The Lived Experiences of Veteran and Military Students in the Context of a “Military Friendly” Institution: A Phenomenological Case Study

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THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF VETERAN AND MILITARY STUDENTS
IN THE CONTEXT OF A “MILITARY FRIENDLY” INSTITUTION:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY

by

Gail Y. Rouscher

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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There have been many studies of military and veteran students attending a higher education institution after a period of time on active duty. The studies on this population can be divided into four categories: (a) stopping out (Belch, 2004; Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2007; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Schnoebelen, 2013), (b) financial (Winston, 2010), (c) enrollment, (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010) and (d) programming (APSCU, 2013; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley & Strong, 2009; Mangan, 2009). There is limited research on completion rates for veteran and military students who have the opportunity to use specific veteran and military services and attend a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. What has yet to be explored or revealed is what the veteran and military students are experiencing and what they are deriving from the initiatives to provide them with specific support at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. The purpose of this phenomenological bounded case study is to describe and interpret how these specific undergraduate students make meaning of their lived experiences at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution in the Midwest. In particular, this study will tease out the essence of the veteran and military students’ institutional experiences which enabled or slowed their successful degree completion. The research questions were designed to capture the essence of the
lived experience of the military and veteran student at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution as they progressed to completion.

The participants of this study were recruited using criterion and purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013). Data was gathered using open-ended questions during face-to-face interviews with military and veteran students. Eight participants were interviewed who had applied for graduation or graduated from the institution within the past year. Then, three key informants were interviewed who were instrumental in the development and continued oversight of the military and veteran services at the institution. Finally, documents were collected and reviewed that relate to the evolution and function of the military and veteran program at the institution.

Major findings of the study indicate that the needs of the military and veteran students were simple: provide a detailed plan for their courses and they will follow that, tell them who they need to work with to complete the necessary paperwork for funding and financial challenges and they will work through that individual and lastly, the military and veteran students have developed their own system of coping and have not relied on the support programs put in place for this population at the institution. Based on the information gathered from all sources, I believe the institution is meeting the needs of the military and veteran students.

This study was conducted through the lenses of the Adult Learner Theory, Andragogy Theory and Transition Theory. Further research is recommended on the impact of distance learning for this population, composition of this population of learners with respect to gender, race/ethnicity, parents and single parents, and marital status.
DEDICATION

To my husband, John, who was by my side and provided unwavering support as I put in the seemingly endless hours in front of the computer, while doing my best to balance motherhood, marriage, education, and my career. Without your love and understanding, this would not have been possible. To my boys, Ian and Brandon, it is for you that I continued this journey. It was my hope to show you that no matter what obstacles may be placed in your way, perseverance and hard work will prevail. Your steadfast support and encouragement throughout this endeavor provided the motivation for me to continue, even when things were difficult. To my biggest cheerleader my mother, Isabel, who instilled in me a strong work ethic, determination, and commitment. Your endless support has always been treasured. And finally, to my dear friend, Traci, who continued to calm me when feeling overwhelmed, pushed me when I needed a little push, and always reminded me that I work best under pressure.
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To Dr. Whitehurst, my mentor, colleague, and dissertation committee member, I thank you for your willingness to review my work, not only on the dissertation, but throughout those courses where I was challenged along the way. For continuing to push me in the direction that I needed to go in order to succeed, encouraging my emphasis for research, and understanding my focus early on, I thank you.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Background

Since 1944, veteran and military students have had the opportunity to use some version of the GI Bill for higher education (“History and Timeline,” n.d.). The versions of the GI Bill have evolved over time. The first GI Bill was established as a way to give back to those who had stepped out of school to serve the country. The number of veteran and military servicemembers who are eligible for the GI Bill has continued to increase, and the programs which include extra funding for this population have grown (“History and Timeline,” n.d.; The Post-9/11 GI Bill Yellow Ribbon Program, 2010). There are veteran and military students who do not complete their certificate or degree. In 1976, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), performed a study for the purpose of examining the educational completion rates of veterans who had served during the Vietnam Era (“Completion Rates for Education,” 1976). The study looked at the completion rates of these veterans who had trained under the GI Bill prior to 1972. The VA has provided direction to veteran and military students and higher education institutions as to how this population would best be served. Still for this population of learners to successfully complete a higher education degree, there must be collaboration between all stakeholders (Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, & Sulak, 2011; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Olson, 1973; Sander, 2014).

More recently, a study by the Student Veterans of America (SVA) examined the completion rates of veterans within higher education. The “Million Records Project” sought to
examine the completion rates of veterans with the intent of determining the best practices and procedures to promote the best outcome for student success within this population (Cate, 2014). The Million Records Project specifically narrowed in on those veterans who used the more recent versions of the GI Bill — The Montgomery GI Bill or the Post 9/11 GI Bill between 2002 and 2010 (Cate, 2014, p. iv). In addition to the monetary component, there are veteran and military specific programs designed to assist in the completion of educational programs. The veteran and military student should be informed of what programs are available, the assistance institutions can provide, and the benefit to the student. These programs are designed for the success and degree completion of the veteran and military student.

Many of the veteran and military students currently enrolled in higher education institutions have experienced the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The War on Terror (WOT) has been unlike the war witnessed by veterans who served in Vietnam, Korea, or World War II. More than 2.6 million troops have served in the WOT (“After the Wars,” 2014). These troops are returning to an environment where it is very difficult to obtain a good paying job based on their military experience and training. The difficulty is leading them to use the GI Bill and veteran and military student specific programs that they have access to, in order to work toward a degree in the hopes of obtaining a well-paying job.

**Problem Statement**

The GI Bill has transformed since its inception in 1944, and the War on Terror has ignited an increase in veteran participation. Colleges and universities have struggled to design effective programs which assist the veteran and military student with degree completion. The veteran and military students have special needs and unique challenges when seeking to achieve degree completion which the typical student does not. The veteran and military students entitled
to use the GI Bill have experienced life in ways unfamiliar to a traditional high school to college first year student.

The first GI Bill, signed into law in June of 1944, allowed 7.8 million World War II veterans to participate in education or training programs before its conclusion July 25, 1956 (“History and Timeline,” n.d.). The version of the GI Bill approved August 1, 2009, known as the Post 9/11 – GI Bill, allows any veteran with active duty service on or after September 11, 2001, to receive educational benefits. Documentation indicated there were 945,052 students enrolled during FY 2012 (Kirkwood, 2014, para. 5). According to the study on Services and Support Programs for Military Service Members and Veterans at Postsecondary Institutions, 2012-13, by Queen and Lewis (2014), the number of military servicemembers, veterans, and dependents who were enrolled in public four-year institutions was 265,300.

The term “Veteran Friendly” or “Military Friendly” was coined after the Post 9/11-GI Bill, and is intended to indicate which institutions have veteran and military specific programming to ease the transition to student. In a blog by Captain Robert Prah (2014), the terms “Military Friendly” and “Veteran Friendly” are tags which are voted and advertised most often through veteran related magazines or newspapers. A veteran or military student attending institutions has the opportunity to answer survey questions which indicate the ranking for such periodicals as the Military Times Edge “Best for Vets Colleges,” G.I. Jobs Magazine’s “Military Friendly Schools,” U.S. Veterans Magazine’s “Best of the Best” and Military Advanced Education’s “Military Friendly Colleges & Universities” and others, which function as catchy recruiting tools for many institutions around the world. Minnis (2014) defined the meaning of a “Veteran Friendly” institution as “going beyond the ‘friendly’ label and fostering an institutional culture which is supportive, appreciative, respectful, embracing, and inclusive of the veterans it
educates” (para. 4). Studies have shown veterans have a dropout rate of 88% within the first year at higher education institutions (Wood, 2012). Minnis indicated being “Veteran Friendly” includes steps which assist in building a climate at the institution that is geared toward the support of veterans’ holistic success in higher education and includes engaging veterans in their education and growth towards a future career in the civilian world. What meaning do veteran and military students make of their experience at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution?

A “Military Friendly” institution can be described very closely to that of a “Veteran Friendly” school (Prah, 2014). According to Prah, the institution, and others, will “know that you are Military Friendly if you do the ‘right thing’ and provide the best education and services to help your Veterans and Servicemembers succeed while enrolled and after graduation” (para. 7). The 2015 list of “Military Friendly Schools” contained more than 1,600 schools in higher education. The 2015 MilitaryTimes results for the “Best for Vets: Colleges 2015 list was the result of comparing ‘not only schools’ survey responses, but also data compiled by the U.S. Education Department, including academic success measures” (Altman, 2015, para. 6). Using the multiple rankings and surveys, the list of the best of the best, or the “Top 100” are decided.

Attending a “Veteran Friendly” or “Military Friendly” institution is important for the veteran or servicemember. The ability to know that the institution has the capacity to meet the needs of this unique population of learners, both in the classroom and throughout the university is paramount for the student. The recent designation for an institution which supports the veteran and military student has been “Military Friendly” (Brown & Gross, 2011), which indicates the institution has met specific criteria to address the unique needs of the veteran and military student population. As veteran and military students increase in number, there are few institutions who have not received this designation or title. Further inquiry into the “Military
Friendly” designation indicates there are those colleges and universities which rank as “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institutions. Those institutions are designated as such by a review and ranking comprised of input from the veteran and military students on a yearly basis. The ranking indicates that the institution is meeting the needs of the veteran and military student based on their personal experience at the institution.

Becoming a “Military Friendly” institution requires specific criteria be met in order to receive that honor. Receiving the designation of “Military Friendly” speaks to the commitment of the institution towards the student-centered practices and being service-oriented. These criteria are not rated by students, but by the institution itself reporting the services they provide. The key criteria used to define a “Military Friendly” institution provided by Brown and Gross (2011) include the following:

- Offering priority registration for military students
- Simplified or expedited application process
- Flexible enrollment deadlines
- Academic and counseling services targeted to military students
- Special Web pages for returning military students
- Support groups
- Transfer credit policies that minimize loss of credit and avoid duplication of coursework
- Limited academic residency requirement of 25% of undergraduate degree programs on campus and 30% for fully online programs
- Acceptance of ACE credit recommendations for learning experiences in the armed forces
• Awarding of credit for college level learning validated through testing, Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Services exams, and Excelsior College Testing
• Deferred tuition payment plans
• Veterans lounges and centers
• Research focus on meeting the needs of military students

As a “Military Friendly” institution, there are many programs to help ease the transition from combat to classroom and support the military and veteran student. The programs are there to assist this unique population of learners feel a sense of community and belonging in a new environment and help them to become successful in order to reach degree completion.

The “8 Keys to Veterans’ Success” are specific steps outlined for postsecondary institutions which are meant to assist veterans and servicemembers in their transition to higher education and completing their college degrees. These keys are a voluntary initiative through the Department of Education, Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense. The “8 Keys to Success” include the following which are similar to those initiatives considered for a “Military Friendly” institution (“8 Keys to Veterans’ Success Sites,” n.d.):

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans.
2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
4. Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space.
5. Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.

6. Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention and degree completion.

7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.

8. Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.

As of November 2015, there were 1,947 higher education institutions committed to the 8 Keys (“8 Keys,” n.d.).

Studies on this population can be divided into at least four categories within the literature discussing military and veteran students, which this researcher explored: (a) stopping out (Belch, 2004; Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2007; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Schnoebelen, 2013); (b) financial (Winston, 2010); (c) enrollment (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010); and (d) programming (Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities [APSCU], 2013; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009; Mangan, 2009).

Studies which examined the idea of “stopping out” are limited. Most often the theme of “stopping out” has emerged through dialogue with the participants and then becomes a sub-theme throughout the study. “Stopping Out” has not been a central phenomenon studied. In this context, “stopping out” is defined as a period of time which veteran and military students may have to cease attendance due to being recalled to active duty, serving their yearly active duty period, or for other reasons related to military service. These students have the intention of returning to the classroom and this is not the same as those students who drop out or stop out of a
program and do not return. As suggested by multiple researchers (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008), those students who experience “stopping out” experience a fuller connection and easier return if the institution maintains a connection with them while deployed.

As many veteran and military students have converged on college campuses since the enactment of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, some institutions have seen an increase upwards of 65% in students using the GI Bill (APSCU, 2013; Brown & Gross, 2011; Eckstein, 2009; Kirkwood, 2014; Moon & Schma, 2011). Studies which have examined the financial challenges to the veteran and military student have a common theme: the red tape is difficult to navigate and one must ask questions and seek responses repeatedly in order to successfully traverse the process. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL] (2014), “Between 2000 and 2012, more than 900,000 veterans and service members received educational benefits through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs” (para. 3).

Previous topics researchers have addressed include the enrollment of veteran and military students from differing perspectives such as women veterans, veterans who have been in combat, members who have enrolled while on active duty, and credit provided for military training and experience. In addition, studies on the numbers of military and veteran students as they compare to the “traditional” student have also been completed (NCSL, 2014; Ross-Gordon, 2011). The veteran and military student as a subpopulation of learners are unique in the way that their experience and training includes transferrable credit (Brown & Gross, 2011; Olson, 1973; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Zinger & Cohen, 2010).

Studies which address programming specific to the veteran and military student are vast and address the variation of programs set up at different institutions for the veteran and military
student. Such studies agree that this particularly population of learners has unique needs not found in the traditional student (Ackerman et al., 2009; Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Bonar & Domenici, 2011; DiRamio et al., 2008; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Herrmann, 2008; Lokken et al., 2009; Queen & Lewis, 2014; Sander, 2012b). According to Sander (2012a), initial findings of the Operation College Promise and the Pat Tillman Foundation pilot study of veterans’ academic performance indicated that veterans tend to outperform their non-veteran peers (p. 2). A study released in 2014 by the Student Veterans of America was the first comprehensive study of nearly one million veterans who had pursued post-secondary education, while using either the Montgomery GI Bill or Post 9/11 – GI Bill. The study examined completion rates, time to completion, level of education and the degree fields which were pursued (Cate, 2014, p. iv).

There is limited research on completion rates for veteran and military students who have the opportunity to use specific veteran and military services and attend a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. What is not known is how veterans and military students make sense of their experience with specific veteran and military services at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution in the completion of their programs. Prior to April 2012, institutions were not required to track the veteran and military students at their institution (Sander, 2012). Capturing veteran and military student attendance at institutions was solely up to the institution. Before 2012, veteran retention and completion had not been followed by all colleges and universities. It was up to the individual institution to track student demographics, including veteran status, and it was not captured conclusively at all institutions. The Million Records Project provided comprehensive information with regard to completion rates for this population of learners.
Programs have been developed within the higher education system to contribute to veteran and military student success. In order to serve this unique population, government has set the criteria and standards for being “Military Friendly” or “Veteran Friendly.”

Studies have not indicated or revealed what the veteran and military students are experiencing and what they are deriving from these initiatives meant to provide them with specific support at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. The veteran and military students have been studied multiple times for the purpose of understanding their reasons for enrolling (APSCU, 2013; Field, Hebel & Smallwood, 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) and the problems or issues with transitioning into a college or university setting (APSCU, 2013; Brown & Gross, 2011; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Church, 2009; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Ford et al., 2009; Mangan, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Further study is needed, however, to better understand how veterans experience and derive benefit from the specific programs developed and designed for this population at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. Additionally, it is not clear how the specific programs assist or hinder degree completion or when, how or why they are used by the veteran and military students.

Theoretical Perspective: Purpose Statement and Research Question

The Purpose Statement

The focus of this study is the phenomenon of successful undergraduate degree completion among active duty and veteran military personnel, post 9/11, who served either as support personnel or engaged personnel during military conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, or other conflicts, at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” higher education. The purpose of this phenomenological bounded case study is to describe and interpret how these specific undergraduate students make meaning of their experiences at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly”
institution in the Midwest. In particular, this study will tease out the essence of the veteran and military students’ institutional experiences which enabled or slowed their successful degree completion. Additionally, this study seeks to understand whether veterans at a “Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution recognize and utilize the services designed for them by the institution.

The Research Question

The following question and sub questions guide the study: How do post 9/11 active duty and veteran military personnel who served either as support personnel or engaged personnel during military conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, or other conflicts, successfully navigate the transition to becoming undergraduate students at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” higher education institution and persist to completion of their degree?

Sub Questions:

1. How do the active duty and veteran military students (as described above) describe their experiences transitioning from active military duty to becoming university students?

2. How do they describe their acclimation to higher education and account for their progress to completion?

3. What particular challenges did they encounter on the path to completion and what campus experiences, programs, or services, if any, did they utilize to overcome those challenges?

4. How was the program designed, shaped, and implemented to support the veteran and military student?
5. How do the veteran and military students’ experiences intersect with programs and services offered by the institution?

**Methods Overview**

I utilize a phenomenological case study to understand the lived experiences of the veteran and military students who have applied for graduation at a Midwest university. Interviews were conducted with veteran and military students who have applied for graduation at one Midwestern university. Participants were selected through criterion sampling and purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013). Using both the criterion and purposeful sampling approaches ensured each participant had served in the military during a time of conflict post 9/11, applied for graduation, thus completed degree, and experienced the same phenomenon.

Using participants, who are veteran or military students and have experienced either active duty or reserve duty through the military post 9/11, allows for a data rich sample. Creswell indicated there is a narrow range for sampling strategies for phenomenological studies. Creswell (2013) states, “It is essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied” (p. 155). Purposeful sampling allows me to conduct a credible study when the initial pool of potential sample participants could be quite large (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Using 6 to 10 initial participants allows for a “detailed interpretative account of the cases included” (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 56). As Smith and Osborn indicated, the small sample allows for sufficient in-depth engagement in each individual interview, but also allows for “detailed examination of similarity and difference, convergence and divergence” (p. 57). Polkinghorne (as cited in Creswell, 2013) states, “interview from 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the same phenomenon” (p. 81). Creswell posits, “For a phenomenological study, the process of
collecting information involves primarily in-depth interviews with as many as 10 individuals” (p. 161). Interviews were continued until saturation was reached within this pool of participants.

I developed an interview guide for veteran and military students which includes questions which tease out the meaning made by the veteran and military student experience at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” university. As a veteran student myself, any approach to these interviews required bracketing. As the researcher, it is necessary to set aside my personal military experiences in order to not influence the views of sample participants.

In addition to interviewing the military and veteran students, I interviewed those who were instrumental in forming the military and veteran programming at the university and those directly involved in continuing the oversight. Through these interviews, I discover how those involved envisioned the participation of military and veteran students within the university setting, how the government expectations shaped their vision and how the process has evolved.

**Conceptual Framework and Explanation**

The theories I use are the Adult Learner Theory and Transition Theory. I use these theories to describe the impetus for this group of individuals to complete their education. Cross’s (1981) Characteristics of Adult Learners and Knowles’ (1979, as cited in Smith, 2002) Andragogy theories (defined as the art and science of helping adults learn) provide the framework for the adult learners. Examining the characteristics for Adult Learners and linking them to the veteran and military student at a Midwest “Military Friendly” institution provide insight into how the program assists or hinders the veteran and military student in reaching their goal of degree completion.

