end, there are a number of student veterans who are exploiting the current system, which may lead to a larger problem in the future.

So far, this section has discussed participants' perceptions toward current campus systems and practices to support student veterans. Participants shared their experiences establishing and

maintaining academic connections with their student veterans. Carmen summarized this phenomenon in the following:

No matter how hard you try, they are just not open to it...not because anything bad happened to them, but they just were not ready... that is the hardest part for me...someone that would come around all the time and then all of a sudden would stop showing up. And you knew that they were isolating.

The above comment illustrated that connection, in definition, is a relationship associated with someone else. If one end is deliberately isolated, the connection is difficult to establish and sustain altogether.

As previously mentioned, student veterans may isolate themselves for various reasons: a) they may not realize that they need help; b) they do not want to participate; c) they do not know how to get involved, or; d) they have a different agenda and are interested in collecting benefits only. Participants explained that the worst thing that student veterans could do is not visit their VRC at all and isolate themselves. In sum, connection requires effort from both ends, and this section discussed how isolation may negatively affect the student's academic performance. The next section will explore how the lack of connection will affect the VRC program's institutional funding.

VRCs' Experiences of Campus' Structures, Processes, and Norms

The second research sub-question is based on how participants experienced their campus' structures, processes, and norms. Overall, participants discussed the current challenges in the California Community College system with VRC funding and staffing. Four themes in this section include:

1. **Funding Formula:** California Community College Chancellor's Office has mandated their VRC funding solely based on certified student veterans who are currently receiving the GI Bill. Participants shared that the current funding formula overlooks that there are additional students for whom VRCs devote the same time and effort but do not receive any funding, including reservists, national guards, or dependents. They call for reform of the current VRC funding formula in the California community college system.
2. **Funding Paradox:** the current funding formula induces a paradoxical effect on student engagement and VRC's funding. VRC would encourage their students to manage their GI Bill meticulously. It is crucial to reserve their GI Bill because the entitlement coverage is limited and calculated by the duration, not by the tuition amount. And yet, as a result of encouraging student veterans to reserve their GI Bill, fewer student veterans would seek VRC services. Thus, encouraging student veterans to save their GI Bill leads to less student engagement and less institutional funding.
3. **Soft Funds:** Participants described how they are reliant on soft funds, including general funds from the district and grants from the state. Soft funds are temporary, non-permanent, and non-sustainable sources of funding. Therefore, VRC must go through the application process recurrently to maintain its funding level and staffing.
4. **Staffing and Space:** California's guidelines for the VRC staffing requirements are often not met due to insufficient funding. Furthermore, participants shared how their VRCs are currently understaffed with part-time interim positions. Also, they discussed how the lack of funding shaped their current physical space. Subsequently, VRC experiences limited staffing and space due to funding issues.

Funding Formula

According to the 2020-21 Veteran Resource Centers Allocations Memorandum by California Community College Chancellor's Office (2020), California provides VRC funding solely based on certified student veterans who are currently receiving the GI Bill; however, VRCs serve additional students, including reservists, national guards, or dependents for whom VRCs do not receive any funding. For example, Alonzo's VRC has 300 certified student veterans, but they also have an additional 450 students to whom they provide the same services with no institutional funding. Thus, Alonzo explained:

So when the school talks about equity gaps, that is a big equity gap up there as the state is only providing funding for half of the students that we serve...so the funding is the biggest issue I see within VRCs in California.

Daniel, who is at a different campus, also echoed this notion: "We are serving 600 student veterans, only 300 are being certified and that's the funding they get only for the certified."

Nonetheless, all VRCs in this study encouraged their student veterans not to use the GI Bill in a community college setting. Rather, they would encourage student veterans to save and ultimately extend those benefits for when tuition becomes more expensive after they make the transfer to a four-year university.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill pays full tuition directly to the school, whether it is cheap (e.g., community colleges) or expensive (e.g., four-year universities). Generally, student veterans may receive this entitlement for up to 36 months. It is crucial to keep that entitlement duration intact because the coverage is calculated by the duration, not the tuition amount. Thus, there is no standardized coverage amount (everyone will receive a different amount of GI Bill within that 36

months), and the coverage varies depending on their school's tuition amount. For that reason, Frieda, a female US Marine Corps veteran, and a current VRC specialist, shared the following:

If the student can go make it through without using their GI bill for how little tuition is here, then yeah, why use your GI bill because you can save it up for part of a master's degree, which is going to be significantly more expensive than a semester (here).

There is the California Promise grant, in which, if students qualify, their tuition and fees can be covered by the state. Henry further explained: "We encourage all our veterans to apply for FAFSA. So you don't have to tap into those benefits (GI Bill) because they are limited." Daniel summarized the following:

Whether it be a UC, Cal State, private (or graduate level work programs), it is going to be significantly more expensive than here at [this] college. So why don't we get you some local grants...you will not be able to collect your (GI Bill) now, but save it for later when it is much more expensive.

Henry later mentioned that few student veterans still often choose to use the GI Bill because they cannot afford their housing.

To sum up, participants discussed the current flaws in the California Community College system with VRC funding. Institutional VRC funding is based solely on certified student veterans receiving the GI Bill. The current funding formula overlooks that there are additional students for whom VRCs devote the same time and effort but do not receive any funding. Still, the VRC would encourage their students not to use their GI Bill prematurely because the GI Bill is limited in duration. There are other financial aid and resources available so that student veterans can save their GI Bill for now. Interestingly, their genuine effort to save the GI Bill has led to a funding issue.

Funding Paradox

Paradoxically, as a result of encouraging student veterans not to use the GI Bill, fewer student veterans seek VRC services. Those not using the GI Bill do not feel the need to seek VRC services and support because certification is no longer required. Daniel elaborated on this phenomenon:

Many times, we (VRC) are successful in making student veterans see the importance of not collecting benefits right away and saving them...The problem with those students, sometimes they do not come back to us because they do not see the need or value of coming to the VRC and regularly seeing a veteran's counselor or coming to our office for any events or programs that are tailored in designed to serve student veterans.

Thus, student veterans who are not using the GI Bill rarely seek the VRC. Julian echoed: "We [approximately] certify 100 students...but then you have another 200 that don't use the benefits. And then we do not see them, they do not come in here." Ben also shared how it is difficult to encourage student veterans to save (or not use) the GI Bill and still utilize VRC services concurrently: "We do try to interact with the students that are not using benefits...it is tough to reach out to them, because they do not need to come in." Although many student veterans seek camaraderie and maintain their military connections on campus, most students no longer seek military affiliation or bureaucracies, especially when they are no longer required.

Nevertheless, the VRC would maintain its stance toward saving the GI Bill for student veterans' academic success in the long run. In essence, Daniel summarized this phenomenon in the following:

So essentially, am I telling you, we are willing to accept less funding by telling students do not use your benefits here? Yes. Because for us, at the end of the day, it is not about

money for us it is about serving the student as a whole. And if we know that a student is going to go transfer to a four-year university and we know it is going to be significantly more expensive and sometimes to a point where the student may not be able to complete their degree goal, because they cannot afford it. For us, it is worth not receive even the extra few dollars per certification from the student. We will find other means of getting the student to get paid, but more importantly...that is just one budget string...the money that we get from the VA for certified students, that is just one funding source.

The VRC will not receive institutional funding for assisting those not using the GI Bill at the moment; and yet, they are still willing to encourage their student veterans to save their GI Bill regardless of the current funding formula. As a result, they must resort to other prospects.

Soft Funding (Grants)

As Daniel briefly mentioned above, there are other funding sources besides institutional funding based on the number of student veterans the VRC certifies. They may include general funds from the district and grants from the state, also known as soft funds. Soft funds are temporary, non-permanent, non-sustainable sources of funding. For example, Alonzo has gone through fundraising grants to get additional funds for the VRC. It is a yearly process to see if they could maintain the funding level; however, they do not know if they can raise the same funding the following year. Alonzo noted how he was grateful that he had been able to be awarded grants over the last few years. He also hired a part-time social worker with grants to help students with off-campus resources. He hired a full-time special projects coordinator and an adjunct counselor for student equity funding. But again, “it is not permanent.”

Similarly, George mentioned “Center of Excellence Grants” at his campus, creating a coordinator position for a mentorship program and advisory board and building connections

throughout the campus. On the other hand, Henry also shared the two grant programs at his VRC: a) the Veterans Upward Bound (transitional program), which is a five-year grant; and b) the Veteran Student Services [retention program], which is another five-year grant. Both grants are written to fund hiring staff members to run those programs. George added:

So, because we have those grants, we have two program specialists...[it would] be a totally different scenario if we did not really have those grants...those grants give us the capacity to have more staff....the capacity for us to serve our veterans would be very limited if it were not for these grants.

In sum, participants explained how their VRC utilizes soft funds from the district and grants from the state.

However, soft funds are temporary and non-permanent sources of funding. VRCs must go through the application process recurrently to maintain their funding level and staffing. Although grants are written to fund hiring staff members to administer specific programs, they are not permanent. Accordingly, most VRC staff are in part-time, temporary positions.

Staffing and Space

California has a guideline for the staffing requirements for VRC (Montgomery et al., 2018). According to the guideline, each VRC should have a full-time director/coordinator, one full-time counselor, and one full-time certifying official per 200 certified student veterans. However, those requirements are found to be rarely fulfilled in each VRC in California because they do not have sufficient funding. A lack of funding may lead to a lack of staffing.

Alonzo further explained: “[Our college is] not following California standards, but again, it is because we don’t have funding...the only thing that’s holding me back is really the funding and the staff.” Furthermore, Alonzo explained that he was the only permanent/full-time staff at

his VRC. At the same campus, Carmen, a permanent/part-time Certifying Official, also discussed how her current part-time status does not give her sufficient time to fulfill her job duties. Carmen stated that she firmly believes Certifying Official is a full-time, 40-hour-a-week job. She explained:

If you know, as a Certifying Official, you are kind of running a school within a school, you are reporting grades... graduation...completion..., and you are not overcharging all of these things.

And yet, administrators may not fully understand Certifying Officials' job duties. Carmen explained that this is her current roadblock, which has not improved since she started. Kate, who is at a different campus, also added: "...if I can give my opinion on where my frustration is, that I only can work 19 hours with these students as a student program as a veteran student support services program."

Finally, Daniel, as an administrative dean at a different campus, also shared his previous challenges with funding and staffing:

...political roadblocks that I experienced was with regard to...faculty and with funding allocations. I wanted to hire more adjunct counselors...anytime that you're trying to hire more faculty, it has to go through the appropriate channels, and that's where I experienced some bumps on the road.

Notably, every participant in this study discussed how their VRCs are currently understaffed with part-time interim positions and are reliant on soft funds and grants. Furthermore, other campuses across the state may have even less funding, and their VRCs are more financially constrained.

Nevertheless, their commitment and dedication toward their mission are still strong. Irena summarized the following:

I am very frustrated that I am a part-timer...But I love it here, and I think when you get good people that love their job and they work hard, it is hard to prove that you need more time. It is hard to prove that you need a bigger budget or, you know, to have a full-timer because I have been doing a full-time job in part-time.

The lack of institutional funding for VRC not only has an impact on staffing but also places spatial constraints.

George discussed how the lack of funding shaped the current physical space at his VRC. Currently, his VRC office space is set up in cubicles, which do not go all the way to the ceiling due to the fire code. Thus, George's next funding project is to have a space with permanent walls that offer privacy for students, especially for those who are getting mental health services. Not just limited to mental health services, every participant in this study underscored the importance of sufficient and meaningful space for student veterans' overall welfare.

Lori, assistant dean of student services, emphasized that creating such space may boost retention, persistence, academic standing, and good-natured vibes within student affairs. Space is only a part of the prerequisites to better VRCs, not all. Ben shared that some VRCs with sufficient space may still struggle with staffing: "...and yeah, awesome building. But when you can't fully fund the staff...What's in it?" On this account, changing the funding formula for the state of California was a phenomenon that participants in this study underscored. VRCs need funding, not just for the certified students. They need to be funded for the number of students served overall. Ben further elaborated:

We are over here struggling, and it feels like we cannot make this happen because we do not have the staffing, and they (administrators) looked at me, and they turn that question

around, and they are like, but the thing is that you are making it happen...they see the progress and ...they see it functioning and if it is functioning where is the issue?

At this time, seeing VRCs well-functioning at a sufficient level with the current funding, administrators are reluctant to grant additional funding.

In summary, participants in this study revealed how VRCs are institutionally underfunded due to the current funding formula. Participants asserted that administrators must assess not just the numbers of GI Bill-certified students but the actual population of those students served by VRCs. Those populations may include: active duty, reservists, military dependents, and those who are not using benefits (because they have either exhausted, are not eligible, or are saving their benefits). In essence, VRCs do not receive institutional funding for providing services inclusive to all of those populations. Notably, these student populations are also prone to non-academic related hardships, and the VRC must be prepared to accommodate and assist them with their limited institutional funding, staffing, and space. The next section delves into how VRCs collaborated with other campus offices and outside resources.

VRCs' Interactions with Other Resources

The third research sub-question examined participants' perceptions toward their interactions with other resources aiming to serve student veterans. Participants described their interactions with other campus offices and outside resources to assist student veterans with hardship outside of the classroom; if a student struggles outside the classroom, they would most likely not succeed in the classroom. Thus, participants underscored the importance of recognizing non-academic hardship that student veterans may experience. There are four themes in this section:

1. **Campus Services:** the VRC has established a good relationship with different programs and offices on campus; however, not all campus services are fully adequate to serve student veterans' specific needs. Also, student veterans may spend too much time making multiple trips to different offices and working through their bureaucracies on campus. Therefore, participants strived to make their VRC a one-stop center for student veterans to better facilitate and minimize complications.
2. **Student Veteran Homelessness:** participants highlighted how student veteran homelessness is the most difficult to rectify and resolve. They shared narratives on how they utilized outside community resources to assist student veterans facing homelessness. Notably, this is a non-academic matter with which most VRC staff members are not trained.
3. **Things That the VRC Cannot Provide Assistance:** participants shared that there are many other non-academic matters which they cannot accommodate or assist. Participants could not evince all their limitations. At the same time, participants were fully aware that they could not solve every student veteran's personal issues.
4. **Tour to Four-year Universities' VRC Offices:** participants shared how they employed four-year university tours as an outside resource to increase student morale, retention, and commitment. They established connections with the prospective VRC so that their student veterans may make an educated decision on their transfer application and, ultimately, make a smoother transition.

Campus Services

Participants envisioned and implemented making their VRC a one-stop center so that student veterans do not have to spend too much time making multiple trips to different offices

and working through their bureaucracies. Conversely, other offices or programs on campus would automatically refer student veterans back to the VRC despite the matters with which they could easily assist, just because they are student veterans. Furthermore, participants also shared that their student veterans expressed discomfort with being referred to another department/office for matters they have privately/exclusively shared with their VRC. Nonetheless, most participants shared that they have established a solid relationship with other campus program offices and services overall.

Disability Support Programs and Services (DSPS)

Participants shared that they have the closest relationship with the Disability Support Programs and Services (DSPS) Office. Daniel requested DSPS to station a learning disability specialist at VRC one day a week:

So that way our veterans are not having to fight this internal dialogue that says I am not disabled. There is nothing wrong with me, but if I bring somebody from DSPS to the VRC, now it is just another member of the VRC [so that student veterans may feel more comfortable seeking help].

Overall, participants were satisfied with how DSPS would provide additional accommodation and services to their student veterans with disabilities.

Health Center

Regarding the Health Center, the participants' contentions were divergent. Although some participants were satisfied with their referrals and service, others shared that their Health Center does not offer comprehensive services, especially in mental health; this notion applied to all students on that campus, not just limited to the student veterans. Moreover, most student

veterans are already aware that they can receive services from the Health Center; however, they prefer to meet with a military-connected counselor, which is available through outside resources.

Outside Resources

In regards to the outside resources, most participants mentioned the Tierney Center of Goodwill, California Employment Development Department (EDD) workforce centers, Orange County (OC) Rescue Mission, and most importantly, Outside the Wire (OTW). During this study, all campuses, except one, had mentioned how they established the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) relationship with the outside community program Outside the Wire (OTW). It is part of US VETS, a non-profit organization to help veterans and their families transition from homelessness by offering tailored support to gain independence (USVETS, 2022). OTW is community mental health support specifically designed for student veterans and their families who reside throughout Los Angeles and Orange County (Outside the Wire, 2022); it is not funded by the US Department of Veterans Administration (VA).

For instance, Outside the Wire (OTW) counselors visit twice weekly to meet with student veterans for mental health services at one VRC in this study. Concerning mental health services for student veterans, participant A explained that sometimes, he would rarely refer his students to the health center on campus because students may only receive six mental health sessions at their health office. Those who need additional mental health services will be referred to a community-based mental health service afterward. Thus, he prefers to work with OTW with more flexibility.

Aside from their flexibility, every non-profit organization cannot overlook the possibility of closure due to funding issues. For that matter, participants also mentioned another prominent non-profit organization called Strength and Support. Similar to Outside the Wire, Strength and Support also provided mental health services to student veterans; however, they lost all their

funding due to the pandemic and had to shut down. With that in mind, participant A further elaborated that he has prepared alternatives to additional outside resources in case one becomes no longer available:

... let us say tomorrow, we lost our mental counselor [and] there is no money to fund that position, paid by the school...I have it, but it's paid by a non-profit...[or] I would go to USC and get an intern to come to the campus and be our mental health provider.

To that end, all participants underscored how it is important to function as a single point of hub per every outside resource contact. Thus, they are not just providing multiple phone numbers and websites to those in need, but rather, they are providing a meaningful connection. Kate further elaborated:

Reason why we go to outside sources is because of veteran specific with veteran experiences...I think, a veteran to know what a veteran is going through. I am not trying to discount non-veterans or civilians from the work that they do, or that they could assist with some of their needs. But I think there is a level of camaraderie and a level of comfortability veteran to veteran.

Notably, the notion of camaraderie and comfortability was not limited to the military status but also could be extended to their maturity level and age.

Campus Climate

Consistent with the literature review, student veterans are typically older. Their maturity levels are different from 18 years old, traditional, first-year students. Subsequently, student services personnel tend to exhibit more comfort while engaging with youth, minors, or those still under the auspice of their parents. Lori shared that student veterans typically demand respect in a different way, which other staff members find unpleasant. For example:

Couple weeks ago, we had a veteran called ANR (Admissions and Records) and the ANR staff did not like how that student interacted with them and was upset and the student identified themselves as a veteran, so they called our veteran office, hey do you know X, Y, Z student. We are having issues they are talking in their tone as you know we feel intimidated.

Furthermore, Lori interacted with other offices who were fearful of possible retaliation or instances that might happen across campus when the student's mental health issue was disclosed. She further elaborated that that incident has a purview of equity and stigma.

According to Lori, the fear was driven by additional stigma involving males of color with mental health issues. She further recalled, in full transparency, that an aggressive black male student could very well be perceived as a threat on campus; however, she has engaged with that student multiple times, but it did not bother her. She continued:

It is just how he engages but he was not threatening in any way, you know, but he felt...no one was paying attention, no one was listening to him and they were just concerned for their safety when he did not say anything to make them feel unsafe, he was just expressing himself in a way that they were not used to.

She added that it could also have been a demanding tone, which differs from speaking to a child or the young child. It was plausible that the military voice tone might have engendered discomfort in other staff members, ultimately leading to fear.

In summary, participants shared that student veterans may have to spend too much time making multiple trips to different offices and dealing with bureaucracies on campus. Moreover, as non-traditional students, student veterans' unconventional maturity levels may demand a certain level of respect, which not all campus staff members find comfortable. Withal, the VRC

has established a good relationship with different programs and offices on campus, although not all campus services were fully adequate to serve student veterans' specific needs. This notion can be extended to student veteran homelessness.

Student Veteran Homelessness

Participants highlighted their challenges and strategies for countering student veteran homelessness. By way of introduction, Kate summarized the following:

The biggest challenge is homelessness for our veterans. And that is not something I do not want to say that I am not equipped to handle, but it is not part of my job description, essentially, to help with homelessness.

Therefore, participants discussed how student veteran homelessness is most difficult to rectify and resolve. In particular, Edward shared the following narrative:

Couple months ago, two days in a row, as soon as we opened our doors in the morning, a student walked in with all of their belongings in their car. Two days in a row! different student [one female and one male], different branches, do not know each other, like unrelated completely...walked up to the front desk and said, everything is in my car I got nowhere to go....no family in this state and nowhere to go tonight with nothing... Like I am about to be homeless.

Edward recalled his sense of urgency to execute as best he could to handle that situation. He explained that, in both situations, his first primary concerns were safety, food, and transportation. Therefore, VRC provided a gas card and a food card; they were regularly available at the VRC through their funding. The next step was to reach out to a community resource.

The Tierney Center of Goodwill in Orange County provided a hotel voucher on the same day upon the request, and student veterans may stay there for up to two weeks:

So I get them on the phone with Tierney Center, they get, they tell them where the hotels at, the voucher is sent and my student can go to that hotel and check in and it is completely paid for seven days. They have a room they're safe. They are going to sleep under a roof tonight. They are going to sleep in a bed tonight. That is our primary concern.

After referring to the Tierney Center for transitional housing, Edward contacted Volunteers of America to initiate the arrangement for permanent housing.

Upon the referral, Volunteers of America assessed the students' financial status and searched through their vacancy listings of affordable apartments. Within a week, both student veterans were able to move out of the hotel and find their own place. Edward was contented that he was able promptly to resolve that matter. Moreover, he was also very proud when his team was able to handle a similar situation when he was off-duty for being a part-timer. He has been training the team as well: "I think that's why we lead the way is because there's a lot of VRCs that couldn't handle that...that's heavy when someone walks in and says I have nothing." In sum, both students have their very own place now, and Edward was happy that neither of them had to spend one night in their car.

Still, the above narrative may incite the following questions: a) how do you become homeless when you are receiving the GI Bill with the housing allowance; b) shouldn't it be sufficient to make a living arrangement; thus, c) how and why would both student veterans in the above narrative have to deal with homelessness? Each of them had their reasons, and Edward explained, starting with the female student:

The place where she was living was no longer safe for her...she was crying and, and said, I got to go right now. Like I am in danger. So of course, we say, we will bring you here.

Make sure there is no danger following her, make sure everybody is safe in here.

On the other hand, the male student was asked to leave the house by a roommate: “he was not from California and has only been out for a month.” Edward continued:

He was staying with someone...something happened, it did not work out, and so they told him get out. And again, he had no family here. He made money, but he had just paid his rent and they kept it and threw him out. He was thrown out.

Again, both students initially had the means but were abruptly forced to leave the place, which they called home. Finding a new place and moving into it, all within a single day, was challenging to accomplish on their own.

Certainly, they were able to resolve the matter much quicker with the assistance and facilitation from their VRC than they would have resolved on their own. The VRC has already established connections with outside community resources. In addition to resolving the situation, the VRC would further extend this matter to students’ mental health. They were both in a dangerous situation, so a follow-up was required as to the status of their mental health.

Like you just left a very scary situation, which is traumatic on you, and that probably was not the first time you ever experienced it, you just had nothing left. So, how is your mental health? Let us have a talk.

In the end, both students did end up going into mental health services (outside campus) and received the help they needed to address what they had experienced that brought them into the VRC that day.

Further, George recalled another previous student who needed assistance with the first and last month’s rent. He mentioned that it is very expensive just to get started in an apartment, especially in Orange County. The student was taking care of his mother, and they could not

extend their lease. As a result, they were evicted. The student did not have the funds for his first and last month's rent and the deposit. Therefore, the VRC applied for a grant through the Stanley W Foundation. The good news was that their funding provided a better living arrangement for the student and his mother. The bad news was that the pandemic exacerbated this issue, and several other students were experiencing difficulty with making rent payments.

Kate, who was at a different campus during the pandemic, also shared about her student who lost his father due to COVID complications. The mother was living with somebody else due to personal issues at home, and the student was working a part-time job at minimum wage. Thus, personal issues, financial difficulties, and educational endeavors became too onerous. He became homeless and was living in his car. The situation has not been resolved at the time of the interview but is in progress toward improvement. Homelessness is also difficult to identify because shame and stigma are involved. George asserted:

...especially amongst veterans, it is something that people do not feel very comfortable coming in and saying they are homeless or they even need help, you know, so that is kind of the first challenge is just identifying who is homeless or who may be close to homelessness.

For that matter, Kate shared a personal narrative of experiencing homelessness herself:

I have experienced homelessness myself...I could not focus on [academics]... [I] was solely focused on where am I going to stay and when my next meal coming. And the only way I could do that was by working...but [with] all minimum wage jobs...the experiences that I have accrued in the military does not necessarily translate out here into the civilian life. And so that is a very difficult barrier to get over.

With tremendous effort and commitment, Kate was able to overcome such hardships and achieve

her current position. She underscored that it would not have been possible without her VRC's support.

In summation, participants discussed their experiences of dealing with student veteran homelessness. It is often difficult to rectify and resolve because this is a non-academic matter in which campus staff members are not trained to assist. Initially, it is difficult to fathom that student veterans with the GI Bill would have to face homelessness; however, participants' narratives have presented many complications and variables, including mental health, unaffordable living arrangements, and the pandemic involved in each case. Also, it is often difficult to identify because stigma and shame are involved, which makes this issue more challenging. Still, VRCs have successfully facilitated this matter, and they continue making connections to outside resources to further protect student veterans from homelessness. Nonetheless, there are matters other than homelessness that VRCs cannot find ways to resolve.

Things That VRC Cannot Help or Assist with

Participants shared that there are issues with which they cannot assist even with their resources. Although there are many others, participants mainly shared that they do not have any control over campus climate, criminal and family legal issues, and poor credit problems. For example, Carmen remembered one incident where one of her student veterans was wearing a shirt with a slightly offensive slogan to the Middle Eastern population. Consequently, a group of Middle Eastern peers attacked the student veteran because of that shirt. She further elaborated on how the incident settled:

[The incident] did not fit the narrative of what the campus wanted to portray. So it actually did not end up in the veteran's favor, even though he was not at fault...and that

is really what triggered, "wait, I'm not going to come to your school if you're going to treat me like this," right? So those are some of you would miss out on, too.

In consensus, participants shared that VRCs cannot control the campus climate surrounding their peers on campus.

Moreover, participants also discussed legal workshops mainly assisting with changing the discharge status from the military (e.g., dishonorable or other than honorable into a general discharge). Specifically, Edward mentioned the Veterans Legal Institute of Orange County. Although they provide pro bono services for veterans, they do not assist with criminal or family law. Edward explained that several student veterans visit his office concerning criminal and family issues:

They need a lawyer for, they got in trouble or they are getting a divorce. So that is a frustrating part of my job is when I have to tell you, I cannot help you. That wears on me.

As I say, there is nothing out there for you. That is the hard part.

Fixing poor credit was another notion that student veterans have been bringing to the table with, which the VRC could not assist. In that regard, Edward recalled how surprised he was to find out that many veterans had poor credit when they got out of the military. The poor credit was generally due to predatory auto lenders near military bases. They would solicit younger soldiers to finance a car through payday loans during the military, thus, negatively affecting their credit upon discharge.

Again, there are many other non-academic matters, known and unknown to participants, that the VRC does not have the ability to accommodate and assist student veterans. Unarguably, participants were fully aware that they could not solve every student veteran's personal issues. All in all, the VRC is a program embedded in educational institutions primarily designed to

facilitate academic matters. Nevertheless, they are still looking for an alternative to, directly and indirectly, resolve these matters.

Tour to Four-year Universities' VRC Offices

As discussed, there are limitations to what the VRC can do to assist and accommodate student veterans' needs. To that end, the VRC tries to fully utilize every available resource. Notably, VRCs also utilize four-year universities' VRC offices as a resource to increase student morale, retention, and commitment. Specifically, they arranged a tour of the prospective four-year universities and helped their student veterans establish a connection with a representative at their prospective VRC. That way, their student veterans may make an educated decision on their transfer application. Henry explained:

[Last weekend] we drove our students over to Cal State Fullerton, and they always put on a great a great tour for us...they take us around campus, then they take us in their Veterans Resource Center, which is really great.

Henry highlighted the importance of “putting a face to four-year college VRCs.” Each campus tour would orient student veterans about available resources and different programs once they make the transfer. Some of their in-person tours may include Chapman University, University of Southern California, and California State University Fullerton, Long Beach, San Bernadino, and Dominguez Hills. They have also held virtual presentations with Yale University. Participants' effort to arrange this event exhibited that VRCs want their student veterans to be well taken care of even after they make the transfer.

In summary, VRCs must be prepared to address and accommodate the students' non-academic issues and needs, which may include: living arrangements, housing, food insecurity, mental health, and wellness. In general, acknowledging the importance of the non-academic

matters of students is crucial, whether veteran or non-veteran. As previously stated, if they struggle outside the classroom, they will most likely not succeed in that classroom. The VRC cannot solve every student veteran's personal issues. VRCs, as a part of an educational institution, are primarily designed to facilitate academic matters; they are able to mitigate only some aspects of each student's life issues. VRCs are looking to find solutions and alternatives to, directly and indirectly, enhance student veterans' quality of living and learning. To that end, there are often difficulties and challenges (whether they are novel or perennial) which may ensue, and it will be explored in the next section.

Difficulties and Challenges

The fourth research sub-question discussed participants' difficulties and challenges in their work. According to participants, there were distinctive intricacies that the VRC and student veterans experience. Notably, this section carries the historical significance of the policy changes due to the recent pandemic. Accordingly, intersectionality with the previously discussed phenomenon was also evinced. Four themes in this section are the following:

1. **Military-Affiliated Students:** there are various military-affiliated student populations in addition to student veterans. They may constitute over half of the student population at the VRC. VRCs devote the same time, effort, and service to both student veterans and military-affiliated students; however, most military-affiliated students are not counted toward the state's funding criteria. Further, they are not all viewed as equally important as student veterans and are often overlooked or sometimes neglected by the current system.
2. **Insufficient GI Bill:** most student veterans with high educational aspirations require more than just a bachelor's degree. And yet, participants shared that the GI Bill,

- which covers tuition for up to 36 months maximum, is practically not enough to cover the bachelor's degree.
3. Living Arrangements in Orange County: most participants mentioned how expensive it is to live in Orange County, California, compared to other areas. Most student veterans chose to come to California, by themselves, for educational opportunities. GI Bill Benefits include the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH), determined by the zip code. Although Orange County has one of the highest BAH, student veterans without family support inevitably experience difficulties with their living arrangements in Orange County.
 4. COVID-19: participants in this study mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the biggest challenges they have recently experienced. Although the pandemic had impacted higher education systems in general, there were impacts distinctive to the VRCs. Thus, participants shared narratives on how the VRC and their student veterans were particularly vulnerable during the pandemic. Further, participants also discussed a recent change in the VA's COVID-19 policy, which may negatively affect student veterans.

Military-Affiliated Students.

As previously discussed, according to the 2020-21 Veteran Resource Centers Allocations Memorandum by California Community College Chancellor's Office (2020), California provides VRC funding solely based on certified student veterans who are currently receiving the GI Bill. And yet, not all student veterans choose to use the GI Bill at the community college level for various reasons. Nonetheless, VRC provides support and services to student veterans regardless of their certification status.

Additionally, VRC support and services are also provided to military-affiliated students. This population may include dependents, active, and reservists. And yet, they are not certified GI Bill recipients and are not counted toward the state's funding criteria. Still, VRCs provide services to all of them, as Alonzo stated,

...we do not get any funding for those who are not using benefits. But we still provide counseling...same thing with the dependents...and a reservist...those two populations are the ones that I try and help out the most with the additional support services. But because of that, I opened it up more to all the other ones who are not using benefits, but identified as a military affiliated students.

Ben also shared that approximately 52% of the student population he serves at this VRC are military dependents. Upon approval, veterans' remaining education benefits can be transferred to their dependents. Thus, some military dependents are receiving the GI Bill, which is transferred from their parent.

However, there are more dependents without transferred GI Bill from their parents. Generally, they do not have any education support from the VA. Only if a veteran (as a head of the household) has 100% service-connected disability (which is rare), dependents may be eligible for the VA education benefits for dependents and survivors (also called Chapter 35 benefits). It is a monthly stipend of up to \$1298 for three years (as of 2022). On the other hand, dependents may be eligible for the state's (CalVet) tuition fee waiver if the parent has a service-connected disability (it can be less than 100% service-connected disability). However, the state's (CalVet) tuition fee waiver is not an education support from the VA certification. Thus, these military dependents are not counted toward VRCs' funding formula.