When examining the Adult Learner Theory and Transition Theory, it is clear that they are anchored together. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) posit that “discussing adult
learners in educational institutions, our conceptual framework is anchored in two major areas: adult learners and educational environments” (p. 13). Schlossberg et al. discuss the diverse group of adult learners and what they found to be common in the group. Looking closely, they found that “when an adult thinks about returning to school, does so, and then leaves, he or she is in transition” (p. 13). Transitions, such as career change, that prompt a return to the educational setting are then inherent in the educational process.

In Ross-Gordon’s (2011) research on adult learners, she indicates a set of characteristics that have helped to define this population. Some of those characteristics are: (a) entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school, (b) having dependents, (c) being a single parent, (d) being employed full time, (e) being financially independent, (f) attending part time, and (g) not having a high school diploma (para. 2). In a study released in 2014 by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the age distribution of undergraduate students indicated the largest percentage of those students age 30-39 were military or veterans, as well as those aged 40 and older.

Cranton (2006) describes adult learning theory as a “distinctive process” which is often described as voluntary, self-directed, collaborative and participatory (p. 23). Cranton reasons that “many adults have been away from learning experiences for a number of years and have rusty reading, writing, and time management skills which lead them to feel anxious about their ability to succeed” (p. 5). Over time, this particular characteristic may not hold true when defining the adult learner as there has been more shifting of careers and professional development in recent years.

The transition framework helps to determine a learner’s position within the transition process. When looking at the age of the participant, their confidence level or energy level assists
in determining the adult learner’s position within that transition process (Schlossberg et al., 1989). The military or veteran student returning to or beginning the educational process is in a transition from the structured military life to an environment where the structure is based on their own desires, wants, and needs, or those of their family.

There are multiple stages to the transition process. Schlossberg et al. (1989) describe the stages as “moving in, moving through, and moving out” (pp. 16-17). The first stage of any transition is moving in. Any new situations bring common agendas and needs for the adult learner. Once established in the educational setting, the act of balancing all their responsibilities — moving through — their academic requirements and those outside of academia, such as family or work may be the next challenge. Providing support while the learners work toward this balance is often necessary to sustain commitment to their journey. Then comes the “moving out” phase which is when the learner may begin another transition as they wonder “what next” when nearing the end of their educational journey.

The conceptual framework is used to illustrate the interaction between the major areas of study and the desired outcome. This study aims to examine the “why” and “how” behind the meaning for the veteran and military student. The focus is on exploring the experiences of those who have served in the military during a time of conflict post 9/11, are attending a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” higher education institution, and have completed their degree. This study examines the transition from active duty to becoming a university student, the acclimation and progress to completion, challenges encountered along the path, experiences, programs and/or services utilized, and any benefit they feel they have received by attending a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution.
Based on the literature, there are many universities which are “Veteran Friendly” or “Military Friendly” and provide services for the veteran and military student. There are also those which are classified as a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. After reviewing the literature the conceptual framework was developed for this particular study. The major areas examined are specific to the veteran and military student and the challenges this unique population of learners may face on their path to degree completion at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. Those areas are: Stopping out (for military service), Financial, Enrollment (services available for non-traditional students), and Programming or Services (specific to the veteran and military student population).

In reviewing the literature on completion rates for traditional higher education students and veteran and military students, and reasons for non-completion, we have learned a lot at the institutional level. Mangan (2012) examined the rates for degree attainment on a national scale with respect to all students, including those who are considered nontraditional, although this did not include the veteran student. Cate (2014) examined the veteran student and their rates of degree attainment. What has not been discussed is if veterans graduate at a higher rate while at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution than at other higher education institutions. The framework provides a guide as to the specific challenges which may inhibit or advance the likelihood of the veteran or military student completing a baccalaureate degree. The framework also indicates which services, if used, offered by a higher education institution, may provide understanding as to whether the veteran and military student is able to reach completion.

The conceptual framework developed for this study (Figure 1) demonstrates the connection between the veteran and military student, the issues faced by this population, and how using the programming put into place might assist them in reaching completion. Within this
framework there are four categories of veteran and military student specific areas which differ from traditional college students: (a) reasons for stopping out, (b) type and timing of financial assistance, (c) enrollment patterns, and (d) use of programming. There are services that, although put into place, may not be used by all veteran and military students. Through exploring the literature (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Ford et al., 2009; Schnoebelen, 2013) on the experiences of veteran and military students who are successful and reached degree completion, the research may help institutions of higher education better understand the experiences of students who have (a) participated in the veteran and military specific programs, (b) feel a part of the university community through engaging in activities related to their population, and (c) have taken advantage of the financial and enrollment practices put into place for this population. The literature (Alfonso, 2008; Reed, 2013) highlights that those who have not had their military experience properly evaluated either do not complete their program, or take much longer to complete than those students who will gain credits through their service and training.

For this study, veteran and military students have experienced a similar phenomenon, are working toward a comparable goal, and have the same support programs available to them; it is fitting to use the developmental theories of adult learning theory, andragogy, and transition as a framework for this study. For this unique group of learners, it is not their first round of post-secondary education. Many of the veteran and military students have already participated in education which is the equivalent to that of a bachelor’s degree.
The multiple wars and conflicts which our military has been involved in the last decade (and more) have increased the size of our military veteran population significantly. With the introduction of the most current Post-9/11 GI Bill in August 2009, Veterans Affairs anticipated a 20% or more increase in the number of servicemembers enrolling in higher education within two years’ time (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009). As of Fiscal Year 2013, there were 2,316,871 total enlisted military personnel who could potentially be eligible to receive educational benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Title I: Military Personnel, n.d., p. 16). This number does not include the exponential number of veterans and family members to whom portions of the Post-9/11 GI Bill would apply. The Post-9/11 GI Bill has changed how institutions work with the federal government to provide educational benefits and support to

**Summary**

The multiple wars and conflicts which our military has been involved in the last decade (and more) have increased the size of our military veteran population significantly. With the introduction of the most current Post-9/11 GI Bill in August 2009, Veterans Affairs anticipated a 20% or more increase in the number of servicemembers enrolling in higher education within two years’ time (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009). As of Fiscal Year 2013, there were 2,316,871 total enlisted military personnel who could potentially be eligible to receive educational benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Title I: Military Personnel, n.d., p. 16). This number does not include the exponential number of veterans and family members to whom portions of the Post-9/11 GI Bill would apply. The Post-9/11 GI Bill has changed how institutions work with the federal government to provide educational benefits and support to
eligible military and veteran students. In April 2012, it was reported that at least 416,000 veterans were enrolled and taking advantage of educational benefits (Howell, 2012, p. 1). In 2014, the NCSL indicated that there was a 42% increase of beneficiaries of the Post 9/11 GI Bill between 2009 and 2010. How the veteran and military students are served and complete their certificate or degree is an area which has not been researched.

The knowledge gained through this study could assist policy makers in examining the intentions and rationale behind the required “8 Keys,” and what enables degree completion by the veteran and military student, not just the statistical outcome of the policies. With this information, student affairs professionals may be able to better serve this unique population of learners while addressing their needs as students.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

After WWII, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944—later known more commonly as the GI Bill, was instituted as a way to have returning soldiers fill classrooms rather than flood the workforce as there were not sufficient jobs (“History and Timeline,” n.d.). Providing educational benefits to returning servicemembers would delay the onslaught into the workforce, and would prevent a repeat of what was experienced at the end of WWI—returning soldiers were provided a $60 stipend and a train ticket home (“History and Timeline,” n.d.).

The GI Bill has been a fixture for servicemembers since that time. It has changed, evolved, and the benefits have been shaped and reshaped, renamed the Montgomery GI Bill, Post-9/11 GI Bill, adapted with the times, but essentially, the basic purpose is still the same: to assist servicemembers with their education after serving their country. As our country has had many servicemembers enter and depart service, there are many servicemembers potentially eligible to use the GI Bill.

The after effect of over a decade of war and multiple conflicts is a large contingent of veteran and military students seeking a degree, paid for through the GI Bill (Winston, 2010). As of the end of Fiscal Year 2010, there were 2,798,000 total active duty military members who would potentially be eligible to receive educational benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill (U.S. Department of Commerce [DOC], 2012, p. 1). In addition, there were 1,102,863 active reservists and 362,000 National Guard members, most of whom may be entitled to educational benefits.
(DOC, 2012, p. 1). With that in mind, institutions have had to conform to meet the needs of those servicemembers. In response to becoming an institution at which veterans are able to use those funds, they must now be labeled “Military Friendly.”

The definition of a military veteran as “defined by federal law, moral code and military service as ‘any, any, any’ . . . A military veteran is any person who served for any length of time in any military branch of service” (“What Is a Veteran?,” 1973, p. 1). In recent years, it has been the norm for institutions to receive the designation of “Military Friendly” (Brown & Gross, 2011), which indicates their meeting specific criteria to address the unique needs of the military and veteran student population.

The military and veteran student population is faced with challenges not seen by the traditional college student (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Lokken et al., 2009). How institutions react and respond to the veteran and military body of students has a direct impact on the rate of completion by the veteran and military student. Cate (2014) indicated 79.2% of student veterans have enrolled at public institutions (p. v). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center Signature Report (2012) indicated that the completion rate for the adult students (over age 24) was 42.1% compared to that of younger adults (24 or younger) which was 56.8% within six years (p. 50). This report did not look exclusively at veteran and military students. The report also indicated, “By the end of the study period, 44.4 percent of the older students were not enrolled anywhere, compared to 26.4 percent of the younger students” (p. 50). Based on the number of older students which may be, in part, veteran and military students, it is essential to address the drop in completion.

In recent years, the designation for an institution which supports the veteran and military student has been “Military Friendly” (Brown & Gross, 2011), which indicates the institution has
met specific criteria to address the unique needs of the veteran and military student population. There are few institutions who have not received this designation or title. Further inquiry into the “Military Friendly” designation indicates there are those institutions which rank as “Top 100” Military Friendly institutions. Those institutions are designated as such by a review and ranking comprised of input from the veteran and military students on a yearly basis. The ranking indicates that the institution is meeting the needs of the veteran and military students based on their personal experience. This is impactful in reaching out to potential veteran and military students, while at the same time meeting the requirements of “Military Friendly.”

Becoming a “Military Friendly” institution requires specific criteria be met in order to receive that honor. To receive the designation of “Military Friendly” speaks to the commitment of the institution towards the student-centered practices and being service-oriented. These criteria are not rated by students, but by the institution checking boxes indicating the services are available at the institution. The key criteria used to define a Military Friendly institution provided by Brown and Gross (2011) include the following:

- Offering priority registration for military students
- Simplified or expedited application process
- Flexible enrollment deadlines
- Academic and counseling services targeted to military students
- Special Web pages for returning military students
- Support groups
- Transfer credit policies that minimize loss of credit and avoid duplication of coursework
• Limited academic residency requirement of 25% of undergraduate degree programs on campus and 30% for fully online programs
• Acceptance of ACE credit recommendations for learning experiences in the armed forces
• Awarding of credit for college level learning validated through testing, Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Services exams, and Excelsior College Testing
• Deferred tuition payment plans
• Veterans lounges and centers
• Research focus on meeting the needs of military students

As a “Military Friendly” institution, there are many programs that are put in place to help ease the transition from combat to classroom and support the military and veteran student. These programs are there to assist this specific population feel a sense of community and belonging in a new environment and help them to become successful in order to reach degree completion. As stated by Ackerman et al. (2009) in a journal article, students defined the term as a campus “where programs and people were in place to assist with the transitions between college and the military” (p. 10).

There is an organization that compiles a list each year of the more than 12,000 schools that have been approved by Veterans Affairs, of which, 15% are designated as “Military Friendly.” The numbers are very real, survey driven, and “were independently tested by Ernst & Young LLP based upon the weightings and methodology established by Victory Media” (“About Military Friendly Schools,” 2013, p. 1). The surveys are conducted once per year and are completed by the institution. The results are not ranked into a top 10 category. “The 2013 list
includes more than 1,700 schools that represent the top tier of U.S. colleges, universities and trade schools doing the most to educate America’s veterans” (“About Military Friendly Schools,” 2013, p. 1).

Institutions can choose to adapt to the policies of those for “Military Friendly” institutions, or not. Many do as the funding is very lucrative. According to Justin Pope (2012), “The G.I. Jobs ‘Guide to Military Friendly Colleges’ is probably the best known list, with annual circulation of 135,000 and reaching more through its website, militaryfriendlyschools.com” (para. 18). Institutions have chosen not to use the phrase “Military Friendly” as they cannot guarantee they can meet the 12 requirements specified for that designation.

President Obama signed Executive Order (EO) 13607, which provides the “Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members” on April 27, 2012. The purpose of EO 13607 is to “Establish Principles of Excellence to apply to educational institutions receiving funding from Federal military and veterans education benefits programs” (Executive Order No. 13607, 2012, p. 25861). The principles that should be established at institutions were designed to:

Ensure that these educational institutions provide meaningful information to service members, veterans, spouses, and other family members about the financial cost and quality of educational institutions to assist those prospective students in making choices about how to use their Federal education benefits . . . and ensure that educational institutions provide high-quality academic and student support services to active-duty service members, reservists, members of the National Guard, veterans, and military families. (Executive Order No. 13607, 2012, p. 25861)

In August of 2013, President Obama (“President Obama Applauds,” 2013) introduced the “8 Keys to Veterans’ Success” which are “specific steps that schools can take to truly welcome and encourage our veterans” (“8 Keys,” n.d., para. 3). These keys are voluntary and at the time of the roll out, more than 250 community colleges and universities had agreed to participate in
this opportunity to aid veteran completion of college degrees, certificates and licenses. The “8 Keys to Success” include the following which are similar to those initiatives considered for a “Military Friendly” institution.

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans.

2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.

3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.

4. Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space.

5. Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.

6. Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention and degree completion.

7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.

8. Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.

Research has highlighted areas which the “Military Friendly” institution should address in order to meet the needs and challenges of this unique population of learners (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Brown & Gross, 2011; Hassan et al., 2010; Lokken et al., 2009). These areas speak to the transition and acclimation of the veteran and military student with regard to seeking a degree at an institution of higher education and life outside of active military service. Specific areas to be examined are (a) transitioning from a combat role to student, (b) navigating the
bureaucracy of financial benefits, (c) using the training from military for enrollment direction and course credit, and (d) the support services designed specifically to meet the needs and unique challenges of the veteran and military student population.

The purpose of this phenomenological case study is to explore the lived experiences of veteran and military students in the context of a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution in the Midwest. In particular, this study focuses on the essence of the veteran and military students’ institutional experiences that enabled or slowed their degree completion.

Transitions

The veteran and military students experience transitions which are unlike those experienced by a traditional student when seeking a higher education degree. An action as normal as enrolling for college courses can be a tremendous challenge for this population. The veteran and military student may be overseas or active duty in another part of the country and unable to register directly at the institution. According to Rumann (2010), students who have been members of the military, experienced conflict, and enroll for courses, expect to receive support specific to their needs. If the students are unable to obtain the required support, they may not continue with their degree. This phenomenon applies to those who have attended prior to being deployed, and to those who are enrolling for the first time (Ackerman et al., 2009).

Stopping Out

Researchers have examined the phenomenon of stop-outs, drop-outs, opt-outs, and transfer-outs, at community colleges primarily and not at four-year institutions (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Woosley, Slabaugh, Sadler, and Mason (2005) define “stop-outs” as “Those students who withdraw from a college or university but subsequently reenroll [at that same university]” (p. 188). There are many different reasons for students to “stop-out” of enrollment. With the
veteran and military student, those reasons are often service related. According to Grossettt’s
1993 study, “The external commitment measures related to dependent and work responsibilities
and financial concerns were relatively unimportant to the stopping-out process” (p. 57). Rumann
and Hamrick (2010) indicated veteran and military students have been activated or called-up to
active duty and deployed for the War on Terror (WOT). Woo (2006) indicated that in the
Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, it was found that “About 80 percent of all
American colleges and universities have had students leave for active military duty” (para. 8).
These deployments have taken the veteran and military student to Iraq, Afghanistan and other
locations internationally. Deployments do not always take the veteran and military student out of
the country, but may also move them to a location in support of conflict which is not conducive
to attending institutional courses.

These actions by the military have caused the veteran and military student to leave their
academics behind mid-semester and subsequently reenter college during a later semester to
complete their degree. In a study of college retention interventions, Hoyt and Winn (2004) found
that stop-outs are more likely to be older students with children, work full-time, and experience
some conflict between their employment and college. This finding would support the veteran and
military student in relation to older students with children. The veteran and military students
qualify as “non-traditional.” As shared by APSCU (2013), in 2007-2008, 85% of the veterans
and military students enrolled in undergraduate education were aged 24 or older. According to
the study by APSCU, only 35% of the participants in the study identified as unmarried with no
dependents (p. 3).

If a veteran or military student is recalled to active duty (this could apply to veteran
students serving their inactive reserve period), in most cases the student must drop the courses in
which they are enrolled. Institutions have taken the step to assist the veteran or military student and have put in place formal procedures through the registrar “that expedited the deployment process” (Moon & Schma, 2011, p. 57). Woo (2006) posited that 67% of higher education institutions now have policies in place which minimize the academic impact of those veteran and military students who interrupt their studies for the purpose of military service. It is necessary for the institution to understand the unique needs of the veteran and military student and work with them to come to a solution. As Ackerman et al. (2009) shared in their study on Transitions of Combat Veterans, “A member of the National Guard unit, while in Iraq, made phone contact with the financial aid office . . . only to be told that to resolve the issue he had to come to the office” (p. 10).

Through the collaboration between veteran and military students and the university, students can be offered a withdrawal or incomplete from their courses. An incomplete will allow them to continue the coursework upon their return without having to reenroll in that same course, providing it is within the specified timeline (Moon & Schma, 2011). Wendy Lang, director of Operation College Promise, cautioned institutions against using a “one-size-fits-all” solution to the veteran and military services provided (cited in Schnoebelen, 2013, p. 2).

As Woosley et al. (2005) found, those students whom indicated a commitment to completing a bachelor’s degree and satisfaction with the institution, had a higher likelihood of reenrollment. The 2005 study by Woosley et al. found that many students who withdrew did, in fact, return to the institution and “stop-outs” were represented substantially as a subgroup. Additionally, it was found that students who had set goals and commitments had a higher reenrollment percentage. Woosley et al.’s study found that 40% of the students who withdrew from the university had reenrolled within four semesters. As suggested by Woosley et al.,
“Perhaps if the withdrawal and reentry processes are made simple and personal enough, the educational and institutional bonds these students already feel will intensify, making reenrollment more likely” (p. 196).

**Becoming a Student**

Re-enrolling or enrolling as a student is not as simple as it may seem. The veteran and military student may have challenges that are unlike the traditional student transitioning from high school to college (APSCU, 2013; Brown & Gross, 2011; Gaines, 2004). As stated by Mr. Dakduk, vice president of University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) chapter of Student Veterans of America, “Assimilating back into life as a civilian and a student isn’t always easy” (Mangan, 2009, p. 2). Becoming a part of the community takes time and effort on the part of the veteran and military student.