Military Dependents

Ben shared that over half of the student population he serves at his VRC are military dependents. In that respect, Edward, at the same campus, discussed how the current system often overlooks and sometimes neglects military dependents:

...a lot of the community resources for veterans are not funded for dependents. They are only funded for veterans. So it makes it double hard. When I sit down with people [community resources] for the first time, and they tell me their whole spiel about what they can do for veterans, I have to stop them at the end and say, what can you do for dependents?

Edward pinpointed that there are not many services available for military dependents. Therefore, part of his challenge was to advocate and secure additional funding for military dependents:

...they [dependents] get left out a lot, even though they have been through that life for 20 years and traveled the world too, and I mean, you serve, you know, everyone says the hardest job in the military is to be a spouse, right? Like it is tough.

Military Transition and the Family

Edward further explained that military dependents also experience hardship when a student veteran, as a head of household, transitions back into the civilian setting. It makes their transition even more difficult when a veteran comes home and experiences mental health issues (e.g., PTSD, depression, or anxiety). The family suffers with them. When it happens, as Edward elaborated, the family dynamic may abruptly shift toward outbursts, fighting, and detachment.

Edward added:

There is a lot that the family endures...I think that is very important, but a lot of times, we will make that referral, and the veteran starts to heal, but no one is looking at the

family. That is a family element there that is not being addressed....you need to worry about the whole family because they are impacted by it.

In order to facilitate mental health support for student veterans' dependents, Edward mainly utilized a non-profit organization called Strong Family, Strong Children in Orange County. To be eligible for service, veterans must have minor children in custody. They provide family therapy (e.g., play therapy and sand therapy) for parents and children, together and separately.

In retrospect, Edward talked about when he had a chance to observe one of their Parent-Child Interactive Therapy (PCIT) sessions. During the therapy, he was sitting behind a one-way mirror, where the parent had an earpiece in, and the therapist had a microphone, and they taught mom or dad how to interact with their child:

Someone who has suffered major trauma in their life maybe has detachment issues or connection issues you have sometimes retrain them to get on the floor and play with their kid a little bit. Or if their child is demonstrating behavior issues, how to correct them in a healthy way... that's part of the healing process for the veteran instead of the outbursts [or] yelling...and they are guided through it step by step, literally with the speaker in their ear.

In summary, Edward made a crucial point that you must also inquire about their family when making mental health service referrals. Otherwise, it would be inappropriate/inefficient.

However, this phenomenon is often overlooked by the community. Edward concluded, "if you just treat the veteran, I think you are doing a disservice to that veteran family."

In that phenomenon, several participants discussed the benefit of conducting a biannual VRC orientation for the military family only. They shared several instances when the military

spouse expressed that she never comes to the VRC and does not think this place is for her; the building sign says *Veterans* Resource Center. Edward added:

And she [the military spouse] said, I am not a veteran. Like why would I ever come in here? And I had to explain to her, no, there is more of you than him. Like there is more dependents that we served than there. She does not know that. So I think an orientation would one let all of the in students know what we can do in here. What we are capable of. Two, it would let all the dependents know that this is a home for them too.

Military Spouse

As mentioned above, Irena shared her unique previous experience as a military veteran and a military spouse. Irena got married when she was in the military, and when she was honorably discharged, her spouse was still in the military. As she became both a military wife and a veteran, she saw the other side: "it was harder than being in the military myself...It is always adapting, always adapting, and that can become very draining."

According to Irena, there were three transitional phases while she was pursuing her educational endeavors: a) being a student veteran while her husband was in the military; b) being a student veteran after her husband was discharged from the military; and c) when she started her current profession at the VRC after she completed her degree. During the first phase, Irena shared that her experience being a military spouse and concurrently a student veteran was challenging:

...so with both of my experiences, you know, I was a stay-at-home mom for about four years...then I started school...I had felt really, like, I did not really belong anywhere, belong with people like, my civilian friends did not really quite get my experience.

In particular, Irena recalled her experience when her husband was deployed. She recalled that her friends did not understand why she had to go home and wait for a phone call. At the time, video phone calls (e.g., skype, facetime, and Zoom) were very rare, and she had to make sure she did not miss any calls. She further elaborated:

I was just sad and like, always worried and, what if something is happening to him...I remember just being scared, being afraid. We were not always able to communicate with my husband while he was deployed.

Irena remembered when she heard the news that there was an attack at the place of her husband's deployment. She expected a phone call, but the phone call never came. She did not know where the attack was until she saw the Facebook announcement that her husband's unit got hit. She said, "I didn't hear from my husband for two days...and I think those were like, the hardest two days of my whole entire life." Thankfully, her husband was not hurt, at least in a physical spectrum.

On the contrary, Irena further shared how her husband's traumatic deployment experience, and mental health issues, impacted her relationship with him, family dynamics, and most importantly, with herself:

Once I talked to him, it was a suicide bomber, he was right in front of him. There was 14 kids that died and that changed him. That completely changed them. He came back a completely different person. Knowing that when he came back, I was going to have to deal like, helping him process that was big. I took it upon myself...to make sure that I was strong.

Although she has witnessed many other military spouses experience similar hardships, she could not help but feel lonely. Moreover, as much as she wanted to help her husband, she had to be

careful not to overstep until he was ready to receive the help he needed. However, when her husband finally returned from the service, things became even more difficult for her and the family. She recalled:

Also, you know, you marry someone, and the military completely changes them. It is a whole new identity. It is a whole new person who has now experienced these things that you were not there to experience. So when they come back, you are dealing with a whole new husband, and it is, like, adapting again. And you have been living your life without them there and you have been able to adapt without them physically being there and now they are physically in your space again demanding for things to be done certain ways, asking for and all that adapting just takes a lot, and it drains you. I am divorced now and part of it was the adapting. He got back and I was already living, I was going to school, I felt really good about my life, and he was going through so much and there is like, whole push thing that it just became really hard for us. It is hard to adapt. I think that is the biggest part.

In addition to what she was going through, it was surprising to hear that Irena also had a service-connected disability. Nonetheless, she had patience and perseverance; she gave it time. She especially wanted to give her husband time to be her husband again. Irena also shared that she partially overcame those challenges through the therapies provided at the Strong Family, Strong Children in Orange County (which Edward previously mentioned).

In the end, Irena's unique life experience as a veteran with a service-connected disability, military spouse, and student veteran, who has completed her education and become a counselor, has empowered her to be more empathetic toward her student students. She shared:

I do relate a lot to many of my students. My female student, who are married, going through that. They just came back. It is so different. He is so different with us. How long does it take for him to be normal again? Like, all this stuff. Like, those were questions that I had, and my best advice is, you know, I sit back, I hear them out...unless it is like something abusive or anything like that, then we take action obviously.

When Irena mentioned violence, it had to be clarified whether there were any domestic violence reports from her students. Thankfully, there were no domestic violence reports. Rather, it was more of emotional abuse. She clarified further:

... they are just letting their anger out...that anger is really real. They teach you in the military how to turn it on and when you get out, they do not teach you how to turn it off.

Anger, alcohol use all of that is prominent. That is very prominent in our community.

Overall, being a part of a military family is difficult. But again, this phenomenon is often overlooked. In that context, Irena summarized her previous experience of being part of a military family in the following:

...so in the military, you are trained to adapt. Nobody trains your family to adapt. And I think that is why it is harder to be a family member...most of the times you're adapting on your own...I know marriages that didn't work out because of that, the adapting...and all that adapting is really hard.

Irena's previous experience illustrated that being a part of a military family can be as difficult as much as a veteran transitioning into the civilian world and pursuing educational endeavors.

Alumnus

Despite the difficulties, Irena acknowledged that her interaction with the VRC significantly contributed to her academic success when she was a student veteran. This

phenomenon was predominantly discussed among other participants who were alumni of their current VRCs as well. For instance, Edward is currently employed as VRC's Case Manager at his alma mater, prior to transferring to the four-year university and attending graduate school.

Edward expressed gratitude toward his community college VRC as an alumnus.

When Edward was pursuing his master's degree in social work, he was experiencing tremendous difficulty with certifying/processing the VA education benefit at his graduate school. It was mainly because the VRC staff at the graduate school were not fully trained at the time to certify/process the VA Chapter 31 - Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) benefits. As an alumnus, Edward was no longer an eligible VRC recipient at his previous community college. Nevertheless, he had to reach out to his previous VRC for assistance, as he explained:

They [his previous community college VRC] were not getting paid to help me when I was in grad school. I am not on their roster. Like I do not go here. They would take the time; they would send the emails. They would answer my phone call. They would help me from their heart. And I really appreciated that about this school. So that is how I got here."

On the other hand, there was one participant who was not happy with his alma mater VRC. Hence, not all experiences are the same.

Not Every School is the Same

To that end, not every school is the same. Irena described how military dependents who are also receiving the Chapter 35 (dependents') GI Bill are not eligible for priority registration at her campus:

Like our veterans depend on this money...our dependents [also] depend on this money.

And like little policies that just make no sense to me. Like Chapter 33 and 31 active duty

and reservist all get priority registration...[but] Chapter 35, our dependent students they do not get priority registration.

Irena's college does not offer priority registration to military dependents. If military dependents cannot register for their required classes, they may not receive their VA education benefits. In this situation, Irena asserted, "all GI Bill users should get priority registration because they all are under the same system." Conversely, Lori, who is at a different campus, mentioned that priority registration is offered to all VRC recipients at her campus:

So typically only veterans who certify get priority registration...well here [at our campus] we have made an agreement with our office that as long as they're coming to our office [VRC] we can give him priority registration. So that is also you know a carrot out there that you do not have to use your benefits, you just have to engage with the office.

This notion reveals that not every campus has the same policy toward student veterans. Such inconsistency may impose further complications on few other military-affiliated students discharged from the military with other-than-honorable status.

Other-than-Honorable

During the interview, Julian shared about a student experiencing homelessness at the time; the student was not identified/classified as a student veteran because he was discharged from the military with other-than-honorable conditions. Julian further elaborated:

There was a student that was experiencing homelessness, and this was recent...he was a veteran, but he was not a veteran... I say like that, because that is how he presented it...he said, I am not sure what my status is, I am experiencing homelessness. I also provide for my mom, because she is disabled. And my dad, who was the sole provider, passed away within the last year due to COVID complications.

It was later revealed that the student did not make it through the basic combat training, also known as the boot camp, because he had asthma. Therefore, he was discharged from the boot camp with a classification titled, *No Classification*. Regardless, he was back in the civilian setting and taking classes at the current campus; while in danger of failing all of his classes due to his hardship.

The situation was more challenging for Julian to help that student. At first, he attempted to make a referral to the Basic Needs Center on-campus because they could provide a hotel voucher to their students-in-need for two weeks, but one of the conditions was that the student needed to have above 2.0 Grade Point Average; however, because the student was a new student, he did not yet have a GPA in the system. He recalled: “So it’s not that we weren’t going to help the individual, but it definitely took a lot to get that individual to the right place.” Julian further shared that he was able to resolve the situation as he made referrals to two of the outside community organizations, US Vets and the Tierney Center of Goodwill. Julian further recalled that it was a difficult experience to assist a student veteran who did not have any benefits.

In conclusion, there are various military-affiliated student populations in addition to student veterans. California VRCs receive institutional funding solely based on the number of certified GI Bill recipients. Nevertheless, Ben asserted that inclusivity must be extended further regardless of the current funding formula: “when it comes to military-affiliated students here in the VRC what we do try to do is be inclusive of not just the veterans, but also active duty, reservists, dependents, so children and spouses [and alumnus] as well.”

Participants also emphasized changing mindsets about military families and how the VRC should be approachable and available to them. Otherwise, the vicious cycle may continue if Campus services overlook/dismiss the phenomenon that the family should be considered a single

unit. Family constitutes our society as it makes its part as a whole. Furthermore, military dependents are a considerable part of the higher education system as students themselves. They are part of the VRC family. Subsequently, there was no tension observed between serving students-veterans and military-affiliated students.

In essence, they are all viewed as equally important, and the same effort, time, and money are devoted to all of them. Still, as previously discussed, the VRC receives funding for certified GI Bill users only. There is no institutional VRC funding for military-affiliated students and student veterans who are not using the GI Bill; it is an issue, and there is a gap between the current campus policies and the practices. More importantly, the GI Bill is inadequate in that it fails to cover the cost of attendance fully.

Insufficient GI Bill

Participants asserted that the GI Bill might not be sufficient for every student veteran because the entitlement coverage duration is limited. As a previous student veteran, Alonzo emphasized that student veterans with high educational aspirations require more than just a bachelor's degree. In that respect, the GI Bill, which covers tuition for up to 36 months maximum, is not enough. It may not even be enough to cover the bachelor's degree, especially for engineering students, because they spend between three to four years at community college for all their math and science prerequisite classes. Frieda echoed that many students are not able to get through a bachelor's degree with 36 months of GI Bill:

This is not doable if they are trying to do prerequisite courses that they have to retake, they are taking lower math classes or anything like that. I made it through in four years, but that is an outlier situation. It is not the norm.

Additionally, prerequisite classes become more of a concern for those with undecided majors, not because there are overwhelming numbers of classes to take but also because they do not know which prerequisites to take.

Ben recalled his previous student, who was experiencing difficulty with deciding on his major. Notably, the GI Bill can only be certified toward a certified educational goal. Therefore, Ben would first explore and guide what would be interesting for the student veteran. Then, he would fit those classes into their general education to ensure that the student is not getting stalled for taking classes not needed, thus, taking classes toward their certification efficiently. Despite the effort, one of his students had spent too much time choosing the right major while exhausting his GI Bill.

As a result, the exploration cost a significant amount of GI Bill expenditure, and none of them counted toward his desired major:

He has burnt so many months off his GI bill just here. And now you want to go somewhere else to pursue a degree. The clock is ticking on. You have 36 months to get that done, and you have already burnt up...a whole two years of time.

According to Ben, the student chose to attend trade school for woodworking but did not know whether he would be able to complete his degree or not. Then, the student lost contact upon the transfer. Frieda, who is at a different campus, also witnessed many student veterans dropping out after they made the transfer because they exhausted their benefits:

[They] used a bunch of their GI bill here, transferred to CSULB [which] is a pretty decent school, but they have only got so many months of their GI bill left... that is going to cost them a significant amount of money...who can afford to pay out of pocket if they have been just going to school this whole time?

Frieda's statement may summarize this section with the following:

We (student veterans) are definitely blessed and privileged to have a GI bill that we worked for. But at the same time, 36 months is not enough. ...something even 42 months, an extra six months on that GI bill [would be] incredibly beneficial because it is so tough. And that is why I think when it comes to the later time to complete school without having a GI bill, it is tough. It is difficult... if the student can go make it through without using their GI bill for how little tuition is here or if they have that coverage from financial aid, then yeah why use your GI bill because you can save it up for part of a master's degree...which is going to be significantly more expensive than a semester [here].

As discussed above, all participants in this study underscored that the current GI Bill is insufficient for their students due to its limited duration and coverage. On top of that, the living expense of being an independent student cannot be considered lightly.

Living Arrangements in Orange County

Participants highlighted how expensive it is to live in Orange County, California, compared to other areas and how it induces hardships amongst student veterans. Interestingly, George has discussed that, in his experience, most of the student veterans who are attending his college are not California residents. They chose to come to California, by themselves, for educational opportunities of being part of the University of California (UC) system. Therefore, they are reliant on Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH). As previously discussed, BAH is part of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33). It is housing compensation, in addition to the college tuition, based on their local cost of living by the ZIP code.

According to Veterans.com (2022), the current Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) for full-time student veterans in Orange County, California, is \$3,354 per month. And yet,

participants shared that they witnessed their student veterans experiencing issues with the living arrangement despite the BAH support. Kate discussed:

Orange County has one of the highest Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) rates. Thus, veterans tend to expect that a part-time job in addition to that BAH would sufficiently supplement their living arrangements in Orange County. And yet, in the meantime, they are only to discover that it is much more difficult than expected...so they come with these expectations, and those expectations are completely unmet.

Furthermore, Frieda asserted that even if you use the GI Bill, it may not fully cover the living expenses without additional support from the family. She shared her narrative as a previous student veteran making her living arrangements while using the GI Bill:

It is liveable. I know I have lived on it for four years...I understand it is not supposed to be something that you are living in excess on the GI bill. But at the same time, if you cannot get a one bedroom apartment for \$1900 a month, you have 1100 left over. If your car payments [are] \$300, you have got all these other bills they could be struggling...in down payment. It is very difficult... If a vet does not want to live with mom and dad and they want to go and start new somewhere, it is an incredibly difficult amount of money to do that.

In essence, Frieda pinpointed that if a student veteran does not have a stable living arrangement through parental or family support, it is difficult to make a living independently based on the GI Bill alone.

Moreover, Frieda also shared that her partner, who was also a student veteran, used his GI Bill at the same time as she did. Thus, they had two GI Bills for their living arrangements. Although it made things much more sustainable for them, she emphasized that her case is rare,

and not many veterans would have a partner like that. Frieda continued:

...if they are living with mom and dad or they have a spouse that's working full time, and that is enough money for them to live on...your lower division classes, which are going to cost probably about \$700 a semester, then do not use your GI bill. But if they cannot live without the housing stipend, then use your GI Bill.

George also talked about how he had to reach out to the OC Rescue Mission to take his students through the process of being housed there at the rescue mission. The program was designed for student veteran students. Therefore, the caveat of applying for OC Rescue Mission is that you must currently receive the GI Bill to qualify for their housing program. The service is exclusive to GI Bill recipients because they are going to be guaranteed that they will be getting the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH). They were charging approximately \$700 to \$800 in exchange for a dorm, which is substantial support. And yet, this is only viable when you make a living arrangement solely for yourself.

Henry elaborated on a case where a student veteran was struggling with living arrangements while taking care of his family in the following:

if you are actually taking care of your family, whether it is your siblings, whether you have your own children, your mother, spouse, whatever it might be, then again, you know, Orange County is very expensive. So that may not cover, you know, all the expenses.

In that context, Henry recalled his two student veterans. They were taking care of their families as the head of the household while concurrently attending college. In particular, one of them was taking care of his mother and his three siblings. They were living in a single room together.

Henry shared that the situation has not yet been fully resolved, but it is in progress. For that matter, he asserted that “our veterans should not have to live in such a situation.”

So far, participants discussed that the GI Bill might not be sufficient for every student veteran. This phenomenon is not just limited to the duration of entitlement coverage but also extends to the monthly amount, considering the high cost of living in Orange County. In effect, these were precedents for much more serious issues and hardships in unexpected ways after the pandemic.

COVID-19

Finally, all participants in this study mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the biggest challenges they have recently experienced. It was such an impactful phenomenon as VRCs witnessed their student veterans struggling. Participants described: a) how the pandemic had impacted higher education systems in general; and b) the impact that was distinctive to the VRCs.

First, participants explained how the pandemic generally impacted higher education systems. All campuses and VRC operations shut down completely when the pandemic started. Student enrollment dropped, and it impacted the attrition rate. Community colleges’ funding formula comes from student enrolment, and Lori explained that the pandemic impacted the enrolment of her student veterans by over 60 percent. Last but not least, campuses also had to transition from in-person to online courses abruptly. For example, Alonzo shared that he had to transition all his operations from in-person to online within three days. Also, laptops were one of the first things his VRC purchased for its students during the pandemic. Many student veterans were asking to see if they could borrow laptops, as George shared that many of their student

veterans did not have basic internet access or a laptop. These notions are not exclusive to VRCs because the pandemic impacted the education system in general.

To that account, participants shared distinctive narratives that student veterans were particularly vulnerable to during the pandemic. For example, Edward mentioned that the pandemic exacerbated the social isolation of student veterans with mental health issues in the following:

...not every veteran by any means, but a lot of them suffer from mental health issues, PTSD, anxiety, and depression, so being very social is already a challenge. And then you have throw them in a house for two years and do not let them come on campus. And then we expect them to all just walk back in one day...It is not realistic expectation.

As discussed above, VRCs are also experiencing difficulties “getting back to normal” since the pandemic. Additionally, Ben discussed how readjustment was particularly challenging for student veterans who were discharged in 2019-2020:

...because you are coming out of the military, and now you are coming into a world that’s not the world that you remotely remember what it was before, and now you are in isolation coming out of a military situation.

Ben recalled one particular student veteran. He wanted to go into the medical field but experienced tremendous difficulty coping with his new online courses. When in-person courses were offered again, the campus imposed a vaccine mandate; however, he did not want to get the vaccine for personal reasons and did not want to submit a religious exemption. As a result, he was not able to attend classes in person.

On the other hand, Frieda highlighted another example of how the pandemic impacted living arrangements for student veterans. In particular, those who wanted to save their GI Bill for

their future academic pursuits (e.g., 4-year universities or graduate school) were forced to exhaust their GI Bill as they struggled with reliable housing due to the pandemic. It made things even more onerous because the GI Bill and housing allowance were insufficient for them to make a sustainable living in Orange County (as previously discussed). Frieda elaborated further:

Orange County is notorious for having lack of liveable places for people in general, and our veteran population is seeing the same exact thing. We have had students that are living out in their cars, but they are using their GI Bill. So even though they might be receiving a large stipend every month, they still do not have the ability to secure housing where you have to put a down payment or anything like that.

To resolve the above issue, Frieda and her VRC provided down payments (ranging from \$500 to \$700) for their student veterans as a loan without interest.

Additionally, their VRC has made efforts to provide relief for their student veterans, financial aid, and miscellaneous pandemic-related issues. Frieda remembered about the student veteran in particular who tested positive for COVID-19:

And we would have students that are couch surfing and trying to pay rent when they have to take two weeks off because of COVID...when you have COVID, nobody is then going to let you sleep on their couch. As an educational institution, to be able to find resources for housing is incredibly difficult... Orange County is difficult to find affordable housing for anybody, right?...we are still, at the end of the day, just an educational institution.

She shared that it was emotionally draining, and she felt very limited because there was not much she could do to facilitate student veterans' academic success at the time.

Strikingly, George discussed a pivotal change in the VA's COVID-19 policy starting June 1, 2022. If a student veteran chooses to continue online college training after June 1, 2022,

their Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) will be reduced to half the original amount. This policy change is well-justified because the BAH can be adjusted by the cost of living within the campus' vicinity. When students did not have classes in person, they did not have to live in the city, let alone in the state, to remain as students; again, Orange County has one of the highest BAH rates.

Simply put, the VA implemented this policy change to prevent non-residents taking courses remotely at high-cost BAH-approved colleges (including Orange County) from receiving higher BAH. However, this policy change does not fully consider that not all classes have yet returned to Resident Classes (VA, 2022) or classes taken physically in person. George discussed:

So unless a lot of our instruction returns to face-to-face our vet will not be able to get their full housing allowance for the VA, [but] some classes are just not being offered in-person. So that is currently probably, if not, one of the biggest challenges that we have and complete outside our control. It is up to faculty.

Therefore, if a student veteran fails to register for Resident Classes that fit their academic plan, their BAH will be significantly reduced. Again, Resident Classes are not yet fully offered by the campus. Also, many student veterans still rely on their BAH due to the pandemic. As a result, VRC and student veterans must undergo unnecessary formalities to contact the faculties to reconsider and revise their class modalities or, even worse, transiently change their majors to fit the currently available Resident classes to their revised academic plan.

In summary, the pandemic has affected student veterans and VRC in various ways. It exacerbated the social isolation distinctively within student veterans' transition. High-cost living arrangements in Orange County amid insufficient GI Bill coverages resulted in the housing crisis. Although VRCs plan to maintain (and expand) the virtual infrastructure to make it more

convenient for their student veterans in the long run, remote learning modalities pose challenges in maintaining student engagement. All the while, VRCs devoted the same effort, time, and money to military dependents for which they did not receive institutional funding.

Notably, themes in this section intersect with previous sections in this paper. For example, the Military-affiliated students' equity gap is closely related to VRC's funding formula and staffing and space constraints. Insufficient GI Bill for student veterans has interconnectivity with VRCs' efforts to reserve GI Bill for their students despite the unintentional consequences of losing student engagement. A high-cost living arrangement in Orange County is also associated with student veteran homelessness. Conclusively, this intersectionality can be extended to the next section: the VRC must also be fully prepared to assist and accommodate student veterans with severe service-connected disabilities.

Activities and Interactions with Student Veterans with Disabilities

The last section of this chapter details how participants perceived their activities and interactions with student veterans with disabilities. Per the literature review, student veterans' service-connected disabilities were one of the liabilities that required an introspective transition into the civilian setting. Participants discussed how student veterans' service-connected disabilities may pose a barrier for the VRC to strengthen their connections and increase student engagement. There are four sub-themes in this section:

1. Student Veterans with Severe Service Connected Disabilities: VRC experienced beyond the reach/scope when the student's disabilities are too severe. Participants experience challenges setting the boundaries and establishing accurate expectations for both student's and VRC's. In sum, participants asserted the importance of providing individualized services and specific resources specially tailored to the

disability and its symptoms.

2. **External and Internal Stigma:** There is an internal and external stigma involved with military service-connected disabilities. External Stigma involves the public's negative or discriminatory attitudes, assuming that student veterans are vulnerable and dangerous. Internal Stigma encompasses the mistranslated sense of self-sufficiency and how disability is embedded within the sign of weakness in the military.
3. **Lack of Disseminated Health Benefits Information:** Many student veterans were unaware of their benefits and disconnected from their resources. Veterans' benefits information tends to be stringent, and they are not properly disseminated.
4. **Veterans Administration (VA) 's Bureaucracy:** VRCs and student veterans, both, experienced difficulties interacting with the Veterans Affairs (VA). Therefore, student veterans must always be mentally prepared for an undue delay because the VA sporadically follows up on their requests, certifications, and contacts. Participants shared how they are enervated with the VA's bureaucracy.

When the Disability is Too Severe

First, participants shared their experiences interacting with student veterans with severe service-connected disabilities, which were beyond their reach/scope. For example, Carmen, a VRC Certifying Official, mentioned her experience interacting with a student veteran with severe mental health issues. She felt it was beyond the scope of what she could do then, and it was the most difficult experience at the VRC. According to Carmen, the student veteran was an army ranger, and schizophrenia ran in his family. A traumatic experience triggered the schizophrenia: "he did not want to take medication. He had an apartment but did not want to stay there. He mainly just wanted to be on the street. Yet, he would still come to school."

One night, the student did not want to stay on the street but did not feel safe staying at home either. For that reason, he wanted to be picked up for involuntary hold, also known as the Welfare and Institutions Code 5150. The 5150 allows involuntary detainment for 72 hours if a person is experiencing a severe mental health crisis and requires psychiatric hospitalization if deemed a danger to themselves and others. With that in mind, “he would come and do episodes on campus.” Carmen further recalled:

... he would run in the VRC...and he would throw his passport at our counter and be like, watch this. I need you to hold onto it for me, right. And then he would go in the parking lot and create a scene and get picked up. So it just got to a point where, we were like, we cannot hold your passport anymore. You know what I mean? And then, because he felt, we broke his trust. He did not come to the VRC anymore. And then he stopped going to school.

At a later time, Carmen spotted him at the Huntington Beach, homeless:

...look who we saw, you know what I mean? but it is kind of beyond my scope. Like I cannot help him do that...And I think the hardest part is that like, even though you offer all these resources and programs and you're open...there's always going to be that one person that, you cannot get to, and I think that is the hardest for me.

In that context, Frieda, who is at a different campus, asserted the importance of providing individualized services and providing specific resources that are specially tailored toward student's disabilities:

We do have students with TBI (traumatic brain injuries) cases... we are taking special care or equitable care with them, not just providing the same exact resources...we want to provide them with resources that are for them all right. I want to make sure that if they

have a TBI, then I am following up with them making sure that certain paperwork is getting submitted correctly.

Lori, who is at a different campus, also shared two instances of interacting with student veterans with mental health issues. In both cases, the students admitted that they did not take their medications and acted erratically. It became a safety concern for staff, students, and even the person themselves. So, they also had to call for the 5150. And yet, Lori shared:

...but unfortunately, the VA hospital is not the greatest, you know, it is more just a holding tank... typically 5150 does not mean anything. Which is really sad because you know that they really need the support and they can get released right away pretty much.

In retrospect, Lori discussed the phenomenon of trust and boundaries, which Carmen also previously discussed at a different campus. According to Lori, there is a tendency among some student veterans to misunderstand the VRC as their Safe Haven where they do not have to worry about rules.

Lori postulated a phenomenon of trust and boundaries among student veterans. She shared that it was surprising for her to see that many student veterans are seldom interested in rules. Conversely, the military, in general, is very much about command in order, and an order is given in every situation by the contact officer. However, when campus rules and structures are fully enforced and imposed, some student veterans, especially those with service-connected mental health issues, are disturbed because it broke their trust.

...a little upset that the veterans can put their foot down and said no, you have to follow the rules. That was just an interesting dynamic as I am reflecting out loud that coming from such structure being a veteran as following structure made that person upset.

Although it was an interesting intricacy, Lori explained that she experienced challenges setting the boundaries and establishing accurate expectations on both students' and VRCs'.

All in all, participants heavily emphasized that they witnessed many student veterans struggle with physiological or psychological needs due to their service-connected disabilities. They also shared that interacting with some student veterans with severe mental health issues was beyond their scope of practice. Nonetheless, All participants highlighted the importance of providing individualized services and specific resources that are specifically tailored toward their disabilities and symptoms to better facilitate and accommodate student needs. Moreover, student veterans with disabilities are a hidden population. Their mental health issues may not be apparent, and their disabilities may be confidential and concealed (mostly stemming from their stigmas) until they choose to disclose them to the VRC.

External Stigma

Participants explained that there are two types of stigmas surrounding veterans with disabilities: External Stigma and Internal Stigma. First, External Stigma involves the negative or discriminatory attitudes of the public by two assumptions in which student veterans are: a) vulnerable and/or b) dangerous. Regarding vulnerability, Alonzo asserted that he does not want the faculty to identify student veterans and look at them as broken because student veterans are a resilient population. He added:

There may be other schools like, “hey, you know, they have a lot of mental health issues.” They may have all those barriers that they may be encountering, but there is still very successful. But you still have to mention all that stuff, right? You have to mention that this is what society says is wrong with vets.

Daniel shared that the culture of how non-veteran members of his college community viewed student veterans was influenced by Hollywood and social media. He further elaborated:

The entertainment business has portrayed to what a veteran is or what a veteran looks like. And I think a lot of times, when you do not have military attachments in your personal life, your perception of military veterans is biased based on media. And so doing a lot of education on my campus has sometimes been one of the hardest struggles.

Thus, how veterans are perceived will be very different from a student who has never served in the military.

While some may perceive brokenness within student veterans, others view them as a threat or danger. Lori, who is at a different campus, discussed this notion further: “There is a perception that there are scarier of veteran that you need to be more scared because what about the come back and do something on campus. I personally have never felt in fear.” She shared that the VRC is probably the safest office on campus for her. She also underscored the importance of building rapport with students for VRC offices to function efficiently as a safe haven.

Internal Stigma

Internal Stigma within student veterans shares intersectionality with the first theme in this paper, the mistranslated sense of self-sufficiency. Specifically, stigmatization of disability is embedded within the sign of weakness in the military. Kate discussed that it comes from the environmental and social aspects of military nature. Interestingly, she connected this notion with military jargon in the following:

I do not know if you remember this, but they had in the Army, they had the it was a joke, but not really, it was the Sick-Call Creed, instead of the Soldier’s Creed. It was the Sick-

Call. And it was essentially says, I'm a piece of shit. And I cannot do my duties as a Sick-Call Soldier. Right. And, and meaning that they have been injured or something is going on with the soldier that they cannot perform their duties. But they have been put on like, a limited the limited duty profiles.

Kate recalled that those who called in sick and had to take days off were called "Profiles." She further elaborated on how Profiles were often harassed by their peer soldiers. Thus, she conjectured it has been extended and evolved in the form of Stigma in the civilian world. In that context, Irena also asserted:

And it is really breaking the Stigma. Like, it is okay to not be okay. It is okay to ask for help. Like, we make it normal here. Normal and natural. "I am in therapy. I am in therapy too." Just as a natural thing to go through that so that you can help yourself get better.

On the other hand, there are stigmas associated within a family with discrediting a disability if the injury was not due to a combat deployment. Kate remembered: "I was on hazardous duty, but it wasn't a combat deployment. And so my parents kind of scoffed at me and were like, you're disabled? And I said, well, yeah, I tore my hamstring in the military."