As the number of veteran and military students pursuing a secondary degree has and continues to increase, it behooves the institution to provide programming for this unique population. One way institutions welcome students and indoctrinate them to the life of university participation is through orientation. Orientation is generally conducted at institutions right before or during the beginning weeks of the fall semesters and geared towards the traditional freshman. Veterans who use the GI Bill tend to be older, between the ages of 25 and 34, than the traditional student, and are often married (Field et al., 2008). It would be beneficial for each institution which enrolls veteran and military students to have an orientation program designed to meet their needs.

Orientation programs have been developed specifically for the veteran and military student at many universities (Field et al., 2008; Hassan et al., 2010). Field et al. (2008) noted, “At the University of California at Berkley, veterans get a special orientation program and
priority enrollment—a privilege previously reserved for athletes and disabled students” (p. 6). According to Moon and Schma (2011), the Student Affairs Leadership Council recommends offering separate and specific orientation programs for veterans, delivered by key university contacts, for veteran and military students to receive pertinent information which may impact this population of learners. As they are in a different place based on age and experience, it behooves the institution to provide an orientation program designed specifically to meet those needs (Field et al., 2008).

**Financial Challenges**

Veteran and military students are often able to receive the GI Bill. There are many versions of this bill, one being the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Those who are entitled to educational benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill are afforded the most generous benefits in history while pursuing their education. When speaking of these benefits, Representative Howard McKeon stated, “Many feel the process of applying for veterans’ benefits is too complex” (Winston, 2010, p. 34).

**GI Bill**

According to McGrevey and Kehrer (2009), under the provisions of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, effective August 1, 2009, “Veterans who pursue college level training at the associate degree level or higher will receive tuition and fees . . . not to exceed the cost of the most expensive in-state public institution of higher education” (p. 92).

The GI Bill history (“History and Timeline,” n.d.) indicated the new law governing the Post-9/11 GI Bill provides for many items which were not covered in previous versions. The Post-9/11 GI Bill allows funding for books and a living allowance for those attending educational institutions. New for the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the bill allows any unused portion to be
transferred to spouses or dependents. Upon the signing of the legislation to put forth the first GI Bill, Franklin D. Roosevelt stated the reasoning behind the legislation which governs the GI Bill is that the members of our armed forces are due this assistance because “they have been compelled to make greater economic sacrifice and every other kind of sacrifice than the rest of us, and are entitled to definite action to take care of their special problems” (“History and Timeline,” n.d., para. 25).

In years past, GI Bills have allowed usage to the veteran student for up to 10 years’ time. Unlike previous educational bills the benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill can be used for up to 15 years, cover a total of 36 months of tuition payments, and unlike any previous GI Bills, can be transferred to a family member (McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009). As of Fiscal Year 2012, there were 945,052 veterans utilizing the benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Kirkwood, 2014, para. 5).

According to McBain’s (2010) higher education policy brief, there were two bills introduced to amend the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the Senate’s Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act of 2010 and the House of Representatives’ identically titled bill (p. 1). Both bills provide eligibility be expanded to include those who maintain “full-time service in the National Guard and Reserve” and expands the type of institution at which members can use their GI Bill benefits (McBain, 2010, p. 2). The GI Bill is not the only type of assistance provided to veteran and military students.

There are additional programs to cover the expenses of the veteran and military student which have been put into place; institutions can choose to participate in programs such as the “Yellow Ribbon Program” (The Post-9/11 GI Bill Yellow Ribbon Program, 2010). Eckstein (2009) shared that universities participating in the Yellow Ribbon Program have the ability to “waive up to half of the remaining charges [of tuition fees] and receive the same amount from
the federal government” (p. 1). This helps students and universities which charge high fees and tuition. Complicating the system, the colleges and universities have the opportunity to opt-in to the Yellow Ribbon Program, select the amount of funding offered, and the number of students they accept under the program (Brown & Gross, 2011; Eckstein, 2009; Sewall, 2010).

With the number of veteran and military members eligible for the GI Bill benefits, many still go unused. California has the largest number of veterans residing within its borders, than any other state in the nation. As with most institutions, there have been reductions in staff and budget for California’s colleges and universities (Winston, 2010). Although the Post-9/11 GI Bill affords the opportunity to attend many different types of institutions including private colleges and trade schools, for-profit colleges and community colleges were chosen most often by veteran students eligible to use them, the first year the aid was available (Sewall, 2010). In 2007, 84% of GI Bill recipients enrolled at what are considered the “top 500” institutions, 38% enrolled at community colleges, 36% at four-year institutions, 19% at for-profit institutions, and 6% at private institutions (Field et al., 2008).

The cost of the student’s education is covered in most cases, as well as partial living expenses during the time of school. That is, if the money comes through. Part of the financial challenge is receiving the educational benefits. An Air Force veteran complained, “It took eight or more weeks to receive benefits during which time I had to come up with out-of-pocket expenses for tuition and related college expenses” (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 9). Institutions have put policies in place to remedy the stress created during this waiting period. An additional challenge to the veteran and military student is the fact that not all campuses have the ability or have programs in place at their institution which would assist the new veteran and military student (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 8).
Deferred Tuition for Veteran and Military

There have been many changes throughout the years to the GI Bill. Under the provisions of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, “Veterans who pursue college level training at the associate degree level or higher will receive tuition and fees . . . not to exceed the cost of the most expensive in-state public institution of higher education” (McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009, p. 92). Deferred tuition for veterans waiting for reimbursement is being offered at military friendly institutions (Moon & Schma, 2011; Winston, 2010). In addition to deferred tuition, some institutions are providing grants for the first semester of study, providing in-state tuition rates to military members, veterans, and family members, and priority registration (Brown & Gross, 2011; Field et al., 2008; Mangan, 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011).

Academic Residency Requirements

As with most higher education institutions, residency is a huge part of the cost puzzle. It is widely accepted for a “Military Friendly” institution to provide in-state tuition and fees to veteran and military students (Brown & Gross, 2011; Field et al., 2008; Lokken et al., 2009; Mangan, 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011).

Many veterans return to a place which they feel comfortable, may have family or friends, and where they intend to start their life as a civilian. This may or may not be the location which they lived prior to their time in the service. It is imperative that the cost of tuition not be insurmountable as they search for a location to begin their degree. A tremendous hindrance to the cost of a postsecondary education is the difference between a resident and non-resident of the institution’s state. It has become apparent to institutions that, in order to support the veteran and military student as much as possible, the residency requirement must be waived. Of the public four-year institutions enrolling veteran and military students, 46% reported that they provide in-
state tuition to those students, regardless of their length of residency (Queen & Lewis, 2014). Colleges which are located near military bases are often sought out as they tend to cater to the veteran and military student (Field et al., 2008).

**College Enrollment Practices**

The veteran and military student process for enrollment may differ significantly from the traditional student. Many veteran and military students may not have the opportunity for a campus tour, face-to-face interaction with program advisors, and may also have limited internet facilities to have questions asked and answered (Hassan et al., 2010).

**Evaluating Credit for Military Service**

Veteran and military students bring much experience and training with them when enrolling for courses at a college or university. Training can be generalized, much like boot camp and would count for nine credits at most colleges. In order to receive credit for any military training one’s military transcript is required. The evaluation is completed through the American Council on Education (ACE) which was created during the first World War and assists military members and colleges with evaluating the training and experience connected to military service (“College Credit for Experience,” n.d.). Each branch of the military has a specific system which is used to record the military education and credits for experience of each member.

For evaluation, the Army uses the Army/American Council on Education Registry Transcript System (AARTS) for enlisted personnel and officers were required to use the Application for Evaluation of Learning (DD295) for reporting of their service affiliated training and experience. Navy and Marine Corps employed the use of the Sailor-Marine American Council On Education Registry Transcript (SMART) system to evaluate and record training to obtain college credit. According to Cpl. Alfonso, the courses taken in leadership can count as
college credits (Alfonso, 2008). The DD295 provided by the Navy and Marine Corps was used by the college and university for purposes of obtaining college credit from a college. The Air Force uses the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) which automatically captures the training of the servicemen along with experience and standardized test scores. The Coast Guard evaluated training through the Coast Guard Institute (CGI), which required the servicemember to self-report or submit documentation of all training and include an enrollment form in order to receive a transcript (“College Credit for Experience,” n.d.).

In March, 2013, the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Educational Support (DANTES) switched from the multiple transcripts for the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard and adopted the Joint Service Transcript (JST) as the official transcript for their members. The JST provides validation and documents the recommended college credit for personnel in these services. DANTES Director Dr. Berry stated the JST provides for a “single officially recognized military transcript” (DANTES and Naval Educational and Training Command Public Affairs [DANTES and NETC Public Affairs], 2013, para. 4). The Air Force continues to use the CCAF to capture training and experiences of their members.

**Evaluating Credit for Military Training**

The American Council on Education (ACE) continues to evaluate the military schools, correspondence courses, and occupational training in order to determine if they qualify for credit. “The ACE military evaluations program is funded by the Department of Defense (DOD) and coordinated through DANTES” (“College Credit for Experience,” n.d., para. 3). In addition to the ACE credits being awarded, Texas A&M University System partnered with Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Central Texas College and the Texas Workforce Commission to provide veterans credits towards their degree, based on the skills that were learned in the armed
forces (Reed, 2013). This is the first program of its kind and really speaks to the value of the experience military members have obtained. According to Reed in his article published in The Eagle,

The initiative was launched in 2011 with the goal of allowing veterans to more easily re-enter the workforce. The web portal veterans use to register, www.CollegeCreditforHeroes.org, launched in 2012 and nearly 20,000 veterans have created accounts and 2,352 have completed requests for transcripts. Based on its first year numbers, the veterans were awarded 25 credit hours on average. (Reed, 2013, para. 6)

The number of hours awarded and the recognition for experience while on military duty does much to encourage the military and veteran student, while also putting them on an educational trek that is not quite as daunting. Of the public four-year degree granting institutions, 90% award academic credit to the veteran and military student for military training (Queen & Lewis, 2014). Allowing them to use their experience enhances their military training and puts them that much closer to the degree which they are seeking. Ultimately, this initiative puts the military and veteran student on a trajectory to re-enter the workforce and begin their post-military career much sooner.

Support Directed Programs

The definition of a military veteran as “defined by federal law, moral code and military service as any person who served for any length of time in any military branch of service” (“What Is a Veteran?,” 1973, p. 1). In recent years, it has been the norm for institutions to receive the designation of “Military Friendly” (Brown & Gross, 2011), which indicates their meeting explicit criteria to address the specific needs of the military and veteran student population. In addition to “Military Friendly” requirements, there is the additional burden of navigating the bureaucracy of financial benefits.
How these students are received by their peers at the university, the campus and classroom climate, and how they are able to interact with others university as a whole will impact their entire experience and ability to be successful through degree completion. Is there sufficient work being done to educate the campus communities with regard to their diverse needs? Are universities cultures accepting of the way the military and veteran student received their injury, or is this impacting the way this population is treated?

It is no surprise that the number of military and veteran students enrolling in two- and four-year institutions is on the rise. With the number of conflicts and length of time which our military members have been involved, the size of our military and veteran population has increased significantly. As of Fiscal Year 2009, there were 2,254,500 total enlisted military personnel, who through their military service could be eligible to receive educational benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Title I Military Personnel, 2010). There were reportedly 844,500 veterans, military members and dependents enrolled in all two- and four-year degree granting institutions for the fall of 2012 (Queen & Lewis, 2014). The Post-9/11 GI Bill has changed how institutions collaborate with military and veteran students and government agencies to provide educational support to this particular population.

Not all veterans fall under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, although that is the most recent label given to the financial stipend provided through the Veterans Administration (VA) which provides educational benefits. Of the veterans enrolled at all two- and four-year degree granting institutions during the fall of 2012, 97% were using financial education benefits; 80% of the active duty servicemembers, reservists and members of the National Guard used financial education benefits (Queen & Lewis, 2014). The GI Bill, as it is widely known, has undergone
many name and specific benefit changes as it has been transformed to meet the needs and
demands of the veterans it seeks to assist. As stated by the VA,

This bill therefore and the former legislation provides the special benefits which are due
to the members of our armed forces—for they “have been compelled to make greater
economic sacrifice and every other kind of sacrifice than the rest of us, and are entitled to
definite action to help take care of their special problems” (“History and Timeline,” n.d.,
para. 25).

It is imperative that the college and university which seek to serve this population adapts
its financial assistance, educational delivery and programs to meet the needs of this group of
students (Rouscher, 2011a). The population of military and veteran students currently enrolling
has many challenges not seen by the common college student (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Lokken
et al., 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011). Queen and Lewis (2014) indicate that during the 2012-13
academic year 100% of public four-year degree granting institutions enrolled military
servicemembers, veterans or dependents. It is important to recognize the diversity of students,
the diversity of this particular population of learners, and adapt accordingly. The population is
older, experienced much more in their lifetime than the typical college student, and often has
greater home responsibilities.

As Moon and Schma (2011) state, “28% of adult learners comprise the student
population,” (p. 53). There is much value in the life experiences the military and veteran student
brings to the classroom. There can also be many challenges. As recent as 2012, it has been stated
that “Student veterans report feeling isolated, from both fellow veterans and anybody remotely
familiar with military culture. And they often feel at odds with younger classmates” (Sander,
2012b, p. A3). The differences in age and maturity can lead to tense moments or awkward
exchanges between classmates. Add in a mental disability that neither the military and veteran
student nor the traditional student may be aware of, and the interactions can be an extremely difficult.

**Physical and/or Mental Disabilities**

The challenges of physical and/or mental disabilities, which are not usually experienced by the typical college freshman, require additional skills, adaptation, and accommodations around the campus setting, in order for the military and veteran student to navigate and succeed through graduation. “It is imperative to recognize that within this group there are current and former service members which will require an awareness by faculty to recognize their specific needs” (Rouscher, 2011b, p. 4).

It is imperative for the university system to provide veteran and military specific programs which meet the needs of the veteran and military students enrolled at their institution. Areas of support may be academic/tutoring, academic advising, study skills workshops, assistance with employment and career planning, financial aid, mental health counseling, disability services and VetSuccess programs. As this population has experienced many life events unlike those of the traditional college student, it is crucial to provide services which address the needs of the veteran and military student.

As a “Military Friendly” institution, there are many programs that are put in place to help ease the transition from combat to classroom and support the military and veteran student. At public four-year degree granting institutions, it has been reported that 20% provide a formal mentoring or advising program which includes faculty or staff who are or have been members of the military as the mentor/advisor (Queen & Lewis, 2014). These programs are there to assist this specific population feel a sense of community and belonging in a new environment and help them to become successful in order to reach degree completion.
There have been a number of programs developed at higher education institutions to support the transition of military and veteran students in their quest for degree completion. Although they may have different titles, they can often be categorized as the same type of program. The program areas which research has shown are prevalent at universities are:

Transition courses which get the student back into the frame of mind to study and attend classes (Ackerman et al., 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011); Student Veteran Organizations (SVO) which provide a supportive environment where veterans are unlikely to feel the need to hide their affiliation to the military (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009); and as an effort to enhance communication for veterans, universities provide up-to-date information on registration, and other frequently asked questions in a web based format (Ford et al., 2009). With support programs in place to assist the military and veteran student, many students within this population find themselves adjusting not only to life as a civilian and college student, but to life as a college student with physical or mental disabilities. In order to meet the needs of the student, collaboration with a variety of individuals and groups is necessary for students with disability-related functional limitations (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). It has been noted through research, “many veterans have more than one difficulty that affects their learning and may have multiple disability diagnoses” (DiRamio & Spires, 2009, pp. 81-82).

Between March 2003 and September 2011, there have been more than 32,200 servicemembers injured during the Iraq coalition (“Iraq Coalition Casualties,” 2011, p. 3). During the 10 years of U.S. involvement in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), there have been 14,342 members injured (“Operation Enduring Freedom,” 2011, p. 3). These members return home after their service and transition to college life not always knowing or realizing the extent of their disabilities. The most common disabilities noted through research for military members
who have served in a combat role are: (a) post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), (b) traumatic brain injury (TBI), and (c) orthopedic injuries (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Church, 2009).

In past wars, PTSD has been referred to as shell shock or combat fatigue. According to Church, PTSD is based on the “severity of the stressor which must be extreme in nature or life threatening” (Church, 2009, p. 47). The experience the member had or witnessed is relived through recurring thoughts, dreams, or feelings. It has been reported that more than 50,000 cases of PTSD have been diagnosed during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (DiRamio & Spires, 2009, p. 82). Recent studies have estimated that one-fifth of troops returning from these conflicts have experienced symptoms of PTSD (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010, p. 29). The best predictor of PTSD is the members’ exposure to combat. “The rate of anxiety and depression increases from 12% to 27% from the first to the third deployment” (Church, 2009, p. 45).

The symptoms of PTSD do not begin to appear in some members until six months after their return from a combat theatre (Church, 2009; Lokken et al., 2009). These symptoms may appear first in the classroom as fear, anxiety, or an unexpected outburst. Training faculty in recognizing these symptoms or at the very least, being familiar with the challenges this population of war-wounded students may face is necessary (DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Ford et al., 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011).

It has been found that many campus counseling centers are more geared toward traditional needs of college students, those who may be homesick, or missing their parents. The military member suffering from PTSD requires specialized care (Mangan, 2009). The presence of counseling services for students on campus which operate in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is more prepared to deal with this population. It is helpful to have a clinical psychologist trained in PTSD, on campus, to provide counseling. Students have
shared their appreciation for these partnerships (Moon & Schma, 2011). Peer counseling has also shown to be an effective methodology to provide service to this group of students (Church, 2009).

Research is not clear on the percentage of PTSD versus the percentage of TBI as being more prevalent in returning servicemembers. What is clear is that both are being experienced in high percentages, often times by the same servicemember. TBI is experienced by servicemembers who have been in combat and have been exposed to a concussive blast of an improvised explosive device (IED) or other explosion. Mild cases of TBI are difficult to discover and can limit mental performance (Zoroya, 2007, p. 1). Diagnosing TBI is difficult because the symptoms may not be revealed until months after the initial trauma (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Symptoms can include cognitive problems such as lack of concentration and loss of memory, and physical symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, and blurred vision (Ackerman et al., 2009; Church, 2009; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011). Due to the nature of the injuries, it is often necessary for Disabled Student Services (DSS) to provide support and accommodations for the student. As these students do not want to be “labeled” as disabled, this can become a challenge (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). Reassuring the student of the high level of confidentially and building their trust is necessary to provide the best support available.