Additionally, a back injury was also incurred due to some issues with her unit from the level of work. Although she was upfront about her disability, her family did not believe it or take it seriously. Thus, she could relate to how soldiers and veterans feel about their disabilities and the Stigma associated with themselves and their families. Nevertheless, Nate, a former US Marine Corps veteran and a current VRC specialist, still feels the presence of a negative cloud, especially hovering over mental health. He added, "a very, very negative stigma when really it is there should not be because I thought the same thing for a long time that mental health was negative thing like, Oh, why do I need to talk to somebody?"

However, that climate is changing. Participants in this study strive toward the shift of the negative mindset associated with student veterans with disabilities. For that matter, Kate summarized this section with the following conclusion:

I am hoping that, especially here in this office, that people are more comfortable talking about their disabilities, because it encourages others to go and get seen for these things to actually go and get the help that they deserve, that they are entitled to.

Kate was hopeful that someday we can make a proud moment for our veterans to proclaim, “yeah, I am a disabled veteran, because I served my country.”

Lack of Disseminated Information

Surprisingly, most participants recalled how they were surprised to see that student veterans were unaware of their benefits and disconnected from their resources. For example, Alonzo shared that most veterans with disabilities do not even realize they get five years of free healthcare service when they separate from the military. Frieda explained that most student veterans do not understand the need to apply for Federal Financial Aid. Lori also underscored that many student veterans do not know CalVet, a veteran advocacy service in California.

Furthermore, Julian added that some of his student veterans did not know about the GI Bill. Surprisingly, Julian, himself, was unaware of the GI Bill either when he first got out of the military:

Somebody was asking me why I was working, and they said there is a GI Bill, you can get paid almost \$3,000 to go to school, and I did not believe it. And there was definitely a lack of information when I was getting out in 2015.

Other participants also shared that many student veterans may not know anything about their benefits. Consequently, they get used to dealing and coping with issues on their own. To that

end, some student veterans with disabilities were even unaware of service-connected disability compensation. Irena remembered:

I was shocked. They had no idea about disability...“You know, you can apply for disability [compensation].” So did you ever have any injuries or anything like in the military?” She was like, “Yeah. I was on the ship once and this thing hit my face and it broke my jaw.” I was like, “What? And nobody told you about this disability?” I was shocked.

After the dismay, Irena sat with her student in a private room and helped the student apply for VA service-connected disability compensation. Three months later, the student received an 80 percent disability rating. Irena reminisced about that joyous moment:

She called me crying, like, “My daughter can go to school now”...she says now I helped my husband and he has a rating and now we are making money while we’re going to school and like, our lives has completely changed.

Kate, who is at a different campus also added:

Students do not know that after they get out of the military, they have every right to go and apply for a service-connected disability. A lot of students do not know that they have no idea that they are allowed to do that.

Furthermore, Kate speculated that there is a false assumption that a person must have been deployed or gone into combat in order to qualify for a disability rating. As a result, many student veterans have not made an effort to apply for service-connected disability compensation, because they do not know how. She continued:

So some of them come with no disability rating. They have not done any sort of application whatsoever. And they find out that they can they do the process, they go

through the process, and then they are found to have service-connected disability. And then that is when we let them know, okay, let us get you to DSPS because now you are in the program. Now you were rated with a disability.

In summary, many student veterans with disability separate from the military with/or physical and mental service-connected disabilities. They have no idea of their resources and the support and benefits to which they are entitled. To mitigate this issue, VRCs arranged a campaign and outreach to people explaining to student veterans what benefits they (or their dependents) could have. As Freida echoed, “one conversation was what they ever needed, despite the hard fact that they did not even know they could do that.” This calls for another meaningful dialogue with the Veterans Affairs (VA).

VA Bureaucracy

Finally, most participants shared that they experienced difficulty interacting with the Veterans Affairs (VA). Mainly, they have experienced those difficulties in two ways: a) first-hand difficulties (something they have experienced themselves as a college support staff) and b) second-hand difficulties (something they have witnessed/heard on how their student veterans interacted with the VA). Edward shared his first-hand difficulty interacting with the VA:

Just because we (VRC) approve, it does not mean the VA can always process it in a timely manner. Anyone who has ever worked with VA will tell you that our idea of quickly and their idea quickly sometimes is not coincide with each other.

Edward remembered a particular registration period. Concisely put, the VA changed the nomenclature and facility number of the school without notifying the VRC. As a result, students could not receive the GI Bill because none of their certifications went through. Edward further elaborated:

None of our students got paid because they (VA) could not fix their fix...Now you have people who have been pretty reliant on their GI Bill money...they did everything right.

And the ball got dropped elsewhere.

By all accounts, student veterans have promptly followed through with the procedures and submitted their required documents to the school on time. Again, since the VA has made nomenclature changes without notifying the campus, Edward (and his fellow VRC staff) had to resubmit the certification for their student veterans all over again. As a result, those who relied on the educational benefits for their living arrangements did not receive funding on time and missed their housing rent. Edward further shared that he resolved this issue through the local outside resource, Tierney Center of Goodwill in Orange County, which provided financial assistance with housing rent for one month.

Also, participants discussed the sporadic nature of the GI Bill payment disbursement timetable. Frieda summarized this phenomenon in the following:

...when they (student veterans) use their GI Bill, they are not going to get paid that first month... they will get back paid. So if they are taking classes and classes start in August, the first payment should come September first. When you transfer a GI Bill over to a new institution or it's your first time using it, that first payment is not going to likely come until October first. Students do not know that.

Frieda also discussed how the GI Bill is not provided during school breaks. For example, if student veterans decide to take a summer break, they may not receive the GI Bill for that period. Likewise, half of December and January are not paid if they do not take classes during winter intersessions.

The above notion is only applicable, assuming everything is processed on time by the VA without delays. And yet, that is not always the case. Even if student veterans submit everything on time, there will be unforeseen delays, whether it is due to the VRC or the VA. Irena shared that she has personally experienced such struggle as a previous student veteran:

As a veteran, who lived off the GI Bill, as a single mother for seven years oh, I know what that looks like...if you do not certify vet student [on time] they are not going to get their rent paid on time...I know when that paycheck is not there on the 1st or the VA makes a mistake, I had to drop a class and, you know, that panic, what am I going to owe the VA, I know that sense of urgency.

Therefore, student veterans must be mentally prepared for when they are not in school or not receiving their GI Bill. They must be prepared to start saving their living arrangements ahead of time so that they can pay their dues (e.g., housing rent) on time. Such insecurity in living arrangements may induce anxiety.

Additionally, participants shared their second-hand difficulties with their student veterans reaching VA Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors. According to Frieda:

I think with the most issues that we have been seeing in especially lately...getting a hold of (VA voc rehab) counselors. I do not know what it is. If it is because everybody is bouncing around from person to person, if caseloads are way too much. Nobody can get a hold of their (VA) voc rehab counselors...I talked to a student this morning that he contacted his old voc rehab counselor about two weeks ago. He still has not heard from her... it is such a broken system that on our end it is frustrating because we cannot do anything else.

Frieda further shared that, thankfully, their certifying officials somehow could get a hold of some people who can then connect to somebody else; nonetheless, she shared that the most draining (and frustrating) thing about her position is dealing with VA vocational rehabilitation services.

Kate echoed this notion in the following:

I'm speaking from what the student told me...that they've been through three counselors. The first one was unhelpful, essentially denied the student (for voc rehab service), because of an issue with their DD 214, which they resolved prior to getting an appointment with that voc rehab counselor. And then communication between the counselor and the student just was not happening. The student was emailing...calling, and there was no return communication on that.

Subsequently, the student elevated his concern and filed a complaint; only afterward did the VA try to rectify the issue by switching the counselor.

And yet, according to Kate, the student veteran was still experiencing issues. To that extent, Kate had to reach out to the VA vocational rehabilitation counselor she utilized when she was a student veteran. The situation was then finally resolved. She summarized the following:

So it took this student, two different counselors...and me reaching out to...my own VA counselor to finally get the assistance that I think they are going to get and deserve....I think there is a lot of difficulty in it. And this is not the only student that I have heard that the counselor does not communicate back. The student has reached out to them on multiple occasions, that benefits are held up because we cannot get the VA counselor to confer.

Aside from the VA vocational rehabilitation program, most participants revealed a disconnect between what the VA does and what the local colleges do.

According to George, the disconnect could mainly be due to how the VA decides the policies for a housing allowance on the federal level, but the colleges are deciding on the local level based on faculty contracts. Finally, Carmen, who is at a different campus, explained how the VA still employs an outdated reporting system. The current VA reporting software has not changed since 2004, and upgrades are underway to improve the organizational and reporting sides. Although the current information system with the VA has much room for improvement, Carmen was hopeful that it is in the process of restructuring.

Summation

Historically, remnants of war remain perpetual. For that matter, student veteran is a diverse subpopulation associated with various legal implications and entitlement backgrounds. The purpose of this study is to explore how VRC staff members in California community colleges describe their support work toward the academic success of student veterans. The participants in this study offered a multitude of narratives and examples. Data were thematically analyzed within the phenomenological framework, which derived from research questions. Then, within each sub-question, four themes were identified that represent the articulated experiences of the research participants. In summary, the current institutional support systems in the United States may not always directly lead to a better transition for student veterans, and there is a gap in understanding their needs by higher education professionals and administrators.

In essence, VRC staff members experience difficulty sustaining personal and academic connections with their students due to student veterans' mistranslated sense of self-sufficiency and lack of student engagement. Furthermore, some student veterans attend college solely for educational benefits and are not interested in education, transfer, or graduation. Withal, the VRC receives limited institutional funding based on the number of students using the GI Bill.

And yet, the VRC is steadfast on saving the GI Bill for the future academic journey of their student veterans despite their funding shortage in staffing and space. Nevertheless, they substitute their insufficient institutional budget through soft funding and overtime work and provide services to additional students, including reservists, national guards, or dependents for whom VRCs do not receive institutional funding. Concurrently, some mental health services on campus are not fit for student veterans. Further, campus climate does not favor student veterans, specifically other non-veteran peers and staff members, who are uncomfortable or even intimidated by student veterans.

For that matter, VRC utilizes outside community resources to supplement mental health services, and they accommodate non-academic issues, including homelessness. One unique feature of the VRC office is that they also arrange a tour to other VRC offices at four-year universities so that student veterans are more familiar (and mentally prepared) with their prospective school after the transfer. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has hindered services and student enrollments in many ways. There were various matters that VRC could not assist and accommodate, including high living costs, insufficient GI Bill, severe GI service-connected disabilities, the VA's stringent benefit information, and their bureaucracies. Nonetheless, VRC still stands strong and strives toward their student veterans' academic success. The next chapter will discuss implications, recommendations, and limitations for future research opportunities.

5 Discussion

The previous chapter indicated that the current institutional support systems at California Community Colleges may not directly lead to a better transition for student veterans. VRC staff members experienced difficulty sustaining personal and academic connections with their students due to a gap in understanding their needs by higher education professionals, administrators, and student veterans. VRC's limited institutional funding was contingent upon the number of students using the GI Bill, which also paradoxically affected student engagement. As non-traditional students, student veterans were vulnerable to non-academic hardship; however, VRC did not have the capacity or training to rectify all personal issues for their students despite utilizing soft funds and outside community resources.

This chapter presents a comprehensive summary of the study and its findings. The summary of the study explains how it intended to contribute to the body of knowledge on the topic. Further, it presents the topic's importance and how the study's methodology aligns with answering the research questions. The summary of findings is organized by the themes that emerged from the study. It provides conclusions based on the data analysis as it relates findings to the body of knowledge covered during the literature review. Next, implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research are discussed. Finally, the study concludes with its limitations and a closing statement.

Summary of the Study

College enrollment is a deliberate choice for student veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). At the same time, student veterans who end their military service leave more than just a job; they leave a way of their identity and culture (Jones, 2013). Since the implementation of the

Post-9/11 GI Bill, the largest student veteran enrollments took place at community colleges; however, a 28% attrition rate was reported among 850,000 student veterans who left their higher education programs without certificates or degrees between 2009 and 2015 (Cate et al., 2017; Flink, 2017). Student veterans are considered *at-risk students* in higher education due to their 51% overall attrition in higher education (Lim et al., 2018). Colleges and universities initiated campus support services to address student veterans' transitional issues to address this concern. Furthermore, academic literature on student veterans' transition has burgeoned during the past decade.

And yet, previous research studies have predominantly focused on academic performance, mental health, and how student veterans personally experience their transition from the military to college. Although existing studies provide important insights into the phenomenon of student veteran transition, very little research has been conducted about how different institutional strategies can be implemented to facilitate specific aspects of student veterans' transitions across campuses. Only understanding student veterans' first-hand experiences within higher education may not be enough.

Several studies underscored the Veterans Resource Center (VRC) as the one-stop center for student veterans to help them navigate administrative processes and address any concerns toward degree completion (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Summerlot et al., 2009). VRC is more than just an office to certify the GI Bill to the Veterans Affairs (VA); their duties and responsibilities are being overextended to another level. Thus, VRC staff members who interact with student veterans play a major role in their academic success in higher education. The California Community Colleges, the largest system of higher education across the nation, pursued to create veteran-friendly campuses (California Community College

Chancellor's Office, 2014; California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2018b). Still, veteran-friendliness is a context-specific phenomenon; what works for one campus may not work for the other (Vacchi & Berger, 2013).

Therefore, this study seeks to illuminate the knowledge, expertise, and understanding of the professional practices of VRC staff members who work with student veterans with disabilities in California community colleges. It is imperative to understand and interpret how they describe the experience of providing services (and facilitating the transition process) toward student veterans. Therefore, "how do VRC staff members in California community colleges describe their support work toward the academic success of student veterans?" is the overarching focus of this research study.

Phenomenology served as the guiding methodological framework for both the theoretical framework of this study and the analysis method. Phenomenology seeks to describe the essence in how it functions (or is revealed) in the lived experience and manifests in consciousness as an object of reflection. The interview was the principal data collection method, and the final data collection consisted of interview recordings with 15 participants. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Sultan, 2018). Each interview was recorded and ranged between 45-90 minutes. They were transcribed for the discourse of the participants representing the data in this study.

Then, the data were coded using NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2019) as a thematic analysis comparing and contrasting salient elements in participants' experiences and perceptions (Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, it was crucial not only to maintain the context of the *whole* but also, to preserve the fundamental meaning during data analysis in a narrative. Therefore, a set of open and descriptive codes were developed to identify key points made by participants regarding

important aspects of their experiences providing services to student veterans. Finally, participants' accounts (the data from the situated narratives) were unified into a general narrative to focus on the “essence” of the phenomena and generate a general description (Creswell, 2007; Peoples, 2020; Sultan, 2018).

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore how VRC staff members in California community colleges describe their support work toward the academic success of student veterans. The participants in this study offered a multitude of narratives and examples. Data analysis has been organized based on research sub-questions. Then, within each sub-question, four themes were identified, representing the articulated experiences of the research participants.

Research Sub-Question 1: What are their perceptions of the systems and practices to support student veterans?

Participants shared their difficulty maintaining academic and personal connections with student veterans mainly due to: a) student veterans' mistranslated sense of self-sufficiency; b) lack of student engagement; c) arranging VRC orientation to outreach new students and graduates, and; d) those who are in school with a sole purpose of collecting their educational benefits (also known as here for the money).

To that account, participants underscored that learning and absorbing information takes a skill. Asking for help may be a sign of weakness in the military, but it takes skill to be a student. If you are unaware that you lack those skills, you will fall behind. Such skill-set may be acquired by interacting with resources and other students, knowing how to look for resources, and learning how to ask for help.

Research Sub-Question 2: What are their perceptions of the systems and practices to support student veterans?

In consensus, participants emphasized that institutional mechanisms may require funding reform. Previous studies highlighted VRC's frustration with insufficient funding and staffing (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; McBain et al., 2012). The finding of section warrants further dialogue, which is not discussed in the existing research literature, to explain why and how the lack of funding is a more complex issue, especially in California Community Colleges; they may include: a) issues surrounding the current VRC funding formula in the California community college system; b) how the current funding has a paradoxical effect on student veterans and VRC simultaneously; c) how VRCs are currently relying on non-institutional soft funds and grants, and; d) how VRC experience limited staffing and space due to the funding issues.

According to California Community College's guideline for the staffing requirements for VRC (CCC, 2012), each VRC should have a full-time director/coordinator, one full-time counselor, and one full-time certifying official per 200 certified student veterans; however, those requirements were rarely fulfilled because VRCs do not have sufficient funding. In essence, participants in this study revealed how VRCs are institutionally underfunded due to the current funding formula.

Research Sub-Question 3: How do they perceive their interactions with other resources aiming to serve student veterans?

If a student struggles outside the classroom, they would most likely not succeed in the classroom. Participants underscored the importance of recognizing non-academic hardship that student veterans may experience. They described how they interacted with other campus offices and outside resources to assist student veterans with hardship outside the classroom. They may

include: a) campus climate surrounding other campus services and offices; b) Student veteran homelessness and outside resources; c) matters in which VRC cannot assist, and; d) how VRCs employ four-year university tours as an outside resource to increase student morale, retention, and commitment.

Subsequently, VRC cannot solve every student veteran's personal issues; VRC is a part of educational institutions' programs primarily designed to facilitate academic matters. Still, they are looking to find solutions and alternatives to, directly and indirectly, enhance student veterans' quality of life and learning. Also, acknowledging the importance of the non-academic matter of student life is the first step.

Research Sub-Question 4: What difficulties and challenges, if any, do they perceive in their work?

There were distinctive intricacies that VRC and student veterans experience in conjunction with the intersectionality previously discussed phenomenon. They may include: a) Military-Affiliated Students are often neglected; b) COVID-19 hampered student veterans' academic endeavors in distinctive ways; c) GI Bill is insufficient in duration and amount, and therefore; d) students' living arrangements in Orange County, California, are extremely difficult.

Overall, the pandemic has affected student veterans and VRC in various ways. Especially, high-cost living arrangements in Orange County amid insufficient GI Bill coverages resulted in the housing crisis for student veterans. Furthermore, intersection with the previous themes was evinced: a) the Military-affiliated students' equity gap has a close tie to VRC's staffing and space constraints; b) insufficient GI Bill shares interconnectivity with VRCs' efforts to reserve GI Bill for their students despite the unintentional consequences of losing student

engagement; and c) a high-cost living arrangement in Orange County has also become precedents to student veteran homelessness.

Research Sub-Question 5: How do they perceive their activities and interactions with student veterans with disabilities in particular?

Participants underscored that many student veterans struggle with physiological or psychological needs due to their service-connected disabilities, and interacting with a student veteran with severe mental health issues was the most difficult experience at the VRC; they felt it was beyond their scope. It is estimated that 40% of veterans may have acquired various service-connected disabilities, and they have specific disabilities (exception of vision) at higher rates than their civilian peers (Grossman, 2009; Radford et al., 2016). Notably, student veterans with disabilities have less time to learn to navigate the school system compared to their non-veteran peers with disabilities, who have more experience seeking accommodations since their secondary schools (Vance & Miller, 2009).

To that end, participants asserted the importance of providing individualized services and specific resources tailored to their disability traits and symptoms. Still, some fears and stigmas accompany them. The stigmatization and fear of mental health issues often follow veterans transitioning to civilian and academic life (Flink, 2017). Thus, veterans suffering from invisible disabilities not only ignore their disabilities but also avoid disclosing their disabilities to support staff (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). This phenomenon creates a vicious cycle because student veterans become unaware of their benefits and disconnected from their resources.

Surprisingly, participants shared that many student veterans still do not know about their benefits and have become entrenched in dealing with/coping with issues independently. Appallingly (and morosely), they have no idea of their resources and the support and benefits to

which they are entitled. Even if they knew about the benefits, they experienced difficulty interacting with the Veterans Affairs (VA). One participant shared that the most draining (and frustrating) thing about her position was dealing with VA vocational rehabilitation services. Moreover, most participants emphasized a disconnect between what the VA does and what the local colleges do. The disconnect could mainly be due to how the VA decides the policies for a housing allowance on the federal level. However, the colleges make a decision at the local level based on faculty contracts. Not to mention, their outdated reporting software system has not changed since 2004, though upgrades are underway.

Implications

This section is organized based on the following focus: a) implications for practice, b) implications for policy, and c) implications for research. First, implications for practice may signify how VRC and campus communities increase student engagement on campus for student veterans. It is important to recognize that student veterans are not only non-traditional students but also hidden student populations stemming from their unwillingness to disclose their military status and need for help. To that end, VRC must be prepared to address and accommodate student veterans' non-academic issues by establishing and strengthening connections with other campus offices and outside community resources. Second, implications for policy acknowledge the current California Community College VRC funding formula's equity gap and how it induces insufficient VRC funding and staffing. Also, it calls for policy changes toward VA's bureaucratic process and GI Bill benefits. Lastly, implications for research highlight the significance of further research on student veterans' further impact from the COVID-19 pandemic, military-affiliated students and dependents, and stigmatization of disability within and toward student veterans. Notably, not all implications are definitive in the context of advisement but an

articulation of the problem. The aim/intent is to explicate and present the issues clearly as a starting point for advisement.

Implications for Practice

Social Camouflage is a phenomenon of student veterans' inadvertent but also intentional academic and social disengagement (Ackerman et al., 2009; Boettcher et al., 2017; DiRamio et al.; Elliott et al., 2011; Koenig et al., 2014; Jones, 2017; Livingston et al., 2011; Osborn, 2016; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012). Furthermore, they often decide not to disclose their military identity because if no one knows they are veterans, it is all right to ask for help or feel like they have better access to help (Osborne, 2014; Vacchi & Berger, 2013). Thus, if student veterans do not identify as veterans when seeking services, most VRCs cannot track their accountability (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014).

It is challenging for VRC to support those who want to remain invisible (DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011), and participating in the VRC program is strictly voluntary. In other words, if student veterans did not identify as veterans when seeking services, they could not be tracked by VRC (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014). This notion intersects with student veterans' academic issues because they may intentionally not seek VRC services, partly due to their sense of self-sufficiency. In that regard, student veterans may require additional assistance in learning strategies and tutoring.

Many student veterans rush into college after discharge, not allowing themselves an adjustment/preparation timeframe (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011a). Thus, they may encounter academic challenges (e.g., forgetting course content/concepts) due to insufficient academic preparation (DiRamio et al., 2008; Jenner, 2017; Livingston et al., 2011). As discussed in the study, academic preparedness is a skill; sitting in a classroom and absorbing information is a

skill. All in all, studying takes a skill. The first step to obtaining that skill is to learn how to ask for help. Again, it may particularly be difficult for student veterans partly due to their mistranslated sense of self-sufficiency from the military.

Some student veterans may be too prideful to disclose that they need help. The participants throughout the study recited the following statement from the previous study: “the most difficult task for any veteran to overcome may be learning that it is acceptable to need help and even more important to seek help when needed” (Vacchi & Berger, 2013, p. 2). Thus, the study implies that student veterans must make the initial effort to come out of the mindset that help-seeking is a sign of weakness. In return, the campus community must extend sensitivities to student veterans’ unique backgrounds and provide opportunities for individual growth and integration into higher education (Osborne, 2016).

As non-traditional students, student veterans often have unique backgrounds and priorities, including families and employment, that precede school activities (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Durdella & Kim, 2012; McBain et al., 2012; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Not only do they have to balance irregular work schedules, family, and academic commitments (Cate, 2016; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Radford, 2009), cultural gaps and competing responsibilities/obligations may yield students veterans less likely to succeed in college (Bailey et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2018). In that context, student veterans are prone to non-academic related hardships. Approximately 20 percent of student veterans are single parents (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2017). They come from lower-income families than their non-veteran peers and have weaker academic/financial preparation and aspirations (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Wurster et al., 2013). Thus, student veterans’ financial responsibilities were not limited to tuition because they were more likely to have dependents and family obligations (Cate et al., 2017; Elliott, 2015;

Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; Jenner, 2017; Wurster et al., 2013). Student veterans in this study often sought legal workshops assisting with criminal and family legal issues and poor credit problems.

In addition to the complexities associated with being a non-traditional student, student veterans also must undergo transition/reintegration into the civilian world and academic setting (Osborne, 2016). Student veterans asserted that colleges were not prepared to assist student veterans, mainly due to the lack of knowledge and expertise concerning veteran-related issues on campus (Flink, 2017; Glasser et al., 2009; Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2017; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Vance & Miller, 2009). In some cases, student veterans also reported a lack of military appreciation on campus (Livingston et al., 2011). Furthermore, other offices feared possible retaliation across campus when the student's mental health issue was disclosed. Especially when student veterans' unconventional maturity levels may demand a certain level of respect, not all campus staff members exhibited comfort with it.

Schiavone and Gentry (2014) asserted that the problem might lie not in the array of services and programs provided by the office but in how the office communicates with student veterans about the available programs and services. Also, student veterans may spend too much time making multiple trips to different offices and dealing with bureaucracies on campus. To mitigate the issue, participants pursued making their VRC a one-stop center so that student veterans do not have to spend too much time making multiple trips to different offices and their bureaucracies on campus. Similar to the previous studies, VRCs in this study pursued streamlined programs and services for student veterans with administrative services, academic support, and counseling services (Ford et al., 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; Johnson, 2009; Kirchner, 2015; Madaus, 2009; Vacchi & Berger, 2013; Vance & Miller, 2009).

Most participants shared that they have established a solid relationship with other campus program offices and services (especially close with the Disability Support Programs and Services (DSPS) Office). However, their viewpoints toward the Health Center were divergent because most Health Centers do not offer comprehensive mental health services for their students (not just limited to student veterans). Therefore, most student veterans prefer to meet with a military-connected counselor available through external community programs (e.g., Outside the Wire). Consistent with the existing research literature, the study implied that other campus services might not have a specifically trained staff to address student veterans' non-academic hardships (Ackerman et al., 2009; Cook et al., 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2014).

According to DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), non-academic support typically comes from family and friends, and it is likely outside the scope of influence of the service provider on campus. Nevertheless, the study implies that VRCs must be prepared to address and accommodate the students' non-academic issues and needs, which may include: living arrangements, housing, food insecurity, mental health, and wellness. Notably, VRCs may enlarge their service capacities by establishing and strengthening connections with other campus offices and outside community resources. Nevertheless, not all VRCs have such capacities internally due to their limited institutional funding, staffing, and space.

Implications for Policy

In the previous studies, VRC staff expressed frustration with insufficient funding and experienced limited time and opportunities to expand their role (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014; McBain et al., 2012; Summerlot et al., 2009). This phenomenon was also eminent during this study. As a result of the lack of funding, VRC services may vary with uneven quality from institution to institution (DiRamio et al., 2008; Glasser et al., 2009; Jones, 2013; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

Student veterans expressed frustration from inconsistent processing time due to a lack of staffing (Glasser et al., 2009; Wheeler, 2012).

California provides VRC funding solely based on certified student veterans who are currently receiving the GI Bill (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2020); however, VRCs serve additional students, including reservists, national guards, or dependents for whom VRCs do not receive any funding. For example, one participating VRC has 300 certified student veterans, but they also have an additional 450 students to whom they provide the same services without any institutional funding. Thus, participants discussed that the current funding formula overlooks the equity gap of additional students because VRC funding is based solely on certified student veterans receiving the GI Bill.

On the contrary, most VRCs would encourage their students not to use their GI Bill prematurely at the college level because the GI Bill is limited in duration (36 months) and is exhausted by the duration, not the tuition amount. Therefore, VRC advises keeping that entitlement duration intact and utilizing other financial aid (e.g., California Promise grant) before transferring to a four-year university or enrolling in a graduate program afterward. As a result of encouraging student veterans to save their GI Bill, fewer student veterans would seek VRC services. Those not using the GI Bill no longer need to seek VRC services and support when the certification is not required. Consequently, it drastically impacts both student engagement and institutional funding in negative ways. Nonetheless, VRCs are steadfast in encouraging student veterans to save their GI Bill regardless of the current funding formula. They want their student veterans' academic success in the long run.

To substitute/complement their funding shortage, VRCs rely on general funds from the district and grants from the state, also known as soft funds. And yet, soft funds are temporary,

non-permanent, and non-sustainable sources of funding. According to California Community College's guideline for the staffing requirements for VRC (CCC, 2012), each VRC should have a full-time director/coordinator, one full-time counselor, and one full-time certifying official per 200 certified student veterans; however, those requirements were rarely fulfilled because VRCs do not have sufficient funding. Despite the soft funding and institutional funding combined, participants still experienced staffing difficulties and space constraints due to the current funding formula.

In essence, the study revealed that student veterans not using the GI Bill rarely seek VRC. To mitigate the accountability issue, the existing research literature suggested that veteran status needs to be included in the student unit record (DiRamio et al., 2008; Vance & Miller, 2009). Consistently, participants collected data and tracked their students' progress; however, not all veteran status information was forwarded by the student record office (DiRamio et al., 2008). Currently, there are no consistent college policies and procedures for student veterans, and this inconsistency was evinced in the literature (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Paradoxically, the largest student veteran enrollments take place at community colleges (Flink, 2017); hence, this is the place where the transition emerges the most and where VRC services are needed the most. There is a flaw in the current California Community College system with the VRC funding formula. In that regard, this study implies that policymakers and decision-makers must consider not just the numbers of GI Bill-certified students but the actual population of those students served by VRCs.

Additionally, improving the understanding of the transition experiences of student veterans on campus when they are not using the GI Bill is also critical to be better served. Those populations may include: active duty, reservists, and those who are not using benefits (because

they have either exhausted or are saving their benefits). And yet, participants emphasized that even if a student veteran chooses to save his/her GI Bill, it may still not be enough to fully cover the tuition and housing because their educational aspirations often require more than just a bachelor's degree. This phenomenon was especially eminent in Orange County, California, due to its high living costs.

As part of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33), the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) is housing compensation, in addition to the college tuition, based on the local cost of living by the ZIP code. Although Orange County has one of the highest BAH rates (\$3,354 per month), it may not fully cover the living expenses without additional support from the family or, in many cases, when a veteran is supporting a family. Participants also shared that student veterans receive their housing stipends only when they are enrolled in classes. Simply put, they cannot receive those funds during academic breaks (Wurster et al., 2013); even during the semester, benefits are not always disbursed on time. As a result, student veterans may incur education debt to address their unmet financial needs (Griffin & Gilbert, 2014) despite receiving GI Bill benefits, and the study implied the challenges of student veterans' housing.

To that account, participants in this study emphasized how student veteran homelessness was most difficult for them to rectify and resolve. It is one of the non-academic matters that campus staff members are not trained to fully assist. There were various narratives on how student veterans with the GI Bill would have to face homelessness due to: their severe mental health issues, unaffordable living arrangements, and the pandemic. Also, it is often difficult to identify because stigma and shame are involved, which makes this issue more challenging. Therefore, VRCs in this study established a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with outside

community resources to appoint/invite designated professionals to their office, offering specialized counseling services and resources to supplement the need.

To that end, the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is the only federal agency responsible for assisting student veterans with administering benefits, which may include: the GI Bill, disability compensation and medical care, vocational rehabilitation, survivor support, and home loans (Gordon et al., 2016). The current literature on student veteran transition unanimously underscored that the VA's bureaucratic process is not easy to understand/navigate. They also explained several reasons for delays in processing VA payments because approximately six million veterans are seen at the VA annually (Cate et al., 2017; Wheeler, 2012). Participants in the study also shared student veterans' (and their own) frustration with the VA's disconnectedness and stringency. Surprisingly, many student veterans did not know about their resources and the support and benefits to which they are entitled.

Moreover, VRCs are also experiencing difficulties by the VA's abrupt policy change since the pandemic. If a student veteran chooses to continue online college training after June 1, 2022, their Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) will be reduced to half the original amount. The VA implemented this policy change to prevent non-residents from taking courses remotely at high-cost BAH-approved colleges (including Orange County), hence, receiving higher BAH than they should. And yet, this policy change does not fully consider that not all classes have yet returned to *Resident Classes* (VA, 2022) or classes taken physically in person. As a result, VRC and student veterans must undergo complications of requesting faculties to revise their class modalities or switching majors to fit their limitedly available Resident classes into their revised academic plan. Otherwise, their BAH will be significantly reduced.

Implications for Research

This study illuminated novel challenges not discussed in the existing research literature base. Participants in this study underscored the following challenges in their VRC: a) military-affiliated students and military dependents; and b) the COVID-19 pandemic. First, VRC support and services are also provided to military-affiliated students in addition to student veterans. These student populations may include military dependents, active, and reservists, and they may constitute over half of the student population at the VRC. Participants devoted the same time, effort, and service to both student veterans and military-affiliated students; however, most military-affiliated students are not counted toward the state's funding criteria because most are not certified GI Bill recipients. Moreover, they are not all viewed as equally important as student veterans and are often overlooked or sometimes neglected by the campus community (and outside resources), especially if they are not certified GI Bill recipients.

Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic was another novel phenomenon that has impacted higher education systems in general, and its impact on student veterans' were distinctive. Socialization was a crucial element of the student veteran transition experience, and various challenges were reported on managing social relationships (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011a; Koenig et al., 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Wheeler, 2012). Isolation upon veterans returning home was already an issue, and yet, the pandemic had exacerbated the social isolation of student veterans with mental health issues.

Furthermore, VRCs are also experiencing difficulties *getting back to normal* since the pandemic. As participants described, it is not a realistic expectation when you are thrown in a house for two years and then told to return to school in one day. Moreover, student veterans were forced to exhaust their GI Bill as they struggled with reliable housing during the pandemic. VRC

has made every effort to provide relief for their student veterans, financial aid, and miscellaneous pandemic-related issues; however, it made things more onerous due to the VA's abrupt COVID-19 policy change (as previously discussed). In summary, the pandemic has affected student veterans and VRC in various ways; this study implies that further research is needed on this phenomenon.

The study also implied a call for further research on perennial issues: disability stigmatization added challenges to VRCs and student veterans as they transitioned into the classroom. First, external stigma involves the negative or discriminatory attitudes of the public by two assumptions: veterans are vulnerable and dangerous (Flink, 2017; Kirchner, 2015). Especially the media's frequent delineation of veterans as primarily traumatized or possibly dangerous groups draws a misleading image of this group (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Cook & Kim, 2009). The public may also believe that veterans are the ones who are responsible for their disabilities because they obtained them during service (Flink, 2017).

On the other hand, internal stigmatization of disability is embedded within the sign of weakness among student veterans; their military value may equate disability with being less self-sufficient (Osborne, 2016). And yet, those with newly acquired injuries have only begun to establish a basic understanding of how their disability may affect their life and schooling (Ford et al., 2009; Madaus et al., 2009). Student veterans were less likely to report their disabilities, access disability resources, and seek counseling services (or request accommodation), making self-advocacy even more challenging (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Madaus, 2009). Most of the time, they are anxious that it may harm their career aspirations (Ghosh & Fouad, 2016; Gordon et al., 2016; The Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2017; Vacchi & Berger, 2013).

Therefore, student veterans often mask their needs even though they may be simple to address (Vacchi & Berger, 2013). As previously discussed, this concealment creates a vicious cycle because student veterans become unaware of their benefits and disconnected from their resources. Participants recalled how they were surprised that some student veterans are unaware of service-connected disability compensation or do not know about the GI Bill. The study also revealed there was a false assumption that you have to have deployed or gone into combat in order for you to even qualify for a disability rating. To that account, the study implied that more cultivated sensitivity to veterans' language use and communication patterns might play a role in shedding light on this hidden population.

Recommendations

The most important point of recalibrating any policy, practice, and research is to start the dialogue. Campus communities must engage in meaningful conversations, including faculty and staff, administrators, policymakers, stakeholders, student veterans, and the public. This study may provide essential perspectives and recommendations to individuals who design, implement, or adapt services and programs toward student veterans' academic success. This section seeks to offer recommendations for policy, practice, and future research to contribute to future support services for student veterans.

Recommendations for Policy

The study calls for change in the California Community College system with VRC funding. VRCs need funding, not just for their certified students. They need to be funded for the number of students served overall. Having sufficient funding to maintain staffing levels and having qualified staff trained to address and exhibit sensitivities to the needs and concerns of student veterans is quintessential. If institutional VRC funding is based solely on certified

student veterans receiving the GI Bill, the current funding formula has an equity gap. As a result, VRCs are institutionally underfunded with limited staffing and space. Therefore, administrators must assess not just the number of GI Bill-certified students but the actual population of those students served by VRCs.

Additionally, institutional integration may be achieved through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the campus community and the Veterans Administration (VA). to strengthen the connection and facilitate the transition process. The study has shown that an outside community program called Outside the Wire (OTW) has been providing substantial mental health support to both VRC and student veterans. In that regard, more MOUs with outside community programs may be initiated and established because campuses must be prepared to meet the needs of veterans' mental health support services, especially after the pandemic. Consistent and stable partnerships with outside organizations and agencies may help student veterans transition successfully (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

Traditionally, veteran services (e.g., VA for benefits) and academic services (e.g., VRC) have been separated and compartmentalized. The literature has voiced that such partnership is less efficient in honoring student veterans' perspectives, spanning and integrating their roles as students, veterans, and servicemembers (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Consistently, this study revealed that some veterans are still unaware of their rights as students with disabilities or how to initiate support for receiving academic accommodations. Thus, establishing an MOU relationship with VRC and VA could also be recommended to strengthen communication and integrate/improve service delivery.

Recommendations for Practice

Supporting the troops takes more than just a slogan; it must undergo actions and practices (Ackerman et al., 2009). This study suggests the following recommendations for practice: a) hiring a VRC Project Expert/Resource Expert per VRC; b) mandatory VRC orientation; c) VRC-specific academic tutoring program; d) VRC-texting service; e) four-year university tours; and f) professional development.

As discussed, non-academic hardship may be outside the scope of influence of the campus service provider (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Still, being able to identify these hardships and plan for mitigating their intensity can be achieved through a proper referral for where to seek additional help. (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Thus, a VRC Project Expert/Resource Expert may be appointed specifically to assist student veterans with their non-academic hardships through various connections with outside resources. Despite its efficient implementation, there was only one Project Expert/Resource Expert with limited terms (part-time/interim) among participants/campus interviewed in this study. This study recommends expanding this position into mandatory/full-term per each VRC.

Furthermore, Vance and Miller (2009) rhetorically asked: can VRC do more than just wait for the student veterans to self-identify their needs? Livingston et al. (2011) described that pride impacted disclosure, as student veterans were not inclined to announce and use their veteran status to receive preferential treatment. Being around students, taking classes outside of their comfort zone, and exploring subjects are generally non-military in nature (Jones, 2013). Still, veterans receive no re-training to acculturate into campus life (Koenig et al., 2014; Vance & Miller, 2009). Therefore, the college may mandate orientation programs and transition seminar courses only focusing on student veterans. Several studies recommended a separate orientation

program designed for incoming student veterans to assist their transition (DiRamio et al., 2008; Gordon et al., 2016; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Kirchner, 2015; Lim et al., 2018; Mendez et al., 2018; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), but they were not mandatory.

The study revealed that some student veterans do not seek or visit VRC when they are not experiencing hardships. Consequently, student veterans do not know where to seek help when they face issues and problems. Therefore, Mandating a one-time VRC orientation meeting may serve three purposes: a) seeking VRC services is crucial even when there are no hardships at the moment, so you know exactly where to seek help when in need; b) once they are fully aware of how VRC would benefit academic success and improvement, they are making an informed choice, and their choice to participate in VRC (or not) can be fully respected; c) this mandate may reduce VRC staff endeavor to collect/track their students' accountability. All in all, it would be a disservice to treat student veterans as if they were invisible (Ackerman et al., 2009), and mandatory VRC orientation may resolve this matter.

On the other hand, student veterans' aversion to seeking help and support was evinced, and it was often solely on their shoulders to resolve any academic issue (Livingston et al., 2011; Osborne, 2016). Student veterans encounter academic challenges due to insufficient preparation (DiRamio et al., 2008; Jenner, 2017; Livingston et al., 2011). Among participants in this study, only one VRC had devoted veteran-specific Math and English tutors under a soft fund (Veterans Upward Bound Program). Campus communities may invest more in these veteran-specific academic tutoring programs to enhance retention and graduation rates. In addition, participants in this study underscored that students generally do not read emails. Thus, they are in the process of implementing a VRC-texting service. As it was piloted during the Summer of 2022, it could be implemented further contingent upon its efficiency.

Notably, VRC arranged a tour of the prospective four-year universities (and their VRC offices). This event not only helped their student veterans establish a connection with a representative at their prospective VRC, but it also increased student morale, retention, and commitment. By putting a face to their four-year colleges' VRCs, student veterans may make an educated decision on their transfer applications. Only one (among four) VRC in this study fully implemented this tour, and it may benefit many student veterans at other campuses if this milestone event was fully expanded.

Also, several studies underscored the importance of providing professional development opportunities for faculty members and staff to improve student veterans' learning environments (DiRamio et al., 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011a; Gordon et al., 2016; Kirchner, 2015; McBain et al., 2012; Osborne, 2014; Persky & Oliver, 2011). As participants shared, this is one of the few effective ways to positively impact the campus climate toward a veteran-friendly campus. Generally, veterans are not well represented among campus faculty members and administrators.

Suppose the campus community has limited first-hand or systematic knowledge of military culture and the potential impact of wartime service. In that case, it may complicate VRC efforts to change the campus climate positively toward successful transitions for student veterans. In that regard, program evaluation can also be conducted along with professional development concurrently. Once VRC's efficiency in increasing retention, graduation rates, and student veterans' student satisfaction is publicized through the evaluation, the campus community will be more likely to invest in the program. (Kirchner, 2015).

Recommendations for New Research

In the current literature, qualitative studies on student veterans have highlighted their unique transitions and hardships as they make civilian transitions. Subsequently, there are

qualitative studies predominantly about student veterans' first-hand experience of their military-to-civilian transition; however, there is limited data regarding the facilitators and service providers of transition and their service delivery processes. There is a scarcity of studies on service providers' (including the VRC) perspectives, and it is vital to expand the conversation on how they can facilitate the transition process toward student veterans' academic success.

At this time, numerous intermingled, inconsistent terminologies are used to describe student veterans. And yet, the literature still has not reached a consensus. Thus, there is a need to identify this student population with a more comprehensive definition. As Vacchi and Berger (2013) asserted, using different terminologies at different campuses that refer to different populations depending on the campus may create unwanted complications when referring to this student subpopulation in a national dialogue. To that end, every campus has a different structure and procedure for student veterans.

There were several terminologies suggested in the existing research literature, including: Wounded Warriors (Vance & Miller, 2009), Military Undergraduates (Radford, 2009), Student Service Member/Veteran (SSM/V) (Barry et al., 2014), Student-Veterans and Service-Members (SVSM) (Arminio et al., 2015), and veteran students. As discussed, defining this student population should be inclusive of all students who may experience difficulties achieving academic success due to their military background, not just limited to those using military education benefits to attend college (Vacchi & Berger, 2013).

Vacchi and Berger (2013) highlighted that defining this student population should focus more on the clash of culture between academia and the military, not just legal implications and entitlements. Although they wanted to be inclusive to those who experience difficulty with socialization and friction of cultures from the military service, the current institutional funding

formula (at least in California) is solely based on the entitlement certification status of the student. Thus, this study employed the term *student veterans* for former US military members, regardless of deployment status, combat experience with legal status as a veteran. This definition excludes dependents (and spouses), National Guards, and Reservists. They were defined as *military-affiliated students* because they are not certified GI Bill recipients and are not counted toward the state's funding criteria. Notably, veterans with dishonorable discharges (not eligible for military benefits) may still enroll on college campuses.

In that context, improving the understanding of the transition experiences of student veterans on campus when they are not using the GI Bill is also critical if they are to be better served. Interestingly, all participants in this study were unanimously consistent with both terminologies (student veterans and military-affiliated students) without having to describe the sample population. Therefore, this study calls for further implementation of these terminologies to yield consistency and accuracy to the literature base.

Therefore, a further understanding of how disability professionals could facilitate making the campus more accommodating to student veterans is necessary; however, too often, student veterans are approached from a deficit mindset (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Lim et al. (2018) asserted that the contemporary literature had been criticized for eliciting a deficit perspective toward student veterans due to focusing too much on their difficulties and hardship, thus, diminishing their assets and resiliencies. Notably, there have been no studies assessing factors that predict student veterans' academic satisfaction (Ghosh et al., 2019).

Moreover, the pandemic has impacted higher education systems in general, and its distinctive impact on student veterans and its subpopulation has not yet been investigated. In addition, further research on the sub-population of student veterans, including military

dependents, women veterans, LGBTQ+ veterans, dishonorably discharged veterans, veterans of color, and veterans with disabilities, is necessary to facilitate their intersection of salient nature. First, transferring educational benefits to dependents is a relatively new option and may present another level of complexity to future research (Cate et al., 2017).

Secondly, approximately one-third of all women on active duty experienced sexual assault while serving in the military (US Department of Defense, 2012; Vacchi & Berger, 2013), and they are prone to being underreported. In that context, female veterans represent one of the fastest-growing segments of veterans seeking VRC services. Little is known about women veterans' unique challenges in their civilian transition. For that matter, Focusing on Military Sexual Trauma (MST) is also necessary. In that context, one participant in this study was part of the LGBTQ+ population; the military LGBTQ+ population is also estimated to be three percent of the military (Vacchi & Berger, 2013). Women and LGBTQ+ troops in combat situations are still a new, novel phenomenon, and it is unknown to what extent OIF and OEF women and LGBTQ+ veterans may have been affected by combat experience.

Further, the current literature on student veterans seldom discusses how much control the student had in leaving the military. Dishonorable discharge experiences can negatively impact student veterans' ability to access their limited resources and benefits and their confidence and motivation to pursue a new career. Dishonorably discharged veterans also experience the distinctive transition difficulty from military to civilian settings. They are one of the least acknowledged populations in higher education. Also, research on attrition-related stigma may apply to studies of Caucasian student veterans and student veterans of color.

Lastly, there is a possible clash between the perspectives of student veterans with disabilities and VRCs, and this notion could be further explored. Both physical and

psychological service-connected disabilities should be examined equitably (Ackerman et al., 2009; Barry et al., 2014). Again, the current literature is dominated by the first-hand college experiences of student veterans, mostly those with disabilities. Most literature discussed predominantly psychological injuries, and it is equally important to consider those who acquired physical injuries.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, a limited number of VRC staff members were included in the sample. Data are limited to 15 participants, and its measures are limited, as it relied on participants' self-report. As such, although interviews may provide descriptions of participants' experiences, self-reported data may be subject to exaggeration, understatement, or personal feelings at the time of the interview.

Second, data collection was limited to four colleges in Orange County, California, and the findings are subjected to limited transferability to VRC on college campuses nationwide. Another limitation was the researcher's positionality and possible bias toward the student veteran population. As a US Army veteran, high respect for military veterans may lead to more positive bias and advocacy. Furthermore, the institution's strong military heritage influenced the participants' experiences at the interview site.

Fourth, the data also comes from those who volunteered for the study, meaning that more financially and time-constrained VRC offices may not have had the opportunity to participate. Non-response bias is likely to come from campuses that offer little to no specific services for student veterans (Vacchi & Berger, 2013). In that context, other institutions outside of California may not have a similar culture or access to community support resources. Moreover, not all branches of the military forces were represented in this study. Each military branch has unique

branch cultures, experiences, and needs (Fullerton, 2019), which calls for a need to explore based on the branch of service.

Finally, a longitudinal approach would have provided a more in-depth understanding of the influence of the VRC on other longstanding transition issues student veterans may have experienced. They may include: maintaining relationships with non-veteran peers, integrating with military-affiliated students/dependents, and transitioning into the civilian workforce.

Conclusion

Every student is an individual, whether they are veteran or non-veteran. Meeting each student's educational needs presents challenges at every level, and there is no panacea for meeting every student's needs. Thus, higher education institutions cannot assume that all student veterans need the same support, hence, totalizing their experiences. Recognizing that veterans' identities are context-sensitive requires careful attention to unique cultural challenges and strategies for resilience. Student veterans constitute a most valued constituency as non-traditional students because of their discipline, motivation, confidence, initiative, and maturity. However, there is also an indelible mark on their lives from their military experiences. Such marks make those students a socially underrepresented population.

Student veteran transition is not a nascent concept in US higher education. Nonetheless, there is no such thing as *traditional separation* from the military. Institutional efforts must be aligned with overcoming specific transitional barriers for student veterans. Given what we have learned about this barrier, there is a need to engage in meaningful conversations inclusive to every stakeholder, not just limited to the triad (students, faculties, and administrators). Improving student satisfaction, retention, graduation rates, and, most of all, veterans' feeling more in control of their transition may not depend solely on the single program or service but on how the array of

programs communicate. It is vital to understand how student veterans' roles, relationships, and assumptions have changed from their military experiences through the lenses of service providers because student veterans are not a homogeneous group.