In severe cases of service related disability, the VA provides specific programs for those members to be integrated into the programs for continued education. Seeing the value of these students and military veterans, Representative Henry Brown of South Carolina (Brown, 2004, as cited in McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009) once asked,

In what other aspects of our society do technology savvy 20-year-olds maintain multi-million-dollar tactical aircraft, navigate and troubleshoot multi-billion-dollar nuclear-
powered ships, and operate and maintain space-based technologies to keep us safe in an increasingly unsafe world? (p. 1)

TBI is difficult to qualify to an outsider as it is not visible. There are those injuries that are very visible and prevalent with the returning military members. The military and veteran student may be facing the challenge of orthopedic injuries while making the adjustment to civilian and college life. Physical injuries such as burns amputations and orthopedic injuries are visible in most cases. Establishing a collaborative relationship with the VA or Department of Defense (DOD) medical centers in the area is a crucial step to serving this particular population of military and veteran students (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). Due to the numbers of military and veteran students with physical disabilities, many of these students will require campus facilities for the disabled. This will require that colleges and universities meet the American with Disabilities Act requirements for students in numbers not seen previously (Church, 2009).

The American Council on Education (ACE) developed a program in 2007 titled: “Severely Injured Military Veterans: Fulfilling Their Dream” (“Severely Injured Military Veterans,” 2011, p. 1). This program provides for the severely wounded veteran to receive the support needed as they transition from combat to the college classroom. Through the organization, they begin working with the student while still receiving medical care through degree completion (Rouscher, 2011b). As stated on the ACE web-site, “The combination of individualized advising and campus advocacy has proven to be extraordinarily effective in providing assistance to severely injured veterans and their family members to assure that our nation's heroes can fulfill their dream of going to college” (“Severely Injured Military Veterans,” 2011, p. 1). ACE has worked with member institutions to advocate for the military and veteran student and provide services and programs vital to their success (DiRamio & Spires, 2009).
Veteran Centers

Through the initiative of “Military Friendly” institutions there are many pieces which go towards the designation of “Military Friendly.” One of those pieces is maintaining a veteran center on campus. Maintaining a location where the veteran and military student can cavort and relate to each other is paramount to a positive learning environment. There have been offices developed specifically to meet the needs of veteran and military students and according to Moon and Schma (2010), “The success of the office rests on two guiding principles: listen to the soldiers and ‘everybody plays’” (p. 54). In addition, Moon and Schma discuss the success of creating a program known as the “System of Care” in which a forum of students and university staff collaborate and access available resources in order to “address most any personal or health issue a military student may face” (p. 54). Spaces designated for the veteran and military offices may contain comfortable spaces to relax and debrief, specific computers and printers available for use, and space where the veteran or military student can work quietly and alone.

The challenges, which are not usually experienced by the typical college freshman, require additional skills, adaptation, and accommodations around the campus setting, in order for the military and veteran student to navigate and succeed through graduation. “It is imperative to recognize that within this group there are current and former service members which will require an awareness by faculty to recognize their specific needs” (Rouscher, 2011b, p. 4).

Academic and Counseling Services

A crucial component to the success of the veteran and military student is academic and counseling services geared to their needs. As a veteran or military student, their academic needs may differ widely from those of a traditional undergraduate student. As Mangan (2009) has reported, “Assimilating back into life as a civilian and a student isn’t always easy” (p. 2). In
response to the unique needs of the veteran and military student, many universities have taken
the opportunity to develop orientation programs which are geared specifically to the military and
veteran student (Field et al., 2008; Hassan et al., 2010). Of the public four-year degree granting
institutions, 39% provide specific academic advising for the veteran and military servicemember;
29% provide academic support/tutoring specific to this population (Queen & Lewis, 2014). A
specific area of counseling has been shown to be beneficial for this population of learners.

Specific program areas which research has shown are prevalent at universities are:
Transition courses which get the student back into the frame of mind to study and attend classes
(Ackerman et al., 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011); Student Veteran Organizations (SVOs) which
provide a supportive environment where veterans are unlikely to feel the need to hide their
affiliation to the military (Summerlot et al., 2009); and in an effort to improve the
communication for veterans and military students, universities provide up-to-date information
with regards to registration and other frequently asked questions (Ford et al., 2009).

Support Groups

Support programs are necessary for the veteran and military student to feel a part of the
university community, but also a part of the military community they are so used to. The
structure of the military is unlike the structure available at most institutions and the transition can
be difficult. There are many titles to the support groups across campuses. One such group is the
Military and Veteran Student Association (MVSA) which provides best practices for students to
connect with each other inside and outside of the classroom (Moon & Schma, 2011). Cook and
Kim (2009) shared, “In focus groups and meetings, student veterans have expressed the need to
connect with those who share similar experiences” (p. ix). Cook and Kim continued to share that
the institutions that provide an informal gathering place for this population to connect with one another contributes “significantly to their acculturation on campus” (p. ix).

According to Queen and Lewis (2014), 46% of public, four-year degree-granting post-secondary institutions provide a space specific to the veteran and military student for meeting and connecting. Queen and Lewis also indicated that of the public, four-year degree granting institutions, 75% have a specific organization for the veteran and military student.

**Problem Statement**

The GI Bill has transformed since its inception in 1944 and the War on Terror has ignited an increase in veteran participation; colleges and universities have struggled to design effective programs to assist veterans with degree completion. The veteran and military students have special needs and unique challenges when seeking to achieve degree completion. The first GI Bill signed into law in June of 1944, allowed 7.8 million World War II veterans to participate in education or training programs before its conclusion July 25, 1956 (“History and Timeline,” n.d.). The version of the GI Bill approved August 1, 2009, known as the Post 9/11-GI Bill, allows any veterans with active duty service on or after September 11, 2001 to receive educational benefits. Reports have indicated there were 945,052 students enrolled in institutions during FY 2012 (Kirkwood, 2014, para. 5). Studies have shown veterans have a dropout rate of 88% within the first year at higher education institutions (Wood, 2012). The term “Veteran Friendly” or “Military Friendly” was coined after the Post 9/11-GI Bill, intended to indicate which institutions had veteran and military specific programming to ease the transition to student. Do military and veteran students participate in programs designed for them on campus? Do the veteran and military students believe the programs assist in their degree completion? What meaning do the veteran and military student make from the programs? Researchers and
administrators need a better understanding of the association of the use, or lack thereof, of programs designed to assist the veteran and military student and degree completion.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Overview

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, the GI Bill, was instituted as a way to have returning soldiers fill classrooms as there were not sufficient jobs to sustain a larger workforce ("History and Timeline," n.d.). The idea was to provide educational benefits to returning servicemembers and delay the onslaught into the workforce. Since WWII, the GI Bill has played an important part in the lives of returning servicemembers. The GI Bill has changed and evolved over time, benefits have been reshaped and renamed as the Montgomery GI Bill and the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Essentially, the basic purpose is still the same: to assist servicemembers with their continued education after serving in the military.

As the U.S. has been involved in many conflicts over the last 16 years which has increased the number of veterans and military members, there is a large contingent of veteran and military students seeking a degree, paid for through the GI Bill (Winston, 2010). At the end of Fiscal Year 2010, there were 2,798,000 total active duty military members who would potentially be eligible to receive educational benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill (U.S. Department of Commerce [DOC], 2012, p. 1). In addition, there were 1,102,863 active reservists and 362,000 National Guard members, most of whom may be entitled to educational benefits (DOC, 2012, p. 1). To meet this influx, institutions have had to conform to meet the needs of those servicemembers who were enrolling. In order to become an institution at which veterans are able to use those funds, they must now be labeled “Military Friendly.”
In recent years, institutions commonly seek out and receive the designation of “Military Friendly” (Brown & Gross, 2011), which indicates meeting detailed criteria to address the specific needs of the military and veteran student population. This population has unique needs that often must be addressed. Addressing those needs is germane to being a “Military Friendly” institution.

The military and veteran student population is unique and is faced with challenges the traditional college student does not experience (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Lokken et al., 2009). How the institution responds to and addresses the needs of the veteran and military body of students has a direct impact on the rate of completion by the veteran and military student. Cate (2014) indicated 79.2% of student veterans have enrolled at public institutions (p. v). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center Signature Report (2012) indicated that completion rates for the adult students (over age 24) was 42.1% compared to that of younger adults (24 or younger) which was 56.8% within six years (p. 50). This report did not look exclusively at veteran and military students. Looking at another piece of the report, it was stated, “By the end of the study period, 44.4 percent of the older students were not enrolled anywhere, compared to 26.4 percent of the younger students” (p. 50). Based on the number of older students which may be, in part, veteran and military students, it is essential to address the drop in completion rates.

The designation for an institution which supports the veteran and military student is “Military Friendly” (Brown & Gross, 2011). “Military Friendly” indicates the institution has met specific criteria to address the unique needs of the veteran and military student population. As this is no longer a new designation or title, there are few institutions who have not received this designation. In addition to the “Military Friendly” designation there are institutions which rank
as ‘‘Top 100’ Military Friendly’’ institutions. A ‘‘Top 100’’ designation is received after review and ranking comprised of input from the veteran and military student. This is completed on a yearly basis. The ‘‘Top 100’ Military Friendly’’ ranking indicates that the institution is meeting the needs of the veteran and military students based on the students’ personal experience.

Methods

This chapter presents the methodology used throughout this qualitative case study. As with all case studies, there are multiple streams of data collected. One of the main sources of data came from interviews with military and veteran students with regard to their experience at a ‘‘Top 100’ Military Friendly’’ institution. The second source of data was gathered from key informants who were instrumental in the development, implementation and follow through of the military and veteran programs at the university. Finally, the third source of data consisted of department reports, news stories, institutional reports, and department newsletters, which were gathered and reviewed. In this chapter, the specific sections provide an overview of the method and purpose of this study, including the approach, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and limitations.

Overview of Purpose and Methods

This is a qualitative case study with an interpretative phenomenological analysis/approach (IPA). The case study focuses ‘‘on an analysis of the experiences of’’ the military and veteran students at the institution (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 546). Smith (2007) describes the purpose of and main reason behind an IPA is ‘‘to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world’’ (p. 53). Using an interpretative phenomenological approach to this case study allows this researcher to get to the essence and meaning made of the veteran and military student experience at a ‘‘Top 100’ Military Friendly’’
institution. Within a phenomenological study, the researcher seeks to explore “the lived experiences of individuals and how they have both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with other people” (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). The purpose is to describe the lived experiences of military and veteran students in the context of a “Military Friendly” institution in the Midwest.

Using the phenomenological approach within the case study provides this researcher with a way to “explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies” (Yin, 2009, p. 19). Using both the military and veteran students and those key informants who have had the responsibility for the development, implementation and follow through with the programming at the institution allows this researcher to understand the meaning and experiences from both perspectives.

**Research Approach**

The approach used in this qualitative case study is an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Within this study, there are three distinct sets of data collected. The primary data are interview data, utilizing a phenomenological approach, from the military and veteran student. A second data set was gathered from key informants and lastly documents were used to develop a case study of the program designed to support military and veterans at a “Military Friendly” institution. The case study allows the researcher to better understand the environment in which the students being interviewed exist and allows this researcher to conduct what is considered “one of the most important sources of case study information . . . interviews” with those who have been instrumental in their vision, development, implementation and follow through of the programs for the military and veteran students, as well as interviews with the military and veteran students at the institution (Yin, 2009, p. 106). Creswell (2009) defines phenomenological
research as a “strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). Focusing on an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) indicates how the participants are making sense of their personal experience. According to Moustakas’ (1994, as cited in Creswell, 2013), interpretation of transcendental or psychological phenomenology places more focus on the experiences of participants than on the interpretations of the researcher. Smith (2007) indicates that “IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal world” (p. 55). Within most qualitative research, especially one utilizing a phenomenological approach, it is necessary to write an epoché. An epoché is written prior to conducting any interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). An epoché is written by the researcher in order to document their personal experience which may impact the understanding of the experience of participants.

Within the phenomenological approach of this case study research, it is necessary for the researcher to write an epoché of her personal experiences in order for the researcher to better understand the experiences of the participants, and not allow the researcher’s experiences to impact the meaning made of the participant’s experiences. Marshall and Rossman (2011) posit the necessity of the epoché as a “self-examination to permit the researcher to gain clarity from his own perceptions” (p. 148). Once written, the epoché continues to be revised throughout the research as the researcher discovers more information or experiences periods of reflection while conducting the research or its documentation.

In a paper which discusses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) posited, “On a methodical level . . . an IPA study typically involves a highly intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts produced by a comparatively small number
of participants” (p. 103). This approach allows the researcher to delve deeply into the experiences and feelings of those in the study to determine the meaning behind their experience. There are two purposes for this type of study: the first is to “try to understand their participants world, and to describe ‘what it is like’” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 104) and the second is to develop an interpretive analysis which “positions the initial ‘description’ in relation to a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 104).

Using IPA affords this researcher the ability to commit to the participants in cognitive, linguistic and affective ways ensuring a connection between the information being shared and their emotional state when referencing their experience (Smith, 2007). Taking an IPA approach to this study allows the study more depth than the traditional phenomenological study. Historically, IPA studies have involved great detail and case-by-case analysis of individual transcripts. This approach allows the researcher to “examine in detail the perceptions and understandings of the specific group studied” (Chapman & Smith, 2002, p. 127).

Within the case study, seeking insights into the development, implementation and follow through of the “8 Keys” at this “Military Friendly” institution allows this researcher to answer the question of intended support to the military and veteran students. Asking those key informants who were instrumental in the development and follow through of the programming to propose their own insights, acting as informants for the program, provides critical understanding to this researcher (Yin, 2009). In addition to interviewing the key informants, I also reviewed documents that pertain to the development, implementation and review of the programs designed to support the military and veteran students. Creswell (2013) indicates the importance of case study data collection involving a wide array of procedures and documents to assist the researcher in building an “in-depth picture of the case” (p. 162).
In this case study, it is imperative to not only view the emic or inside perspective of the participants, but to also consider the etic or outside perspective of those involved with the institution (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999). Within the boundaries of educational research, the emic perspective often represents an internal language and the meanings of a set defined culture (Merriam, 2009). Yin (2010) posits, “An emic perspective attempts to capture participants’ indigenous meanings of real-world events” (p. 11). Morris et al. posit, “Emic accounts describe thoughts and actions primarily in terms of the actors’ self-understanding—terms that are often culturally and historically bound” (p. 782).

In contrast, Morris et al. (1999) state the following: “Etic models describe phenomena in constructs that apply across cultures” (p. 782). The etic perspective comprises an external view of the culture or language. Using an etic perspective to research is considered beneficial in that it allows comparisons to be made across multiple cultures and populations.

As this researcher looked to both the key informants for insight into the process of development of programming for the military and veteran student population and the military and veteran student participants to gain insight into the meaning they make of their experience at the institution, both the emic and etic perspective were examined. According to Morris et al. (1999), “Methods in emic research are more likely to involve a single cultural group” (p. 782). Using a guided interview, “The participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective)” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 144).

Morris et al. (1999) posit the emic view as “behavior described as seen from the perspective of cultural insiders, in constructs drawn from their self-understandings” and the etic view is “behavior from a vantage external to the culture, in constructs that apply equally well to
other cultures” (p. 783). By disseminating the meaning made of both the emic and etic perspectives of those involved, richer findings emerge.

**Reflexivity**

Phenomenological interviewing is the study of a lived experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In my role as researcher for this project, it is necessary to acknowledge the role my personal experience has on the research. It is necessary for me to write a full description of my experiences with the military and higher education and “bracket” off my experience from those whom I have interviewed. This form of reflection is identified as an “epoché” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 148). Creswell (2009) states, “Qualitative research is interpretative research, with the inquirer typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with the participants” (p. 177). As a veteran and student of a university, it is necessary for me as the researcher, to acknowledge my personal background within the study to alleviate any ethical or personal issues that could potentially arise within the qualitative research process. It is this researcher’s role to create validity and reader confidence in the accuracy of the findings through this study.

It is necessary for me to set aside personal experience and “take a fresh perspective of the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). As a veteran, I have served overseas—not in a combat role, and not during a time of “official” conflict. I have attended more than one post-secondary educational institution, but without the benefit of any GI Bill or veteran assistance. My experience has been broad in the sense of multiple institutions, but has not included much in the way of experiencing any of the available programs for veterans. In fact, I do not recall being asked to identify as a veteran on any of the applications I completed.

I am able to relate to the participants as I understand their military experience, but any discussion of combat does not resonate personally with me. I can empathize with the
participants, but as I have not served in a combat zone or role, I cannot fully relate to their experience as a military or veteran student using the GI Bill or assistance, and any impact that experience may have on their educational participation. It is necessary for me to reflect on my personal experiences throughout this process and document my feelings to clarify my role as researcher rather than military veteran and student.

Population, Sample, Site

Participants were selected through criterion sampling and purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013). As it is important for the researcher to have a homogenous sample, it is necessary to use this approach. As Chapman and Smith (2002) share, “IPA uses purposeful sampling to attempt to find a more closely defined group for whom the research questions will be significant” (p. 127).

In order to be solicited for the study, individuals had to meet the following criteria: be an undergraduate student who is preparing to graduate, and be a veteran or military student who has seen active duty post 9/11. The information regarding graduation and veteran or military status was verified through an administrator at the institution who has access to student information and who provided the listing of those self-identified members at the university in the Midwest. Once the list was established, the professional contact sent an email (Appendix A) to all who fit the initial criteria of having applied for graduation in the fall 2016 semester. The plan was to start with the first 6 to 10 individuals who indicated their interest. If sufficient participants were not identified to provide a sizable sample to reach saturation of the data, I planned to send an email to those who applied for graduation in the spring, summer and fall semester, as appropriate. In this situation, two individuals would be emailed (Appendix B) and added until saturation was reached, or a maximum of 20 participants were interviewed.
An email was sent to potential graduates through the campus office that was created specifically to serve this population of students. The notification indicated the opportunity to participate in this study and detailed criteria for participation and contact information if interested. The email included the following criteria for participation: each participant must have served in the military during a time of conflict post 9/11, have applied for graduation, thus completed degree, and experienced the same phenomenon. In addition to sending emails to potential graduates, a flyer (Appendix C) was posted throughout campus in areas where students would likely notice. Once contacted by the potential participant, I determined through email or a phone conversation that they met the criteria for the study. At that time an Informed Consent form (Appendix D) was provided for review. Due to my connection to the university, those seeking a degree in one specific major were excluded due to the possible influence on the college experience of these students. This influence could inject a specific and arbitrary variation on the experience of the veterans in general imposed by the researcher. The interviews were conducted on university grounds, in an area which provided discretion and privacy to participants. As there are many areas that provide this privacy, the researcher inquired as to the time and location that best suited the participants’ preference. As shared by Marshall and Rossman (2011):

A realistic site is where (a) entry is possible; (b) there is a high probability that a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of interest is present; (c) the researcher is likely to be able to build trusting relations with the participants in the study; (d) the study can be conducted and reported ethically; and (e) data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured. (p. 101)

By conducting the interviews at the university, the participants should feel more comfortable and able to share their personal experiences, while, at the same time, being afforded privacy and discretion to meet outside of their personal academic areas.
There is a select group of three to five key informants who were tasked with the development, implementation, and follow through of the programming for the military and veteran students at the institution. This researcher sought to conduct structured, intentional interviews with each of them for full understanding of the program design and services now available for this unique population of learners. Those interviews were held at a site at the university, identified by the interviewee, where they would feel comfortable providing their perspective and insight.