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Appendix A

California Community Colleges Veterans Resource Center Funding Fiscal Year 2017-18

College	2017-18 Allocation
Allan Hancock College	\$43,686
American River College	\$110,510
Antelope Valley College	\$52,365
Bakersfield College	\$62,818
Barstow College	\$19,327
Berkeley City College	\$21,380
Butte College	\$56,285
Cabrillo College	\$23,807
Cañada College	\$22,407
Cerritos College	\$58,805
Cerro Coso Community College	\$25,207
Chabot College	\$43,966
Chaffey College	\$49,939
Citrus College	\$52,832
City College of San Francisco	\$0
Clovis Community College	\$23,247
Coastline Community College	\$58,992
College of Alameda	\$17,554
College of Marin	\$12,794
College of San Mateo	\$60,298
College of the Canyons	\$67,391
College of the Desert	\$44,432
College of the Redwoods	\$35,566
College of the Sequoias	\$40,606
College of the Siskiyous	\$12,514
Columbia College	\$22,313
Compton College	\$0
Contra Costa College	\$21,100
Copper Mountain College	\$18,767
Cosumnes River College	\$47,699
Crafton Hills College	\$18,767
Cuesta College	\$26,793
Cuyamaca College	\$62,538
Cypress College	\$56,472
De Anza College	\$0

Diablo Valley College	\$64,218
East Los Angeles College	\$46,766
El Camino College	\$57,872
Evergreen Valley College	\$22,033
Feather River College	\$10,741
Folsom Lake College	\$48,446
Foothill College	\$24,647
Fresno City College	\$66,925
Fullerton College	\$68,885
Gavilan College	\$27,633
Glendale Community College	\$21,753
Golden West College	\$32,953
Grossmont College	\$126,656
Hartnell College	\$22,407
Imperial Valley College	\$23,527
Irvine Valley College	\$50,965
Lake Tahoe Community College	\$11,861
Laney College	\$37,433
Las Positas College	\$64,032
Lassen College	\$0
Long Beach City College	\$74,858
Los Angeles City College	\$48,352
Los Angeles Harbor College	\$21,847
Los Angeles Mission College	\$19,327
Los Angeles Pierce College	\$49,286
Los Angeles Southwest College	\$20,447
Los Angeles Trade-Tech College	\$41,353
Los Angeles Valley College	\$40,233
Los Medanos College	\$43,686
Mendocino College	\$16,714
Merced College	\$40,793
Merritt College	\$19,047
MiraCosta College	\$107,523
Mission College	\$18,674
Modesto College	\$45,552
Monterey Peninsula College	\$41,353
Moorpark College	\$54,792
Moreno Valley College	\$47,606
Mt. San Antonio College	\$85,031
Mt. San Jacinto College	\$107,336
Napa Valley College	\$23,527
Norco College	\$41,259
Ohlone college	\$21,753

Orange Coast College	\$65,152
Oxnard College	\$40,326
Palo Verde College	\$10,181
Palomar College	\$159,601
Pasadena City College	\$50,965
Porterville College	\$25,020
Reedley College	\$42,566
Rio Hondo College	\$45,926
Riverside Community College	\$61,698
Sacramento City College	\$77,658
Saddleback College	\$79,898
San Bernardino Valley College	\$55,072
San Diego City College	\$102,763
San Diego Mesa College	\$140,468
San Diego Miramar College	\$0
San Joaquin Delta College	\$46,299
San Jose City College	\$0
Santa Ana College	\$55,819
Santa Barbara City College	\$27,540
Santa Monica College	\$63,285
Santa Rosa Junior College	\$55,632
Santiago Canyon College	\$21,380
Shasta College	\$49,379
Sierra College	\$79,058
Skyline College	\$44,526
Solano Community College	\$59,365
Southwestern College	\$117,789
Taft College	\$13,260
Ventura College	\$79,618
Victor Valley College	\$58,898
West Hills College Coalinga	\$0
West Hills College Lemoore	\$0
West Los Angeles College	\$40,793
West Valley College	\$18,580
Woodland Community College	\$18,954
Yuba College	\$41,259
Total Amount	\$5,000,007

Appendix B

Note. Theme 1: Assets and Liabilities
Theme 2: Social Relationships
Theme 3: Academic Interactions
Theme 4: Institutional Structure
Theme 5: Support Services

Literature Review: Student Veterans' Transition Experiences in Higher Education

REFERENCE	SUBJECTS		FINDINGS	Themes				
Author(s), Year	Study Type	Sample	Summary	1	2	3	4	5
DiRamio et al., 2008	Qualitative Interview	25 Students	Academic advising is a crucial piece of a holistic approach for serving student-veterans; such arrangement was not achieved at the study site, and the financial aid office was the only resource gateway for participants. The study concluded that participants did not express the desire for unusual accommodations (or special status)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ackerman et al., 2009	Qualitative Interview	25 Students	Student veterans are a student population with special needs and require support from both policymakers and program provider	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bauman, 2009	Qualitative Interview	24 Students	Participants indicated how little they utilized the veteran resources center on campus upon their return, and two participants reported contemplating suicide due to mental health issues.	✓		✓	✓	✓
Rumann & Hamrick, 2010	Qualitative Interview	6 Students	Participants actively engaged in the meaning-making process and also selectively filtered external influences to embody multiple social identities.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jones, 2013	Qualitative Interview	3 Students	There is a constant dynamic tension while student veterans recreate their identities during the transition; such tension must be resolved in order to achieve a successful transition.	✓	✓		✓	✓
Schiavone & Gentry, 2014	Qualitative Interview	6 Students	Both assets and liabilities from the military service impacted participants in terms of financial, physical, emotional, psychological, and social.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Naphan & Elliott, 2015	Qualitative Interview	11 Students	Higher education institutions must implement necessary changes to facilitate military veterans’ smooth and successful transition into students.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blaauw-Hara, 2016	Qualitative Interview	6 Students	In order for student veterans’ sense of self-efficacy to translate to college success, colleges should adhere to the habit of clarifying (explicitly spelling out) the instruction for the course curriculum in college.	✓		✓	✓	✓
Boettcher et al., 2017	Qualitative Interview	4 Students	Participants shared experiences that highlight their definition of self through others and approval seeking in relationships.		✓	✓	✓	

Mendez et al., 2018	Qualitative Interview	54 Students	Participants' experiences with the Thriving Transition Cycle (TSC) Program were overwhelmingly positive, but only one course cannot serve as the ultimate retention resolution.	✓	✓	✓	
Elliott et al., 2011	Quantitative Survey	104 Students	Exposure to combat and symptoms of PTSD were positively correlated, and they were both positively correlated with more alienation on campus.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Persky & Oliver, 2011	Quantitative Survey	60 Students	The key elements in creating a veteran friendly campus are sincerity, affirmation, and helpfulness contribute to the validation of students.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Koenig et al., 2014	Qualitative Interview	31 Students	Student veterans poor transition experiences result from underlying tension (stemming from the sociocultural differences) between military and civilian identities via reverse culture shock.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Elliott, 2015	Quantitative Survey	626 Students	Having positive attitudes about participants' previous military service predicted better mental health and less combat related issues.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ghosh & Fouad, 2016	Quantitative Survey	100 Students	The constructs of career adaptability and engagement (including control, concern, confidence, and curiosity) would predict the readiness aspect of career transitions for student veterans.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cate et al., 2017	Quantitative Secondary Data Analysis	853,111 Student Records	The post-secondary completion records (with Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits usage) were found for a rate of 53.6 percent, and the attrition rate for this subset were 8.6 percent.			✓	✓
Ghosh et al., 2019	Quantitative Survey	134 Students	There were positive correlations between satisfaction with life, career transition readiness and career adaptability; however, it did not predict academic satisfaction.				✓
Olsen et al., 2014	Mixed Method	10 Students	There is a need to better understand resources specifically designed for student veterans.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vance & Miller, 2009	Quantitative Survey	237 Staffs	Only 33% of the respondents expressed comfort with knowledge of serving veterans with disabilities, thus, institutions should establish a point of contact, and a "safe" place for veterans to congregate.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barnard-Brak et al., 2011	Quantitative Survey	596 Faculties	Faculty members' negative feelings toward the military are negatively associated with their teaching efficacy toward veteran students. Conversely, if they were able to put those negative feelings aside (and respect the service of veterans), they were they were more likely to exhibit self-efficacy.	✓		✓	
Gordon et al., 2016a	Quantitative Survey	557 Faculties	faculty members' educational attainment and teaching title might influence their level of awareness toward the student veterans transition.	✓		✓	✓

Gordon et al., 2016b	Quantitative Survey	640 Staffs	There is a need for awareness programs for staff members who are assisting student-veterans during their transition	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cook et al., 2009	Quantitative Survey	723 Institutions	Creating special programs for student veterans is not always necessary; instead, they suggest that institutions should make their own determinations via close consultation with their veteran students.	✓		✓	✓	✓
Livingston et al., 2011	Qualitative Interview	15 Students & 2 Staffs	Student veterans have become a camouflaged population, intentionally (due to their reluctant to seek support) and inadvertently (due to the nature of their transition as non-traditional student); thus, having an accurate count of veterans may facilitate better services to this subculture.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
McBain et al., 2012	Quantitative Survey	690 Institutions	The most common challenges reported by participants were: finances, retention/degree completion, and social acculturation to campus	✓		✓	✓	✓
Griffin & Gilbert, 2014	Qualitative Interview	28 Students & 72 Staffs	The institutional restructuring is required for specific campus policies and procedures in regards to veteran students' benefits	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lim et al., 2018	Qualitative Interview	20 Students & 9 Faculies and Staffs	Faculties expected independent, flexible, proactive, problem-solving, and help-seeking behaviors from students. Conversely, student veterans interpreted that faculties did not provide clear, effective guidelines, reflecting faculties' vague instruction as they did not care about student veterans on campus.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Dissertation Title: Student Veterans' Transition Experiences in Higher Education

Doctoral Candidate: Darl Park

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Scott Danforth

Chapman University - One University Drive, Orange CA 92866

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study was to describe and understand the lived experience of staff members in higher education as they interact with student veterans who transitioned from active-duty service members to college students.

PROCEDURES

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in (1) one-on-one interview. You will be asked about your role as supporting staff in the college and how you implement the program at your position/campus.
- Interview protocol was developed prior to the study.
- The duration of this interview is expected to last between 30 and 60 minutes.
- The interview will be audio-recorded upon your permission.
- I will restate your statement to ensure the accuracy of what I captured from your response.

During this process, you may add, remove, and clarify any points made in the interview.

- You may choose to withdraw from this study at any point without repercussion.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The investigator will make every attempt to reduce confidentiality risks by:

- Transcriptionist will sign a confidentiality form.
- Digital and hard copy interview information will be kept locked in a filing cabinet at my private residence and/or in my personal (password protected) desktop computer.
- Pseudonym will be used throughout the study.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

- Please be mindful that, during the interview, you may experience emotional discomfort directly related to your thoughts, reflection, frustration, and challenging times.
- The participant will not directly benefit from participation; however, your insight about your experiences implementing campus support services for student veterans may influence the opportunity to continue (or expand) the support level (locally and statewide).

You may contact the Institution Review Board (IRB) at Chapman University at **irb@chapman.edu** or calling **(714) 628-2833** if you have questions about your rights as a research participant.

By signing this document, you consent that all information about the study has been explained to you, and you voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Name of Subject (Printed)

Signature

Date

Appendix D: Recruitment Letter

CA College
Program Staff/Coordinator/Administrator/Certifying Official
1234 Street City, State, Zip

Dear valued colleague,

Your experience and commitment to providing support services to student veterans within California community college are extremely valuable. I am sending you this email to request your participation in my dissertation study. The purpose of this study was to describe and understand the lived experience of staff members in higher education as they interact with student veterans who transitioned from active-duty service members to college students.

In addition to being a doctoral candidate at Chapman University, I am a Senior Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (SVRC) at the California State Department of Rehabilitation (CA DOR). As I have been truly blessed to reach my 10th year in this position, providing services to Californians with disabilities, I am sure we can also conduct a productive discussion on our possible mutual clients/recipients, not just limited to my inquiry.

I am seeking my inquiry using qualitative research to gain an understanding of how administrators, faculty/staff, and student veterans themselves reach a better understanding of the contemporary phenomenon of the support services for student veterans in higher education at California community colleges.

I plan to conduct in-person or telephonic interviews beginning February of 2022, and I anticipate the interview will take approximately 30 and 60 minutes.

I respect the demands of your time, so I would be honored if you could make time for an interview. I project that your participation in the study would contribute to current and future military and veteran student success. For that matter, I can arrange a time that is most convenient for you, and the interview may be conducted on your campus as well.

Thank you for your time and support in advance. I plan to follow up this letter with a phone call to your office.

I look forward to being able to speak with you and engage your participation in this inquiry.

Sincerely,

Darl Park, MS CRC.
Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor
Department of Rehabilitation
222 S. Harbor Blvd., Suite 300
Anaheim, CA 92805
714 687 4888

Appendix E: Thank You Letter

CA College
Program Staff/Coordinator/Administrator/Certifying Official
1234 Street City, State, Zip

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in my study. I truly appreciate your time to discuss the welfare/success of student veterans.

Attached is a copy of the general questions for our interview. Please let me know if you prefer in-person or telephonic interviews and your most preferred date/time for the interview.

Again, I respect the demands on your time, and I will put my best effort into making sure that your participation in the study contributes to current and future military and veteran student success.

Thank you again for your time and support, and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Darl Park, MS CRC.
Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor
Department of Rehabilitation
222 S. Harbor Blvd., Suite 300
Anaheim, CA 92805
714 687 4888

Appendix F: Interview Guide

You may skip questions you prefer not to answer.

Pseudonym: _____

Demographic & Rapport Questionnaire

- Sex/Gender:
- Age:
- Race/Ethnicity:
- Tell me a little about where you are from (e.g., home state or country, if outside of US)

What is your military status (if any)?

- When/Why did you decide to enlist?
- What branch of the military did you serve? What was your length of service, and was your rank? Have you ever been deployed or served combat duty?
- Are you still affiliated with the military in some capacity? If so, could you provide details?

Please describe your previous college experiences (if any).

- Were you a student veteran?
- What were your goals for attending college? Do you (or did you) feel like you belong in college? Do you (or did you) have any particular concerns about your likelihood of success?
- Do you consider that you experienced college differently than most other students because of your military service; if so, why/in what ways?

Professional Background Questions

Tell me a little about how you got involved working in higher education? What is your current title? How long have you been on this campus?

- Tell me about your duties as it relates to your job title? What has helped you connect with student veterans?
- Is your role as support staff: Interim or Permanent? Full-time or Part-time?
- In your current role, who do you report to?
- How often do you get involved working with student veterans? What percentage of time do you dedicate toward coordinating programs/services for student veterans not otherwise available through your standard services for all other students with disabilities?
- ***Does your office intake process request veteran status information?***

Basically, I want to ask you what you think is necessary to prepare your campus better to serve student veterans.

- How would you assess your offices' level of preparedness in effectively serving student veterans?
- What campus services or support systems that are NOT yet available would help student veterans?

- Have you observed, or are you aware of, any distinctions within student veterans' specific characteristics in terms of access/needs regarding services and/or accommodations?
- Do you know anyone who is also a veteran currently employed at your campus?
- Which support services/programs on campus have you referred to student veterans? And why did you choose those specific support services?

Institutional Questions

- Where do you receive the funding support from the most?
- Who do you think are the key players who can implement/sustain veteran services on the campus?
 - Was there any politics you have encountered that inhibited your ability to support student veterans?
 - Was there any politics you have encountered that facilitated your ability to support student veterans?
- Thinking back to when you started your position, were there any obstacles that prevented you from providing services to student veterans? Has anything (or anyone) helped/hindered you?

Student Support Services

- How often does your program/service provide counseling to assist students who are combat veterans with disabilities?
- Does your health/counseling center offer any of the following?
 - Access to a psychiatrist
 - Coordination and referral to off-campus support services
 - Other (please specify below)
- What communication methods does your campus employ to inform currently enrolled service members, veterans, and their families about existing programs and services designed specifically for them?
- Does your campus engage in admissions or recruitment efforts specifically designed to attract service members and/or veteran students? What outreach methods to potential students does your office employ?

Finally, if you could have all controls to the current support systems, what would you envision?

Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences that I have not asked?

Do you have any questions for me?

Do you know someone who could contribute to this current study?

The purposes of these questions were designed to gain insight (or elicit authentic accounts about) to the lived experiences of support service providers of student veterans. Thank you for your great responses to difficult questions.