**Data Collection Procedures and Instrumentation**

An analysis of data collected from veteran and military students who applied for graduation at a Midwest university was conducted. Data consisted of experience and meaning made at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution—including challenges, services, and knowledge of said institution. Data were collected during the fall 2016 semester, prior to the student leaving the university community. As the military and veteran students responded to the request, they were accepted on a first-come-first-served basis. No intentional selection, other than meeting the listed criteria, was used to guide selection of participants. As sufficient participants did not respond during the fall 2016 semester, further recruitment continued through the spring 2017 and summer 2017 semesters.

Any military and veteran student who indicated willingness to participate in this research and was not selected due to saturation was sent an email to thank them for their willingness and to indicate they were not selected (Appendix H). For any military and veteran student who volunteered and was not selected due to not having any active duty time, an email was sent indicating they were not selected as they did not meet the criteria (Appendix I). If they were not
selected due to not serving on active duty during the time period since 9/11/2001, an email was sent (Appendix J).

After the Informed Consent form (Appendix D) was returned to me, I engaged the military and veteran students in an interview (Appendix F) to tease out the essence of their lived experience at the university, including challenges and progress to matriculation. Smith (2007) describes the semi-structured interview as the “exemplary method for IPA” (p. 5). Using a semi-structured interview has advantages as described by Smith: “It facilitates rapport/empathy, allows greater flexibility and coverage and allows the interview to go into novel areas, and it tends to produce richer data” (p. 59). The interviews were recorded, and then transcribed by the researcher. As Creswell (2009) suggests, an interview protocol was followed during the interview.

I conducted the interviews with the military and veteran students first. Then interviews were conducted with the three key informants at the institution (Appendix G). I conducted the key informant interviews after the student interviews so as not to influence my perspectives with the shared intent and structure of the university programming.

Once the interviews were transcribed, they were sent to the participant for “member checking” (Appendix K). The purpose of “member checking” is “to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to the participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate” (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). Member checking allowed the participants the opportunity to verify the transcript is conveying what they intended, or to comment further. Through member checking, the value of the qualitative research is increased through the description and themes developed in context of those being interviewed (Creswell, 2009). Credibility is established in qualitative research when
it is established that the results are believable from the participants. Trochim and Donnelly (2008) posit, “The purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participants’ eyes; the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results” (p. 149).

When interviewing those key informants who were instrumental in the development and implementation of the “8 Keys” for the institution, I used focused interviews (Yin, 2009). Through this method, I was able to follow my own line of inquiry and “ask conversational questions in an unbiased manner that also serves the needs of your line of inquiry” (Yin, 2009, p. 106). Using this type of conversation allowed me to ask the “how” questions, rather than “why” questions. The idea is to satisfy the needs of inquiry while also allowing the researcher to put forth friendly and nonthreatening questions throughout the interview (Yin, 2009). Using the interview process to delve into the development and follow through of the programs for the military and veteran students at the institution “can provide shortcuts to the prior history of such situations helping you to identify other relevant sources of evidence” (Yin, 2009, p. 108).

In addition to the interviews with the military and veteran students and key informants, documentation and reports related to the creation, evolution, and function of the program at the institution were identified and reviewed. As posited by Marshall and Rossman (2011), “The research project’s final credibility and transferability will be greatly enhanced if future readers can read, in the research report, an account of the sites and sampling procedures” (p. 106). As Creswell and Miller (2000, as cited in Creswell, 2009) state, “Validity . . . is one of the strengths of qualitative research, and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (p. 191).
Data Analysis Procedures

As the interviews were completed, transcription and data analysis began. This aided the researcher in knowing when saturation had been reached; as Creswell (2013) indicated, it is necessary to interview 20–60, to “gather enough information to fully saturate the model” (p. 89). Smith (2007) indicates sample sizes may vary significantly with the IPA approach from as few as one to as many as “fifteen and more” (p. 56). As Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggested, it is necessary to bring order, structure, and interpretation to the mass amounts of collected data. By beginning transcription and data analysis immediately after the interviews were conducted, I was able to identify related concepts and themes which began to emerge after analysis was started. As stated earlier, I started with interviewing six to 10 participants, with a plan to interview more if saturation was not reached. As shared by Marshall and Rossman, “early grounding and planning can be used to suggest several categories by which the data could initially be coded for subsequent analysis” (p. 209).

Wolcott (1994) states, “The greater problem for first-time qualitative researchers is not how to get data, but how to figure out what to do with the data they get” (p. 9). It is advised that as interviews progress, open coding along with constant comparison occurs as the researcher transcribes and disseminates the interview transcripts. As I transcribed the interviews, I used raw data to identify key aspects which were then indexed in relating a particular passage of the dataset as provided through the interviews (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). Wolcott shares that drawing long excerpts from field notes or repeating of the interviewees’ words, the researcher would be telling the story so that the data “speak for themselves” (p. 10). Additionally, another way of organizing the data in order to report it is to “expand and extend beyond a purely descriptive account with an analysis that proceeds in some careful, systematic way to identify
key factors and relationships among them” (p. 10). Reading and rereading the transcripts was necessary to annotate items that were interesting or significant from the participants’ interviews. It was at this point that I began identifying emergent themes and categories from the interviews. Marshall and Rossman (2011) identify “the seven phases of analytic procedures as (1) organizing the data, (2) immersion in the data, (3) generating categories and themes, (4) coding the data, (5) offering interpretations through analytic memos, (6) searching for alternative understandings, and (7) writing the report” (p. 209).

Emergent clusters were identified and the researcher looked for connections between them. Smith (2007) indicates the initial list will be chronologically based on the sequence they appear in the transcript. The next stage required more analytical or theoretical ordering as the researcher attempted to sense any connection between the emerging themes. This stage required the researcher to “make sense of what the person is saying, but at the same time one is constantly checking one’s own sense-making against what the person actually said” (Smith, 2007, p. 72).

A final set of themes was developed once each transcript had been fully reviewed, analyzed and interpreted. Deciding which themes to select was based on the richness of the passages, as they highlighted a particular theme and how that theme assisted in defining other aspects of the study.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Marshall and Rossman (2011) discuss the purpose for including limitations in the study. As such, all proposed research projects have limitations. The limitations of this study include length of time for data collection, lack of sufficient number of participants from the same semester, and a limited amount of variation (service type, gender, age) amongst participants. Length of time for data collection and lack of participants for data collection are potential
limitations due to the many ongoing changes in the office that serves this population. As programs continue to be added to and adjusted, the impact on the experience of the veteran and military students may be different. The potential impact of the limited amount of variation with participants is that the group of participants may not be representative of the overall military and veteran population at the institution.

Delimitations included eliminating students who were enrolled in a particular major due to my position at the university. My concern was that I could have influenced their college experience. My influence injects a specific and arbitrary variation on the experience of the veterans in general; in addition, it could have been particularly challenging for me not to inject my experience into the students’ experiences.

**Summary**

Within this chapter, the methodology was identified, along with data collection methods, purpose of this study, participant demographics, and limitations. The details included the approach, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and limitations this researcher expected to encounter and how the research was conducted for this study.
CHAPTER IV
KEY INFORMANTS

University Support and Designations

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944—later known more commonly as the GI Bill, was instituted after WWII as a way to have returning soldiers fill classrooms rather than flood the workforce as there were not sufficient jobs (“History and Timeline,” n.d.). Since WWII, the GI Bill has played an important part in the lives of returning servicemembers. The GI Bill has changed and evolved over time; benefits have been reshaped and renamed as the Montgomery GI Bill and the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

The U.S. has been involved in many conflicts over nearly two decades which has increased the number of veterans and military members seeking a degree, paid for through the GI Bill (Winston, 2010). As of the end of Fiscal Year 2010, there were 2,798,000 total active duty military members potentially eligible to receive educational benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill (U.S. Department of Commerce [DOC], 2012, p. 1). In addition to those who served on active duty, there were 1,102,863 active reservists and 362,000 National Guard members, most of whom may be entitled to educational benefits (DOC, 2012, p. 1). In order to be able to receive funds, the institutions must now be labeled “Military Friendly.”

In recent years, the designation of “Military Friendly” (Brown & Gross, 2011), indicates the college or university has met specific criteria to address the unique needs of the veteran and military student population. In the years since the Post-9/11 GI Bill has been in place, the number of institutions who receive this designation or title has increased. It is more difficult to
find an institution of higher learning that is not designated as “Military Friendly” than those that are.

In addition to the “Military Friendly” designation, universities can achieve status as a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. To be designated as such requires a review and ranking comprised of input from veteran and military students attending the institution, collected on a yearly basis. In addition, there are benchmarks which the institution must meet. The 2017 survey criteria for Military Friendly® lists those benchmarks as retention rates in years one and two, graduation rate, job placement rate, loan repayment rate, loan default rate, and persistence rate. The ranking indicates that the institution is meeting the needs of the veteran and military students based on their personal experiences or based on the benchmarks. This status is impactful in reaching out to potential veteran and military students, letting those students know the institution has practices in place to meet their needs.

The following question and sub questions guided the study: How do post 9/11 active duty and veteran military personnel who served either as support personnel or engaged personnel during military conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, or other conflicts, successfully navigate the transition to becoming undergraduate students at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” higher education institution and persist to completion of their degree?

Sub Questions:

1. How do the active duty and veteran military students (as described above) describe their experiences transitioning from active military duty to becoming university students?

2. How do they describe their acclimation to higher education and account for their progress to completion?
3. What particular challenges did they encounter on the path to completion and what campus experiences, programs, or services, if any, did they utilize to overcome those challenges?

4. How was the program designed, shaped, and implemented to support the veteran and military student?

5. How do the veteran and military students’ experiences intersect with programs and services offered by the institution?

In case studies there are multiple data streams. In Chapter V, I will present the information shared from the military and veteran student interviews. In this chapter, I present the key informants’ perspective and the reports and data obtained. For this study, the data were obtained through interviews of key informants at the institution and data provided through documents received from the office which supports the military and veteran students, as well as reports from institutional offices and the community.

In this chapter, I share the outcome and insights provided through the interviews conducted with administrators or key facilitators of the services for the veteran and military students at this institution. I examine the data systematically collected pertaining to the university. With the data provided I am able to share the number of self-identified veterans and military students attending the university, as well as other demographic data pertaining to the institution.

**Description of Interviews with Administrators**

During spring 2017 semester, I contacted those who were considered key informants and instrumental in the development, implementation, and follow-through of the “8 Keys” for this institution. I identified five individuals who had been instrumental in or are a part of the
development and follow through of the programs for military and veteran students at this institution. Of the five individuals I attempted to contact, three responded. All three agreed to be interviewed for this study. One other individual responded, but it was much later and all interviews had been completed. The fifth individual was not reached due to retirement with the institution no longer having any valid contact information available.

**Interview Setting and Process**

All three key informants chose to meet with me on the campus of the institution. I conducted focused interviews which allowed me to ask “how” questions, rather than “why” questions of these individuals. The interviews allowed me to satisfy the needs of the inquiry while also allowing for a friendly and nonthreatening atmosphere. The key informants were forthcoming and willing to share their thoughts, knowledge, and experience with regard to the military and veteran support system on campus.

Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and sent to the key informants with a request for them to review for accuracy (Appendix K). I provided a specific date to respond to the request. If no response was received, I moved forward with the transcript and began the first of many readings of each. None of the informants made any substantive changes. In addition to the interviews with the key informants, documentation and reports that relate to the creation, evolution, and function of the program at the institution were identified and reviewed.

The key informants were all male. The race of the key informants was not a focus for the study, but I noted there was a mix of race across the participating group. All key informants are members of the university staff.
The following is a brief description of each key informant. Pseudonyms were used in order to maintain the anonymity of all key informants in this study. In addition, specific roles at the institution are not being disclosed in order to maintain their anonymity. Key informants chose to share personal information that was not directly asked for, but that I believe had an impact on their personal views. If deemed pertinent to the focus of this study, it has been included in their narratives.

**Key Informants**

The first interview was conducted with “John.” John shared that he is a veteran of the armed services and is now retired. He was a student at the institution, on a part time basis, while active in the military. John is pursuing a higher education degree at the institution. He is not using the GI Bill to pay for his studies as his tuition and fees are covered by the institution as a full time employee. John has transferred his GI Bill to his children to use for their higher education pursuits. Fairly new to his position, he has been in the same office for a few years. John was very open and welcoming during our interview. John shared his dislike for the term “Military Friendly” and stated it is only used as an “advertising piece,” and requires time to fill out the surveys. The interview with John lasted 55 minutes.

“William” serves in the military reserves. He has been a member of the military for just a short time. He has been in his role at the university since before the inception of the office that serves the military and veteran population. William was an active participant in the process of obtaining the accreditation required in order for the institution to be eligible to receive GI Bill funding. William was quite welcoming, willing to share his experience to be sure that the institution is meeting the needs of the military and veteran population. The interview with William lasted 68 minutes.
The last key informant that was interviewed was “Professor.” Professor, as were all the key informants, was very welcoming. He has not personally served in the military, but his father did. He shared that his father used the GI Bill to complete his baccalaureate degree after serving the term of his enlistment. When the first discussions about creating a specific office for this population were conducted, Professor was in a different role at the institution. He was still involved in the discussion. He has been in a different role at the institution for some time and in that role has some oversite of the office that serves the military and veteran population. Professor provided full support for this study and was willing to share whatever information he had. The interview with Professor lasted 72 minutes.

**Key Informant Interviews**

Transcription of the key informant interviews was conducted as each interview was completed, transcribing each interview prior to the next taking place. I immediately began transcription and data analysis, including organizing the transcripts and immersing myself into the data as each was completed and confirmed via member checking. As I read and reread the interviews from the key informants, there were items that stood out from each as being important and were identified. I then took those excerpts and put them together with similar statements about the process and oversight of the program.

During the many times reading through the interviews, similar statements began to stand out and I began to see connecting threads and patterns which were put into categories and clusters. The identifying and clustering of these statements allowed me to classify the data into themes. This culling of the data allowed me to see how the programming developed from an initial thought into an office that is now serving the military and veteran student population at the university.
There were multiple areas where all three of the key informants shared the same or similar information in response to questions that were asked during the interview. One key informant may have provided more in depth information than the others, but started or finished at the same place as the others. The interviews provided a strong overview of the process the university went through and why they chose to pursue programs for the military and veteran student.

**Inception of the Office**

All three key informants indicated the idea for the office came from the university president back in the mid 2000s. At that time, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) was raging and the institution “realized we had to help the veterans” (Professor). At that time, the military and veteran population was growing at the institution, as well as the population of students transferring from community colleges. The office began hearing from other institutions and the community that there “was a need to give more attention to transfer students and military students” (William). The first office, which served both transfer students and military students, reportedly did not have any specific funding and the person responsible for the office received no additional pay (William, John).

After approximately 18 months, it became apparent to those in charge that the military population “had a lot of needs” (William). As John indicated, “the influx of military students that came in from that, really showed that if we wanted to provide services to this underserved population, then we needed to have a dedicated office,” and that is when it was split and became its own office. The leadership of the office changed at that time and the office moved to a new location. Staff levels changed as well as the reporting structure over the years. The overall goal remained the same: serve this population in the best way possible. There were many military
members separating from the military and according to William, they were “looking at higher education because of the new GI Bill.”

The Post-9/11 GI Bill was launched in August of 2009 and was quite different than the Montgomery GI Bill which had been, and is still, in effect. The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides much more in terms of monetary support for the military and veteran students. As John shared, “What really gave the office its momentum was the issuing of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009.” This drove the increasing numbers of returning military enrolling in institutions of higher education. At that time, there were reportedly 300 veteran students at the institution; at the time of this study, there are reportedly more than 700 veterans on the campus.

In the fall of 2013, work discussions began regarding a “recruitment strategy” for veterans. Approximately three years ago the university saw the need to have an official recruiter for the military, and added an additional full time position. William indicated there was a need for another “full time position. Someone whose job it is to go out to military installations . . . where there is a lot of military and say, you should come here, and here’s why, because we’re doing it right.” According to William, this expansion “has made a huge difference.”

The office has experienced some turn over with the full time staff members since becoming an independent office. Not all of those who have been in the position to lead the office are military veterans. The office has employed full time staff along with graduate assistants and work study members to increase the outreach and support for the military and veteran population at the institution. These numbers in staffing fluctuate based on budgetary constraints. In addition to the support the office provides to the military and veteran population on campus, the office is tasked with providing support to the military dependents at the university. In order to receive the funding for students through the Post-9/11 GI Bill, there were specific items that needed to be
addressed. For example, a dedicated office or person to assist with the required paperwork, a designated office to provide support, and a space to be used by this group of students.

Like many institutions, staff support and dollars for the office purposes and needs are a challenge for this and other offices. As the number of military and veteran students on campus grew, the number of staff tasked with serving this unique population of learners has decreased, as has funding. It is important to note that the commitment to the military and veteran students has not changed, it is the typical “do more with less” adage.

**Post-9/11 GI Bill**

The Post-9/11 GI Bill, which was instituted in August, 2009, has specific requirements in the form of “Keys to Success” which an institution should meet in order to be able to receive Post-9/11 GI Bill funds. The “8 Keys to Success” include the following which are similar to those initiatives considered for a “Military Friendly” institution ("8 Keys,” n.d.):

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans.
2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
4. Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space.
5. Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.
6. Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention and degree completion.
7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.

8. Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.

In order to meet these requirements, there were several things the institution had to do. William shared that “we had to make sure that our truth in advertising” was being backed up. The advocate for the office was responsible to “look at all of those things and make sure those pieces were there.” Professor shared that the university did not create the office and military support structure because “we want to be rated by the government or by a magazine as being “Military Friendly.”” He indicated, “It was a passion, we wanted to be ‘Military Friendly,’ period.” John does not care for the term “Military Friendly” and shared, “Personally, the term ‘Military Friendly’ and me really don’t get along too well.” His dislike of the term comes from his thoughts that it is coined by a magazine for the purpose of using it for advertising. John states the magazine company “goes out and gets the schools to fill out its surveys in order to become ‘Military Friendly,’ but for the next year you’re being hounded . . . they’re trying to get you to advertise in their publications.”

Both William and John indicated there are guidelines to the financial piece of federal funding. John indicated, “The Department of Defense makes all schools sign a memorandum of understanding (DoD MOU) if they want to take in government education, military education benefits.” The difficulty was in not knowing exactly how to proceed, what was required. William shared, “There were guidelines . . . when it comes to financing federal funding, but not so much guidelines on how you structure services.” John indicated that in the past two years, he and others worked to “come up with the offices objectives and goals.” John went on to indicate that process helped them move into “more of a permanent state of functioning,” as there were no
stated goals and objectives that he was aware of from previous staff. William indicated challenges with the unknown, in regards to institutional policies or lack of, “you don’t know the policy is there or needed until it hits a vet in the face.” Reacting to the needs of this population requires continued development in addition to knowing who you are serving.

Professor wasn’t so interested in what had to be done from the government side. He came at it from the standpoint of, “it was a matter of what’s right for these people, what do they need? They paid their dues, let’s make sure we take care of them.” John did say that the “Military Friendly” survey from the magazines provided a benefit in that “the survey does address certain things that universities should be doing to help the military student population.” In that regard, the survey provides insight to the administration by pointing out what those institutions that are rated “Military Friendly” are doing for that recognition.

There are many different periodicals that rank the military friendly, veteran friendly, best for vets, and American top colleges and universities and others to provide insight for each institution. These surveys are not unlike the surveys which rank the best colleges in America, best college in each state, top 100 colleges, etc. Each survey and ranking provides information to the institution on how it is viewed by those that are attending or have attended the university.

When a prospective student is looking at the outcomes from these surveys, they get a glimpse into the experiences of others who have attended that institution and these details may assist in answering some questions. For example, the Military Times: Best for Vets 2017 ranking provides information that is reported from the universities. This information includes many items which could impact the success of the military and veteran student. The information could also assist the student in making a decision as to which university to attend based on financial support. Some of the items listed include if the institution is part of the Yellow Ribbon Program,
complies with the 8 Keys, has signed the DoD MOU, has a Vet Center, reported numbers of military on campus, and retention and graduation rates of military members (“Best for Vets,” 2017).

These rankings can provide a starting point when military and veteran students begin to scope out the institutions they would be interested in attending. The cost, although much may be covered with their GI Bill funding, their funding does not necessarily cover all the costs. Professor acknowledges the institution has to find a way to meet the monetary needs of this population stating, “We need more scholarship money, because many of the vets have already used up their funds.” Professor also shared,

Tuition levels for active duty and reservists who are not using VA funds, but are allocated up to 16 credit hours at $250 a credit hour, we are greatly above that. If we can bring our online tuition down to the point where they’re not having to pay out-of-pocket. We’re still having those ongoing discussions.

The institution is having continued conversations about lowering the tuition rate for this population. William shared, “There were guidelines, I think, when it comes to financing federal funding, but not so much guidelines on how you structure services.” When discussing the needs, William shared, “Our online education repertoire is not nearly what it should be.” The tuition model factors into the distance learning structure as well. Speaking of tuition, William stated, “If I’m active duty, I get $250 a credit hour. [This] institution is charging $380 a credit hour, but school ‘A’ right next door, $250. It’s a no-brainer. The online education piece is a biggie.”

Another important aspect of support for the military and veteran population is a designated person in the registrar’s office—a person responsible for handling all documents related to the military or veteran student funding. When discussing this position, William shared, “We have someone that is the benefits processor.” That is, there is someone who the student can
come to our campus and say, “Hey, I need to turn these forms in to get my money flowing, who do you talk to?” According to Moon and Schma (2011), a person in this designated role has the sole responsibility to “submit and monitor all GI Bill benefits with the Veterans Administration.” Having a dedicated person for that position is a “big deal” said William. This affords the opportunity for the designee to be current with all the regulations and requirements for the GI Bill funding and is then able to answer the student’s questions. Having one go-to person, an expert, who has the knowledge to answer the military and veteran students’ questions regarding registration and funding, is vital to a positive experience.

There have been times when the student’s GI Bill funding has been delayed beyond when the student is responsible to pay for their tuition. By working with the designee in the registrar’s office, through policy for the institution, the military and veteran student is able to continue classes by accessing an emergency loan for books and housing needs. The registrar has worked to identify those military and veteran students waiting for the payment of their tuition bills. By doing so, the registrar has prevented holds being placed on the students’ accounts, allowing for no delay in the registration for the next semester. In addition to the registrar, the university was awarded a Vet Success on Campus Coordinator who acts as a liaison between institutional and government support entities. The person in this position is a connection to any other services the veteran may need that are not academically specific. The Coordinator serves as a liaison between Veteran Administration services and the veteran’s needs at the institution.

With a person dedicated to answer the questions of military and veteran students financially, and a liaison for additional veteran services, it is also important to answer the questions and concerns of faculty at the institution. A faculty knowledgeable about this unique population assists with the student’s experience at the institution. To have a specific program that
would provide details on interacting with the military or veteran student, recognizing their unique attributes, and how their experiences may add to the classroom are specific areas which faculty could benefit from.

Over recent years, the number of military and veteran students enrolled at the university has climbed. William indicated there are programs, which were recently put in place, to begin to educate the faculty and staff about this population. “We can never educate staff and faculty enough about this population,” said William. Professional development courses for the faculty and staff, campus-wide, are available, but William shared, “I think it needs much better development.” There is an orientation program for the veteran and military students coming to the university to assist with their acclimation, “I think we need a bigger and better for that.” The university is working towards the awareness of this unique population from both the staff and student side, but still has more to do according to William.

Professor indicated, “We have been able to identify what I will define as a special population and recognize that that population needs a different set of services. We have been able to budget and provide for those services.” There are other items that pertain to this population and are not policy at the institution per William, but are seen as a need, such as “an emergency or short notice annual training policy” for the military student. If the student is enrolled and is told they need to go on an emergency training or a period of active duty, there is no policy to address this at the institution. The faculty has the opportunity to work with the student, but it is not a written policy, “professors can also not work with them.” This is seen as an area of need and is in discussion, no formal policy has yet been written.

Important specifics the institution has acted upon include providing a dedicated office space for the support of this population and a dedicated student lounge area. The challenge when
selecting a space for the office was to provide a location that was considered central to the campus. According to William and John, there was much discussion as to where to put the office and lounge, as “there was no clear answer” (William), and with the campus “decentralized,” it was a challenging decision. William shared that there was much discussion, “Where do you put the one stop for vets?” in particular “where should the shop be strategically located?” After researching other institutions and where they had located their offices, William discovered, “That’s different across the nation” and there is no norm across institutions. The location needed to be in a place “they won’t feel embarrassed or guilty walking into.” One space that was considered was the campus counseling center. It was not chosen as William stated, “There’s a stigma there and we were worried about that.” The decision was ultimately made by the vice president. The location is within an area that supports “multiple different specialty groups” and this population is “another specialty group” shared William.

The lounge area for the military and veteran students is in the same building, near the office that serves them. The lounge is not large in terms of square feet; it contains computers the students can use, a television set, and a coffee pot. When discussing the lounge, John stated, “I have gotten feedback on how small the lounge is . . . hoping the lounge was card swipe so there would be a little more security, and making sure the people that go in there are military students.” In a conversation with staff from the institution familiar with the lounge and office, I learned they did not feel the location was the best. There were feelings that the other offices in the general area could be problematic with regard to the population they serve being in proximity to the military and veteran population.

The specifics of the institutional response in order to receive funding from the federal government with regard to the GI Bill have been discussed as told by the key informants. The
key informants were all clear on the inception of the office and who was the main influence in moving the plan forward. Much has been accomplished over the years to bring the office and institution in line with meeting the requirements of the GI Bill. Dedicated staff at the university in roles which provide support to the military and veteran students is well received by those familiar with their needs. The institution has made an effort to meet the needs of this population of learners and continues to build on the foundation established, recognizing there is still more to do to keep pace with the needs of the military and veteran students. The documents obtained from the institution with regard to the military and veteran population are presented next.

**Reports and Documents**

The data collection for this study began as approval for the study was provided. The data were collected from a multitude of sources at the university and the community. Sources include department reports, news stories, institutional reports and department newsletters. The purpose of these reports is to show a snapshot of the military and veteran students at the institution during the time since the office serving this particular population has been in existence.

**Numbers of Reported Military and Veteran Students on Campus**

There was no official way to track the number of military and veterans on campus at the inception of the office which serves this population. All veteran data collected by the institution were “self-identified” by the student. If the student is using a GI Bill, they can be tracked, but not all military and veteran students use the GI Bill. The challenge with the data is that the reports were sporadic; there were changes in staffing within the office which serves this population, and there was no regularity with how the data were reported. I will share what I have, knowing that the data were not collected or reported consistently.
In 2011, the university really examined the veteran enrollment data as available for the institution and discovered important data were missing and the student applications were asking different questions with regard to this population. To follow up in late 2012/early 2013, the university began the process of making all the applications for enrollment identical. That process included bringing the following admissions applications in line with each other: the paper application, online, first-time students, transfer students, graduate students and readmit students.

For the first time in the fall of 2014, all of the application forms for admission were asking for the same information which included veteran status which allowed for more accurate reports to be created. This provided more robust data on veterans who identified as: currently serving, previously served, in National Guard or reserves, dependent and disabled. These changes allowed for demographic data to be collected on a more regular basis. Understanding still, the information was only provided if the military or veteran student chose to “self-identify.”

Although reporting was not consistent, I began systematically gathering reports which provided a snapshot into the military and veteran student population at the institution. Reportedly there were 457 military or veteran students enrolled at the institution for the 2009-2010 academic year; these numbers continued to increase through the years and in the spring of 2017 there were reportedly more than 700 military and veteran students. It is important to remember these numbers are self-reported, and/or include those that are receiving military benefits at the university. The total numbers reported do not break down the academic years or semesters by any demographic parameters.

I received the most comprehensive reports about military and veteran students from the fall 2013 semester and the spring 2014 semester. The data received for the fall of 2013 were very descriptive and contained many attributes and demographic information broken down by
colleges within the institution. Again, some of this information is only available by the military or veteran student self-identifying. If not using benefits through the military, there was no way to track the students formally if they did not declare their military or veteran status. These few detailed reports included student standing, such as freshman, sophomore, junior and senior, along with graduate level students. Also reported was type of admission, term of admission, gender, age at time of report, chapter of monetary support through Post GI Bill or other, and if that support was available at that specific time. The report also included the student’s major at that time, the credits that had been transferred to the institution, and expected graduation date. Although a portion of this information was not a focus of this case study, I felt it was important to share the whole picture of the military and veteran student population by including some data on gender, student standing, and race/ethnicity.

To provide a snapshot of the fall of 2013 semester, there were 498 undergraduate students identified as military or veteran students. There were reportedly 76 freshman, 97 sophomores, 143 juniors, and 182 seniors. Of those, 123 were female and 375 were male. There were 493 who chose to self-identify by race/ethnicity; 386 identified as White, 51 as Black or African American, 26 as Hispanic, 25 two or more races, 2 American Indian or Alaska Native, 2 as Asian, and 1 as Multi-Racial. The numbers reported only include those military and veteran students who chose to self-identify or are using some form of the GI Bill.

The report contained the number of students using specific chapters of the GI Bill. The Chapters are different levels of benefits based upon their military or veteran status. Chapter 30 applies to servicemembers on active duty using the Montgomery GI Bill; there were six military students identified. Chapter 31 is the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E); there were 10 veteran students using Chapter 31 funds. Chapter 33 identifies those that
were using the Post 9/11 GI Bill; there were 206 veteran students supported with Chapter 33 funds. Chapter 1606 is the Montgomery GI Bill for Selected Reserves members and those serving in the National Guard. In the fall of 2013, there were 35 members of the National Guard and 25 military and veteran students classified as Selective Reserve using funds from Chapter 1606. Chapter 1607 is the Reserve Education Assessment Program (REAP) which applies to those active in the National Guard; there were two military and veteran students using the REAP funding. In addition, there is the Yellow Ribbon Program, which institutions participate in voluntarily. This is an agreement the institution makes with the VA to fund tuition and expenses that are in excess of the highest public in-state undergraduate tuition. With this program, the VA will match the contribution up to 50%. There were reportedly five military and veteran students participating in the Yellow Ribbon Program at this institution during the fall 2013 semester. For the fall 2013 semester, there were reportedly 289 military and veteran students receiving some type of GI Bill funding at the university.

The spring 2014 report did not contain the same demographic information as the fall 2013. It did contain the number of military and veteran students enrolled at the institution based on their gender, class status, and race/ethnicity. This information was also broken down by specific college. The demographic data were very similar to that reported in the fall.

There are no other reports that contain the amount of detail when considering demographics for this population. Although not as detailed, the reports do contain those students who were using the GI Bill and graduation numbers for different time periods. There was a one year period during which the number of new military and veteran students was also tracked. First I will report those who were using the GI Bill and the specifics obtained with regard to new enrollments and then graduation data.
Examining the reports for Fiscal Years 2014 through 2017 shows that the number of military and veteran students on campus has increased while the numbers of those using the GI Bill monies have remained consistent.

Table 1

_Military and Veteran Students Enrolled and Those Using GI Bill Funds_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Enrolled</th>
<th>Total Students</th>
<th>Number Using GI Bill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FY 2014</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY 2015</td>
<td>691</td>
<td>532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY 2016</td>
<td>769</td>
<td>533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY 2017</td>
<td>714</td>
<td>525</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For one calendar year the number of military and veteran students enrolling at the institution was tracked. The report from the office which supports the military and veteran students on campus indicated that for the spring 2015 semester, there were 91 new enrollments. For the summer of 2015, there were reportedly 33 new enrollments. In the fall of 2015, there were 118 new enrollments to the institution, for a total of 242 newly enrolled military and veteran students during the 2015 calendar year.

Graduation numbers were reported for the undergraduate military and veteran students as well. For Fiscal Years 2015, 2016 and 2017, there were reportedly 90, 95 and 96 military and veteran students, respectively, who completed their undergraduate degree at the institution. The data on both the new enrollments and the number of those military and veteran students completing their degree would be very beneficial if collected on a semester or yearly basis. The
reports do provide some context as to the number of military and veteran students who are entering and matriculating at the institution.

**Military and Veteran Specific Accolades Received by the Institution**

There are many different awards that are given to members of the higher educational community for exceeding standards in specific areas. This institution has received multiple awards from organizations which serve the military and veteran population. These awards are based on many factors and often rank institutions by highest score. *U.S. News* calculates the ranking by using “statistical quantitative and qualitative measures that education experts have proposed as reliable indicators of academic quality” (Morse, Brooks, & Mason, 2017, para. 4). *U.S. News* takes up to 15 indicators of academic excellence data from each institution to develop an overall score.

In order to receive the Military Friendly® designation, there are three data sources used to compile and create lists, public, proprietary and personal. In addition they also use a survey of 100 questions in key areas which have been deemed important factors for supporting military. The survey questions are new each year and developed through the use of an independent Military Friendly® Advisory Council. Ernst & Young tests the validity of each year’s survey results. It is also noted that all scoring is fully automated (“About Military Friendly®,” 2017).

For this institution, the historical information came from departmental reports. For the 2010/11, 2011/12, and 2012/13 academic years, it is reported the institution received “Military Friendly” status from three national publications. There is no report available for the 2013/14 academic year. For the remaining academic years, this institution reportedly received recognition for the following: *Military Times Best for Vets, GI Jobs Military Friendly Schools, U.S. News*
and World Report – Best Colleges for Veterans, Military Advanced Education – Top Colleges and Universities for Veterans, and a state award for support to student vets—receiving the highest achievable rating.

One other accolade the institution has received particularly for the military and veteran population is the designation of “Purple Heart University.” This institution is one of approximately 50 universities in the nation to receive this designation. This designation signifies the universities’ commitment to recognize and support military members including military and veteran students, faculty, staff and their families. Additionally, the institution acknowledges the largest on-campus population of military students in the state.

Summary

This study examines the data obtained through interviews of the key informants at the institution and data provided through documents received from the office which supports the military and veteran student and data from the registrar’s office.

During the spring 2017 semester, I interviewed those who were considered key informants and who have been instrumental in the development, implementation, and follow-through of the “8 Keys” for this institution. Three individuals agreed to be interviewed for this study. These focused interviews allowed me to satisfy the needs of the inquiry while also allowing for a friendly and nonthreatening atmosphere. In addition to the interviews with the key informants, documentation and reports that relate to the creation, evolution and function of the program at the institution were identified and reviewed.

Documentation and report sources include department reports, news stories, institutional reports and department newsletters. These reports show a snapshot of the military and veteran students at the institution during the time since the office to serve this particular population has
been in existence. There was no official way to track the number of military and veterans on campus at the inception of the office which serves this population. All veteran data that have been collected are “self-identified” by the student with one exception; if the student is using a form of the GI Bill, they could be tracked, but not all military and veteran students use the GI Bill.

Based on the reports and documentation obtained, the numbers of military and veteran students has steadily increased. The syncing of the enrollment applications across the board asks all applicants to the university the same questions. Identification of the military and veteran students, even if not using the GI Bill is important so that members of this population can be provided with support. The institution has continued to receive awards based on the support and services provided for the military and veteran population.

In the next chapter I share the themes that emerged from military and veteran student interviews. These interviews were designed to tease out the military and veteran students’ experiences and meaning made while attending the institution. Their experiences tell an important story of their time transitioning from the military to civilian environment and how that played out for each of them.
CHAPTER V

RESULTS

The GI Bill is a game changer for those who have served in the military and desire a degree in higher education. For the institution to be recognized as “Military Friendly” allows the military and veteran student the opportunity to select a university that should be prepared to assist them.

Though this was mentioned earlier, it is important to highlight the definition of a veteran as some of the findings indicate a difference in identifying who is a veteran of the military. The term veteran has different meanings to some. Merriam-Webster (1998) defines a veteran as “a former member of the armed forces” (p. 1310). The American War Library is more specific in its definition and makes it clear that any length of time in service qualifies one as a veteran: “Any person who served for any length of time in any military branch of service” (“What Is a Veteran?,” 1973, p. 1). Both of these definitions fit the participants in this study.

The military and veteran student population is faced with challenges not seen by most traditional college students (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Lokken et al., 2009). The reaction and response to the veteran and military body of students, by the institution, has a direct impact on the rate of completion by the veteran and military student. As most military and veteran students are adults, it is important to note that according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2012), the adult students who enroll at public institutions have a low completion rate. Based on the number of older students which may be, in part, veteran and military students, it is essential to address the low percentage who reach completion.
A “Military Friendly” designation indicates the institution has invested in this population and is committed to meeting specific criteria which address the unique needs of the veteran and military student population. Further inquiry into the “Military Friendly” designation provides another level for those institutions which rank as “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institutions. Those institutions are designated as such by a review and ranking process based on input received from the veteran and military student on a yearly basis. The ranking indicates that the institution is meeting the needs of the veteran and military student based on each respondent’s personal experience. This ranking has an impact when the university is reaching out to potential veteran and military students, while at the same time it shows the institution is meeting the requirements of the “Military Friendly” designation.

The following question and sub questions guide the study: How do post 9/11 active duty and veteran military personnel who served either as support personnel or engaged personnel during military conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, or other conflicts, successfully navigate the transition to becoming undergraduate students at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” higher education institution and persist to completion of their degree?

**Sub Questions:**

1. How do the active duty and veteran military students (as described above) describe their experiences transitioning from active military duty to becoming university students?
2. How do they describe their acclimation to higher education and account for their progress to completion?
3. What particular challenges did they encounter on the path to completion and what campus experiences, programs, or services, if any, did they utilize to overcome those challenges?

4. How was the program designed, shaped, and implemented to support the veteran and military student?

5. How do the veteran and military students’ experiences intersect with programs and services offered by the institution?

**Sample Recruitment and Selection**

In Chapter IV, I focused on those involved with the military and veteran support and programming at the university along with the institutional data that have been gathered. In this chapter, I focus on the military and veteran students and their experience at the university.

Beginning in the fall 2016 semester, I reached out to the office which serves the military and veteran students on campus and asked them to send an email to any military or veteran student who had applied for graduation for that specific semester (Appendix A). After not having enough participants come forward from that first round of emails, I had the office send out the email again for the spring 2017 semester and the summer 2017 semester. During the fall 2016 semester, there were a total of 35 students who were sent the recruitment email. For the spring 2017 semester and the summer 2017 semesters there were 86 and nine, respectively. Total number of students that were sent recruitment emails for the duration of the study is 130.

Of those 130 students, 15 students responded to the email, poster, or contacted me via word of mouth through acquaintances. In the fall of 2016, I conducted a total of three interviews; two more students indicated their desire, but were ineligible to participate. One was ineligible due to their major and one due to the time until expected graduation. Two others had reached out
and indicated interest, but did not respond to follow up emails. In the spring of 2017, there were a total of five interviews conducted. There was one student scheduled that did not show up for the interview nor respond to a follow-up email, and there were two students who were ineligible to participate as they were graduate students and did not fit the focus of the study. I had no response from the summer 2017 email. I was able to interview a total of eight military or veteran students of the 15 that had responded. All interviews of the military and veteran students took place between October 2016 and April 2017 at a place of the participants’ choosing.

Of the eight semi-structured interviews that took place, one was conducted via Skype for a participant who had moved to another state post-graduation and the remaining seven were completed face to face. One was originally scheduled for a local coffee bar, but the participant was a no-show due to the time changing over to standard time from daylight savings time. We later reconnected and met at a satellite campus. I met one of the participants at the campus where most of his classes were taking place and the remaining five chose to meet me in an office on the main campus of the institution.

Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and sent to the participant with a request for them to review for accuracies (Appendix K). I provided a specific date to respond to the request. If no response was received, I moved forward with the transcript and began my first of many readings of each. There were no military or veteran students who indicated there was anything incorrect with regard to the transcript of their interview and of the eight, four of them responded to the member check request, indicating they had reviewed the transcript that was sent to them.
Participant Descriptions

Those interviewed came from the United States Marine Corps (USMC), United States Air Force, U.S. Navy, and Air National Guard and Air National Guard Reserves. Although the request was sent to all students that had identified as military or veteran and applied for graduation that specific semester, there were no participants from the U.S. Army. The U.S. Army has a large contingent of Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) members at the campus and study recruitment posters were hung in their area. There is also a small U.S. Air Force ROTC contingent at the institution and there were members from that particular group that volunteered, but did not meet the requirements to participate.

I had both male and female participants. The race of participants was not a focus for the study, but I will note that there was a mix of race across the participating group. Participants have been deployed to active war zones and areas in support of the war. All participants are using some version of the GI Bill to pay for their schooling. A small number of the participants mentioned other funding sources such as grants, scholarships and FAFSA loans, while most participants are working full or part-time to supplement the GI Bill funding.

Of those interviewed, there was a wide range of degrees being sought. With eight participants, there were eight different degrees. Three participants were students in the same college, but were pursuing different degrees. There was no mention as to whether they were aware of the other participants or not.

Participant Narratives

The following is a brief narrative for each of the eight participants. Pseudonyms were used in order to maintain the anonymity of all participants in this study. As the students chose not to share some information for personal reasons, you will find that there are differences in the
level and detail included in the personal descriptions provided. Most of the students interviewed shared where they spent their time while in the service, but not all chose to disclose this information. If the participants indicated that they were in combat areas during their time in service, I have included that information. As this was not a focus of this study, I did not pursue where each individual was stationed during their time in service.

“Jason.” I interviewed Jason first. He is a USMC veteran who spent five years on active duty. He was deployed once to Afghanistan during his time in the USMC. He was discharged from active duty in 2010. He stated that he was out of the service for approximately one year before deciding to enroll for classes at this institution. Jason is not married and did not indicate if he had children. Jason was content to continue working in construction until members of his family strongly encouraged him to get a degree.

Jason had a very difficult time adjusting to the institutional environment and shared, “I’m still transitioning. I think maybe it will be forever a transition.” Jason shared experiences of when he first came to the institution which included a situation that caused him to stop using public transportation and to move off campus. He is a full-time student who also works full-time at the institution while pursuing his degree. During our interview, Jason appeared agitated at times, at one point stating, “Because, even though I don’t have documented [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] PTSD, and I’m not, at least I feel like I am more, well-adjusted, I still tense up. Like, I am tense right now just talking about it.” Jason was angry at times throughout the interview and did not indicate a positive view of the institution. He did indicate his pleasure in assisting me in my degree pursuit and stated his willingness to reach out to others to encourage them to participate (I have no knowledge if any of his friends/acquaintances are a participant to
this study). The interview with Jason lasted 1 hr 15 min. Jason is expected to graduate in December of 2016.

“Chester.” Chester is an Air Force veteran and retired from the Air National Guard with a total of 20 years’ of service time. He spent seven and a half years in the Air Force before joining the Air National Guard. Chester was a full-time National Guardsman when he enrolled for classes. Chester is not married and does not have children. During his time at this institution, he worked full-time and took classes on a part-time basis.

Chester decided to pursue a degree after feeling inadequate around his friends that were college graduates. He set a goal for himself one afternoon and did whatever was required of him to make his dream come true. Chester first pursued an associate’s degree at a local community college prior to enrolling at this institution. Chester was very animated and hyped about being a participant of this study. He repeated many times how he “loved this institution” and would be a fan until “the day I die!” Chester had only positive things to say throughout our interview. The interview lasted 1 hr 25 min. He began classes in January 2015 while still an active member of the military. Chester retired from the Air National Guard during his final semester at the institution. He graduated in August 2016.

“Steve.” Steve is a U.S. Navy veteran who served four years as an enlisted member and then attended the Naval Academy. He did not elaborate on whether he served after his completion of the Naval Academy. He did indicate that he received a degree from the Academy and mentioned during the interview of being an officer.

Steve worked for two years after his discharge in 2012, prior to enrolling for classes to pursue a second bachelor’s degree. Steve is a full-time student at the university and does not
work to supplement his GI Bill and benefits. During the interview Steve was laid back, relaxed and quiet at times. Our interview lasted 43 minutes.

Steve indicated a positive experience at the institution and his only challenge was time management. During class interactions with students he stated, “They show me the elder respect” as he was older than many of the students in his courses. He is involved with a student organization directly related to his major. Steve intends to pursue medical school after receiving his degree in December 2016.

“Gonzo.” Gonzo is a full-time Air National Guard Reserves member (full-time active duty). He is preparing to retire after 26 years of military service. Gonzo has completed four deployments: two to Bahrain, and one each to Iraq and United Arab Emirates. Gonzo is married and has two adult children, one of whom is using Gonzo’s GI Bill to pursue his degree at another institution. He spent a period of time as a single parent raising his children while in the service. Gonzo pursued a higher degree right out of high school and stated, “It was expensive!” He also was enrolled at a local community college in 2002 and had to step out due to a deployment. Gonzo is a part-time student working full-time as an Air National Guardsman.

Gonzo indicated his desire to bring more veterans together in and out of the classroom, to be a mentor for those “younger kids” and also for his own children. With regard to the younger students, Gonzo stated, “I think they kind of look at me as the older individual, the parent, kinda like the dad.” He is extremely proud of his service and is having some difficulty preparing for the adjustment to civilian life. He stated, “It hit me that I’m not going to be putting the uniform on very much longer. And that’s hard, because I’ve done that for 26 years.” Gonzo was active duty when enrolled and when he began his studies in the fall of 2014. He is participating in an internship in the office which serves the military and veterans on campus, as a required
component of his degree program. Our interview lasted 58 minutes. He will still be on active duty when he graduates in April 2017.

“Milli.” Milli is a 28-year-old Air Force veteran who spent one year on active duty. Due to circumstances attributed to the Air Force, she served only part of her enlistment and did receive an honorable discharge. The fact that Milli served less than her complete enlistment was difficult for her. Milli stated:

I have this internal struggle of I’m proud that I was a veteran, I’m proud that I took that oath, I’m proud that I wore the uniform, but I know I didn’t do as much as most people in the military did and do. I always feel very uncomfortable in that moment where they ask, who are our veterans?

Although reluctant to become a participant, Milli came to the interview with the intention of helping other veterans through her experiences. She was willing to talk about her experiences and shared her sense of mixed feelings with being a participant as she stated, “With the study when you asked, I was like well do I really want to go talk about how much I didn’t do for the military or do I want to potentially provide information and insight?” Milli appeared to share much of her educational and personal experience and I felt she was quite open in her responses as she wanted to ultimately assist others through this research.

Milli is a divorced, single parent, with two young children. There was a period of approximately three years between her discharge and when Milli enrolled for classes. Milli completed her associate’s degree at a local community college and then transferred to this institution to pursue her bachelor’s degree in 2015. She is a full-time student and works part-time while attending the institution. Milli has a positive view of the institution and her experiences. Our interview lasted 1 hr 23 min. Milli intends to continue on with studies after her April 2017 graduation.
“Robert.” Robert is a USMC veteran who served 11 years on active duty. He entered the USMC at the age of 24. He was deployed to both Kuwait and the Iraq area—never entering Iraq itself. Robert works full-time while attending the institution. He enrolled at the institution approximately four to five months after his discharge in the fall of 2014.

Robert started his education as a part-time student to get the feel of things; then after his first semester, he started taking classes full-time. Robert shared that “it was really great coming into [the institution], because I already had all the discipline from the Marine Corps and learning all that, I was able to stay focused and make sure that I planned accordingly.” He continued taking classes through all semesters, including the summer, in order to complete his degree as quickly as possible. He indicated he completed a four-year program in three years by attending year round.

Robert was quite animated and excited during our interview. He has a positive view of the institution and was excited and ready to graduate and pursue future goals. The interview with Robert lasted 1 hr and 2 min. Robert expects to graduate in April 2017.

“Lily.” Lily is a 33-year-old Air Force veteran who served 10 years on active duty. After her discharge, she went over to Afghanistan as a contractor for a civilian company. Lily had been out of the Air Force for over a year before enrolling for classes. She chose to begin her studies as she was discharged right before the government sequestration and stated, “I spent a year in Afghanistan as a civilian contractor and then when they started handing over security, I decided it was time to come back.” The degree that Lily was pursuing was related to the job she did while in the Air Force. Lily indicated that the transition to the institution was “kind of rough.”

Lily is not married and has no children. While at the institution, she was a full-time student who did not work. Lily was involved in a student organization through her college that
required a significant time commitment each week. As this benefited her in her career pursuit and provided for required time and experience for her degree, Lily did not mind the time commitment. Our interview was held over Skype and lasted 16 minutes. Lily graduated in December 2016.

“Jack.” Jack is a 29-year-old Air Force veteran who served eight and a half years on active duty. He had the desire to return to the Air Force, but is unable to do so. When Jack enrolled for classes he had some previous credits, but was unable to remember the specific number. Jack indicated it has been about two and a half years since he enrolled in classes. Jack was mostly positive with regards to his time in service and time at the institution. Although he would be considered old as a student in some colleges, with the degree he is seeking, “There is a lot of students that are around my age, I found out, which was a little bit surprising to me.”

Jack was an active duty member of the Air Force when he enrolled for classes and has been a full-time student for the duration of his studies at this institution. He has taken classes year round, in part to complete his studies as quickly as possible so as not to exhaust his GI Bill benefits, but also because “I did not take any time off during the summer where it would’ve gone inactive and I would’ve had to refill out the paperwork again.” The interview with Jack lasted 43 minutes. He intends to continue his studies and pursue a higher degree when he graduates in April 2017.

Analysis of Interviews

Transcription of the participant interviews was conducted throughout the interview timeline, transcribing each interview prior to the next interview taking place. I transcribed each interview as soon as it was completed. Transcribing the interviews immediately and beginning data analysis, including organizing the material and immersing myself into the data afforded me
the opportunity to identify related concepts, categories, and themes using the constant comparison method. This allowed me the chance to pursue items that were shared, during subsequent interviews. My dissertation plan stated that I would interview six to 10 participants to start, and add more if I had not reached saturation. After completing and transcribing eight interviews, I determined that saturation had been reached. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) posit that “saturation occurs when continued data collection produces no new information or insights into the phenomenon you are studying” (p. 199). As that determination was made, further analysis and coding of the interviews as a whole began.

As I read and reread the participant interviews, there were passages of the participants’ experiences that stood out as important to me and were identified. I took those identified passages and clustered them together as similar statements or experiences of the participants. Through the many trials of sorting through the interviews, similar passages or experiences began to emerge across interviews and I began seeing trends. Moving them from similar topics to similar statements of experience, to categories and then into clusters, I began to focus on the similarities of the experiences looking for the essence of the participants’ experiences within the passages. The identified passages within the interviews then became themes.

Initially there were 22 clusters with many different passages, for example one of the themes was “running out due to credits.” I then began putting them together in tighter clusters. It took several rounds; I played with the clusters to really capture the essence of what the military and veteran students shared during their interviews. I struggled through the overlapping types of content, trying to decide what the best way of capturing these was. I had each passage on a sticky note and moved the passages from cluster to cluster keeping them organized on poster size paper. I changed the titles of the clusters multiple times while trying to fit the passages together in a
way that made sense. That then required me to move the passages (on the sticky notes) again and again until I felt I had captured the essence of what the military and veteran students said. The process was long and required much thought and careful consideration of each passage individually and then as a whole when looking at the clusters. Finally, during the analysis of the participant interviews, the following four themes emerged:

1. Differences in mentality helped shape the institutional experience of the military and veteran students.
   a. Students were sensitive to actions, perspectives, and opinions that are in conflict with their own.
   b. Students were sensitive to the ways in which the classroom environment and relationships make them feel either comfortable and connected or disconnected.
   c. Reasons behind a military of veteran student taking hybrid or online courses may be different than the traditional student.

2. Military and veteran students’ choice to engage or socialize beyond the classroom: the impact of military vs. civilian experiences.
   a. Lack of time or desire to spend more hours at the institution outside of the classroom.
   b. Feeling like I don’t belong.

3. The influence of military training on coping and the need for support identified by the military and veteran students.
   a. The lingering effect military experience has on the student’s university life.
   b. Not all veterans should be labeled or identify as being afflicted with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.
4. The difficulty and/or ease military and veteran students experience while wading through the institutional bureaucracy.
   a. There is a difference in applying, near or far.
   b. The GI Bill is not the same for all.
   c. The military and veteran students feeling shortchanged.

The following section describes each of these themes along with the quotes that highlight them.

**Theme 1: Differences in Mentality Helped Shape the Institutional Experience of the Military and Veteran Students**

The student participant interviews indicate their interest in many different subject areas, different colleges, and multiple academic experiences, as well as how their experience was shaped by what took place in the classroom environment. Participants mentioned more than once that their experiences were different due to a “difference in mentality” between the traditional student and those who had experienced military life. To get to the essence of those classroom experiences, clusters of meaning were heavily influenced by those with whom the military and veteran students interacted and the amount of interaction based on the class type (face-to-face or distance learning). Although most classes were delivered in a traditional modality, not all of the classes my participants enrolled in were face-to-face. Two of the eight students interviewed indicated they had taken part in distance learning or hybrid courses. Hybrid courses have an in-class or face-to-face as well as an online component to them. Also impacting their experience is their interaction in and out of the class with their professors.

**Subtheme 1a. Students were sensitive to actions, perspectives, and opinions that are in conflict with their own.** Student experiences with their professors were vastly different. Not
only is this a special population, but also a unique population of learners, and their experiences reflect that. When discussing their personal experiences with their professors, participants shared that not all interactions with professors were positive. All relationships the students had with their professors were not equal. There are two students who indicated that they did not continue with a particular class due to the views expressed by the professor. Jason shared his experience with a particular professor who expressed her displeasure with the war and veterans as a whole and implied that anyone who supported the wars did not make the right decision. Jason stated, “We had words and I ended up walking out of one class and then the rest of that entire semester I just put in as little effort as possible.”

Milli stated there were a couple of classes that she realized right away she would not be successful in because of the professor and chose to drop those courses. She also shared an experience with a professor whom she had visited for the purpose of providing insight on her resume as she was getting close to graduation. She explained that having been at many different schools due to her time as a member of the military and a military spouse, she had continued her education in many places as she went from base to base. It was her desire to present the most positive resume to prospective employers and was seeking advice from a professor who was recommended to her for just this purpose. As she tells it, the professor is a military veteran. After he gave a cursory look at her resume, he proceeded to ask “if I was depressed, that I shouldn’t be scared to get on medication, and that I have access to people to talk to and I was like I understand that, but I’m actually a really happy person.” Milli shared that this particular interaction was quite frustrating to her and she left the meeting feeling insulted.

Other experiences the military and veteran students had were more positive:
I really haven’t made friendships here. I haven’t, probably the best friendships I have here have been with professors. I have their personal email, and we email back and forth because we, like I said I’m more interested in engaging with the professor in understanding what I’m learning than necessarily the person next to me. (Milli)

The educator in the position of authority has the ability to foster transformative learning in adult students, particularly if that educator is authentic in their interactions with the military and veteran student. Professors can also have a negative impact on students. As a veteran of the USMC, having served in combat forward areas, Jason had a difficult time with those professors that, although fluent in the English language, had a very heavy accent. Jason was particularly challenged by his experiences stating, “The biggest issue I think I had as a veteran coming into this college was the high percentage of non-speaking, non-English speaking professors.” He went on to add,

I’m having someone of Middle-Eastern decent, who barely speaks English, try and teach me things, when I just got done battling people who don’t, from that area, who don’t speak English, it was really, really aggravating and I feel that I am one of the more, um, well-adjusted veterans. (Jason)

Jason also went on to speak of the situation as a possible “trigger” for those veterans who are not “well-adjusted.” He continued to explain, “So, [I] try not to let the accents really bother me. There are times where it triggers something, but I usually just do my best to ignore it.” Although Jason had negative experiences, he also indicated having positive experiences with three particular professors, one of whom is also a military veteran.

Jack was non-committal in his experience and stated, “As I experienced it, there are a lot of teachers here that are very interested in their research and not so interested in actually teaching,” and a few moments later stated, “There are a couple of really good teachers here that really try and help the students.” In Steve’s interactions with professors, his experience was
fairly straightforward, and stated he did not have any overly positive or negative interactions, only that his professors “would thank me for my service.”

Chester shared very positive relationships with his professors, “I had a lot of professors [who] were in my corner who knew all the hard work I was putting forth” and Robert indicated, “All my professors have been just fantastic working with me” and “They’ve been working at making my education unique to fit what I need, not necessarily with the normal curriculum.” Of the eight participants, Lily and Gonzo are the only two who did not mention professors or interactions with professors during their time at the university. Not only were the interactions with the professors discussed, the classroom experiences were also part of the interviews.

Subtheme 1b. Students were sensitive to the ways in which the classroom environment and relationships make them feel either comfortable and connected or disconnected. Examining the classroom experiences of the military and veteran student provided insight and meaning of their overall university experiences. This group of learners has been through military training, is older than most of their peers, and has experienced a different young adulthood than the traditional college freshman, I expect the experience to be quite different than the traditional student. The statements made during the interviews indicated a noticeable age difference between the military and veteran student and the traditional college freshman. The phrase “difference in mentality” was used by both Jason and Milli when speaking about their experience with other students in class. In telling of their experiences, only one participant indicated that there was no distinct age difference within his program.

When Jack spoke of the age of his fellow classmates, he stated, “There is a lot of students that are around my age, I found out, which was a little bit surprising to me.” Other students had quite the opposite response and some actually showed disdain for the younger students. Gonzo
reflected on his experience saying there was difficulty in dealing with his fellow students:

“Something I think that’s the biggest thing is just dealing with them and then, you know trying to bite your tongue.” When asked why he felt the need to bite his tongue he shared much more of that experience, stating, “I had a class last semester, I remember a student watched an entire soccer game while we were in class, off his computer” and continuing later in the interview:

You know if I could record them through that whole semester as an instructor, I would say, ‘Okay you want to know why you failed, this camera right here shows you watching the soccer game, Facebook, shopping, doing something else, not paying attention.’ It’s frustrating you know and I don’t know if it’s because of my age, or my military experience, but that is one avenue I would like to see different from this perspective where I do have to bite my tongue.

Gonzo also felt like a father figure to his fellow students, indicating he is “trying to help them out a little bit. Have them believe in themselves.”

Jason tended to keep to himself as much as possible while attending classes stating, “A lot of the times I just sit in the back of the room and I don’t talk to people.” As he made his way through his college career, he stated, “I would say most of my student tenure has been spent in seclusion, but I think that that’s mostly been by choice.” Indicating also his dislike for group projects required in the learning environment, citing an example where one member of the group did not pull their weight and the remaining group members did not want to “fire” the one, “The problem is no one wants to make people responsible for their actions. And there are too many people focused on the ‘I’ to make it a ‘we.’ There is no group mentality.” In this example, Jason felt strongly that the one member who did not pull his weight should not receive a passing grade on the assignment, but had no support from the other group members. Reflecting on his experience in the military with group projects,

People who have been in the military, people who have served and fought for a greater good, and learned to work as a team, learned that the only way to make progress is
through teamwork, and in groups, we are never going to mesh. That is just never going to happen and there’s unfortunately, nothing that I think we can do about it.

Jason also was uncomfortable with others in his class. As mentioned previously, Jason had negative feelings of professors who were of Middle-Eastern descent who did not speak English as their first language. He stated that there were “triggers” and this also applied to the students in his classes. As he shared,

I have had a few students who have a similar mentality which has made things easier as far as group projects go, um, but a lot of the times I just sit in the back of the room and I don’t talk to people. It’s easier that way.

Milli’s experience was influenced more by her responsibilities as a single parent, and attempts to reconcile those duties with the students that did not have those commitments.

Scheduling opportunities to work on group projects was difficult as she stated,

I don’t have problems per se, so, I’m very low conflict kind of person. There’s definitely awkwardness of, I mean you’re talking with a group about a group project and there like, let’s just go grab a beer and talk about it Tuesday night, and I’m like I’m a grown up and I have kids and I don’t have time, and let’s just get it done now and be efficient and productive, and there’s sort of a difference in mentality, a big-time difference in mentality.

Lily did not indicate any difficulty in the classroom per se, but did state, “It was tough to socialize with most of the civilian students just ’cause they were so much younger.” Steve had mixed feelings regarding his experience and interaction with other students,

Coming from the military where everybody is supposed to do what they’re supposed to and no talking back or anything like that, coming into this environment and then being around those young, I can’t really call them kids, because technically they’re adults, but . . . Yeah it’s a little annoying at times.

Steve also shared that those students in his same major are “Johnny on the spot” as they want to continue on to a doctoral degree after completing the degree they are currently working toward. In regard to Robert’s experience, he indicated that it has been positive once the students get to know him. Chester also had a positive experience in the classroom with other students, stating:
I was just like a 22-year-old, because really apart from the 40 hours a week when I was in night classes, I had everything in common with a 22-year-old student. I don’t have any kids, I’m not married, I don’t have any responsibilities. So I felt totally comfortable.

Of those students interviewed, Gonzo, Chester and Robert felt as though they had to set an example for those students who were in the same classes. That sense of responsibility came from their age, their military training and experience. During Chester’s last semester he retired from the military. He stated there was a distinct difference in his feeling toward his classmates before and after he was retired.

I felt differently, when I got on campus because, when I retired my last semester there, last semester in class . . . I had retired, had a little facial hair growing out, taking a course called American military history and it was a different dynamic. Half the class was ROTC kids . . . as I went to class, knowing I was a retiree. In that same class I went from being in the military to being a retiree in a week. One class we met I was in the military, next class I was retired. So that dynamic was between myself and the kids, they’re all kids whether they are ROTC kids, they’re 20 years old, 21. The dynamics changed a little bit, I looked at them differently from peers to I’m senior.

While sharing their experiences with traditional students in the classroom, Milli shared her reservations about acknowledging her veteran status and for those of her classmates who were also veterans indicating they would not want to be acknowledged: “I imagine, while other people don’t have the same reservations I do . . . somebody who has issues with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) don’t want to talk about it and do not stand up, don’t want to go there.”

When Steve reflected on his class interaction, he shared that “I’ve seen a lot of students go ‘did you kill anybody?’ That’s not something you want to just walk up to somebody and ask.” Next, I will discuss the pursuit of the students’ degree with regard to the type of courses which they were enrolled and semesters they were in class.

**Subtheme 1c. Reasons behind a military or veteran student taking hybrid or online courses may be different than the traditional student.** The classes in which this group of
military and veteran students was enrolled were not all face-to-face. Options included distance learning courses that did not require a presence on the campus and hybrid courses which require a portion of the class time be spent on campus while the remaining time was completed online. Of those military and veteran students interviewed, three stated they took distance learning courses in an effort to complete their degree sooner. This afforded them the opportunity to take more credits while not requiring them to be on campus during specific times for the distance learning or hybrid course.

The classes were still needed for their degree, but the ability to schedule and complete them online relieved some of the pressure related to time management; the flexibility associated with online and hybrid courses allowed them to work the “in class” time around their personal schedules and other commitments. Robert regularly took classes that were either hybrid or online stating, “I would say that 90% of my classes have been, or 85% have probably been on campus, but I did aim for one online or hybrid each semester.” Robert continued by saying, “It seemed like there was more online classes that were available in the summer.” Chester chose to have a more flexible summer schedule taking “all my summer classes online.” Gonzo said he has taken distance learning courses, “but I am not an online person.” Chester, Robert and Gonzo indicated that the distance learning courses assisted with time management.

Five of those interviewed indicated they had taken classes in the fall, spring and summer—essentially attending classes year round. The reasons ranged from being the only time the class was offered, to having to stay within the timeline (having dropped a course earlier), to having a desire to complete their education more quickly. Jack’s reasoning was different from the other participants; he explained, “I did not take any time off during the summer where it would’ve gone in-active and I would’ve had to refill out the paperwork again.” He went on to
say, “After filling it out the first time and it being 2½ years later, I don’t entirely remember where it was I was supposed to go to fill out all that paperwork again.” In a follow up to his statement, I asked if he meant where on campus, and he indicated all paperwork he completed was online.

**Theme 2: Military and Veteran Students’ Choice to Engage or Socialize Beyond the Classroom: The Impact of Military vs. Civilian Experiences**

The student participants were asked about their involvement with the university during their tenure. The interviews allowed them to expand on any and all involvement be it class requirements, personal interactions or formal student organizations within the university setting they may have been involved with.

**Subtheme 2a. Lack of time or desire to spend more hours at the institution outside of the classroom.** All participants indicated some involvement overall. I asked this group of participants for specifics and with few exceptions, they were not overly involved with student organizations, the military and veterans office or military based activities offered by the university, or even activities required as part of their curriculum. As Milli indicated, there were required activities with her degree, but she does not attend other events. “I have to go to certain events and I go to them, do what I’m supposed to do and leave.” With the exception of Steve and Lily, the participants were not involved with the formal organizations for their respective colleges or major. Through the interviews, I discovered that those participants who were engaged in formal activities only partook in those that were targeted or useful to their future or major.

There are multiple opportunities for students to get involved in a variety of areas on campus. This includes organizations that focus on academics, to service, to hobbies and more. At this Midwest university there are more than 450 registered student organizations (RSOs) that are
open to the students. There are those that are major specific or have membership requirements, but there are a vast number of RSOs open to most, if not all, students at the university. In the area of academics, there are many organizations attached to the specific college or major the student is pursuing. There are organizations that encompass hobbies the students enjoy, language clubs, organizations that provide the opportunity to network with peers or members in their degree field, and service opportunities such as those that support and assist young readers in the community.

Student engagement was difficult for the participants for different reasons. Some of those reasons provided were the age difference, their work schedules, and their family life. All of the military and veteran students indicated their age difference was part of the reason they did not interact more or at all, with Milli stating, “I am in a different place, I have already been there, done that.” Chester indicated that his involvement was limited for many reasons and was not proud of the fact he did not engage or socialize more “working 40 hours a week, having a laser-like focus, knowing that I could not be screwing around in class and I had to focus.”

When Lily was at the university, she chose to be involved with RSO’s that are made up of students from her college. The organization she had the most involvement with is one that provides academic growth, networking opportunities in her field, and also assisted her tremendously with the time and experience requirements of her degree program. By being involved in this RSO, Lily was able to save a large amount of money on her degree. An RSO such as this is not necessarily available in each college, let alone with each major. Although a member of the RSO, she stated, “I didn’t really socialize with like the fraternities or anything like that. I was too old for that, but I was on the [deleted for confidentiality] team and I was also involved with several of the [major – again deleted for confidentiality] organizations.”
Steve is quite involved with two RSOs that are directly related to his major and for a short time, the Student Veterans of America (SVA) chapter on campus. He really enjoys the information put forth from those RSOs involved or based on his major. His involvement with the SVA was short, as he shared, “Leadership was not very good at the time, obviously since the whole club fell apart, but I was really just looking for other veterans to hang out with and just do stuff with.” At the time of his interview Steve was in the last semester of his degree program and took time out from his RSO involvement due to his “need to buckle down and focus for the finals, but I really like the [deleted for confidentiality] one. Good information there, good speakers.” Time, work, age and family commitments were cited by the remaining six participants as reasons they were not able to get involved with RSOs. In addition to the RSOs, there is an office on campus that is there to serve the military and veteran students. The amount of involvement with that office varies for this group of participants.

The office for military and veterans at this institution was developed to provide guidance, work through any possible issues, and provide a safe space to this population of learners. Military and veteran students are not required to “check in,” nor are they required to be involved at all with the office. All participants were asked if they were aware of the office and there were many different responses. Six of the eight participants had some degree of interaction with the office.

The strongest response came from Jason. Before I had the opportunity to ask the question about the amount of involvement he may have had with this particular office, he shared his experience. He indicated that he did not know the lounge, part of the office which is available to military and veteran students, even existed until he was a sophomore and some friends from the ROTC told him. He went there to see the office and lounge because he thought he could meet
more people there. He stated, “It was in a dank basement, kinda gross, nobody really used it.”

The office for the military and veterans support was later moved to a different location on campus.

When Jason heard where the new office and lounge would be located, he was appalled. As he tells it, he has made no attempt to use the office after attending the opening ceremony and made his reasons clear to those in charge.

You put it in the same building with all of the international students, mostly Middle-Eastern students that don’t speak English that come in? You’re going to put a bunch of Iraq, Afghani and some Iran veterans, in the same building with a bunch of Middle-Eastern students. You’re putting gasoline and fire together. All it takes is one dude with PTSD to be sitting there, trying to relax and four or five guys out there speaking, Hitu, whatever language, I don’t know, I don’t remember, so whatever language they’re speaking. For it to set off a large triggered event and for him to snap, and then you’ve got a, a dude, who beats the crap out of some guys, or a school shooting, or whatever the case may be. You have this giant fiasco, because you chose the worst possible building to put a veterans’ lounge in.

Most of the participants were positive about the office, including a few suggestions to improve things. Robert, Steve and Gonzo all commented on the location of the office, but did not indicate having the same reaction as Jason. Gonzo suggested that the office and lounge needed more space, a better location, and more to do:

I would like to see more office space for them to have more for the veterans to do. I don’t know, I guess I kind of picture like a USO at some airport, you know, with the pool table and a couple of books here, a TV.

Robert shared the location could be closer to his college, but the staff in the office itself were “super friendly.” Steve was positive in his interactions with the office personnel, sharing that they stepped in to assist when there was a need for equipment and other financial issues. As far as the location, Steve felt,

The office seems kind of tucked away, like way out of the way. If it wasn’t for the fact that I parked in the parking garage, I wouldn’t even go through [the particular] Hall any
day. I’ve seen other schools student veterans lounge, and stuff like that and they were much nicer. Ours is just like a tucked away hole in the wall, but that’s not really affected me negatively in any way. I mean, to me maybe the veterans lounge in the veterans offices could be somewhere more centrally located, it just seems to be quite out-of-the-way.

All of Milli’s interaction with the office took place over the phone and via email. Milli indicated the office “did serve me well and helped me a lot.” Chester had minimal contact with the office. Other than the initial contact at the office as an accepted student and meeting the office staff during a recruiting visit on his base, he had no other contact. Chester stated he had no need to visit the office, but indicated that he knew “they were there if I needed them. If I would’ve needed anything, I would’ve went and talked to them for sure.” Steve also indicated that the military and veteran office provided some positive benefits for socializing as well.

**Subtheme 2b. Feeling like I don’t belong.** Of those interviewed, there was not one person who stated they had a relationship outside of the classroom with their fellow students, with the exception of on campus relationships with other veteran or military students. The only interaction was through required projects or university activities that they were involved in. Based on their sharing, it is clear that most students did not feel comfortable in engaging or socializing beyond the classroom or required activities. Their satisfaction with the institution and success were not tied to their sense of belonging.

In an effort to provide an opportunity for interaction outside of the classroom, one of the things the institution does through the office that serves this population on campus is to provide opportunities for interaction with the university community. The office often provides tickets to campus activities for the student and their family or friends (often providing up to four tickets per student, per event). These events included hockey games, football games, theater activities and other similar events within the local community. If the student has registered and identified
as a veteran or military student, there is an email that is generally sent to indicate the availability of these tickets. The only requirement is that the students respond and pick up the tickets to attend. Only three of the eight participants took advantage of the free tickets to attend these events.

Lily indicated that she was not interested in any of these types of events and asked the office to remove her from their email list for them. Milli wasn’t comfortable accepting many of the tickets as she stated, “I don't feel comfortable participating in them more, because I feel embarrassed of how I didn’t do as much as I wanted.” As noted earlier, Milli spent one year as active duty in the U.S. Air Force. Lily also shared she felt she had little in the way of relationships. “That sense of camaraderie that I had in the military, I thought that I would, because I made friends when I was in the military, you make friends, you know that family, your automatic friends and that doesn’t translate to a college classroom.” Milli does miss the interaction of others in the military, stating, “I do miss that camaraderie. I do miss meeting somebody, knowing that you have some shared experiences, that to some degree you do have the same sense of morals, sense of right and wrong.”

Jason indicated he has attended many of the activities, but not as a student. In his role at the university, he handles much of the information technology (IT) at campus events. As far as interacting outside of his work role Jason shares his choice to interact with others at the gym:

I’m at the gym, I’ve met a lot of veteran students, usually the people that I talk to and I choose to communicate with. Um a lot of the employees up there I choose not to interact with, because they are, um, foreign, they don’t speak English, and they don’t understand, or they just . . . they are your typical college student and I don’t want to deal with it.
Jason also indicated he really had no interest in socializing beyond the work or gym acquaintances. “That’s not something that I enjoy and would just be more miserable for me if I were to interact with students more.”

Robert seemed to take advantage of the event opportunities the most, taking in hockey games, theater experiences and other events available. He stated that through this endeavor, he has had a real nice experience and knows that he is not the only veteran. He went on to add that when he is over at his academic college, “I feel like I’m the only veteran, because [it is] kinda small over there.”

The opportunity to share time with other veteran and military students is available if the student chooses to do so. In addition to the ticketed events, veteran and military students shared that there were other “activities” the office sponsors, but no further specifics were provided. As Robert shared, “They’ve been super positive.” Safe to say he has enjoyed the activities in which he has participated.

**Theme 3: The Influence of Military Training on Coping and the Need for Support Identified by the Military and Veteran Students**

During the participant interviews, students shared their experience regarding making the decision to go to a higher education institution, what prompted their desire to attend, what type of support and from whom they received support during the decision making process and during their tenure at the institution. The notion of support and coping was viewed with their military lens.

**Subtheme 3a: The lingering effect military experience has on the student’s university life.** Not all of the military and veteran students had an “aha” moment when they decided that the baccalaureate degree would be their focus. For the majority of the participants, it
was dissatisfaction with their situation or employment at the time which prompted their return or initial higher education experience. Chester indicated, “I didn’t feel like I fit in, I feel I wasn’t able to accomplish much and wasn’t like I fit in with people cause I didn’t have a college degree.” There were many types of support the participants received during their time at the university. This support varied from participant to participant. Along with support, the students shared the impact that their military experience had on their educational experience. In addition, the participants indicated time was a large factor in their experience and influenced much of their decisions throughout their tenure at the institution.

Support may be interpreted differently by each individual. When interviewing the participants for this study, four of the eight veteran and military students mentioned support to assist them through, get them started, or help with what is needed to get through their degree program. Some of the students mentioned professors, leadership at the university, laying things out in exact fashion where there are no questions, faith, family, and friends as important sources of support.

The level of support differed among those interviewed. Gonzo shared that his wife would “literally make me go into the room, the man cave, and our dog will come and sit right there and I’ll do my homework.” Gonzo also credits his strong religion and faith: “A lot of prayer, my faith” to complete his journey. Chester indicated that he had much support, coming from different places for his success. “I had a lot of professors were in my corner. Hard work dedication and support from others. I couldn’t have graduated college if I didn’t have the support around me.”

The experience of the participants indicated support seemed to come from the university itself, in fact, most of Jason’s support was derived from his professors, stating:
I had two professors who really were understanding and supportive. I take that back, three, because the other guy was a veteran as well. If it wasn’t for, like I said, those two professors, then I probably would’ve just stopped taking classes and worked full-time.

Milli indicated her support also was derived from the university in that she knew “what I needed to do, how I’ve needed to do it and I was able to do, you know follow the steps just follow the procedure basically.” Having a distinct plan that she was able to carry out was key to her success. All of the students indicated they felt they were supported by those who had a role at the university ranging from registration staff, professors and advisors.

Chester, Jason, and Steve mentioned that their friends encouraged them to return to education to pursue their degree. Gonzo mentioned that his spouse was instrumental in assisting with the decision about when to sign up for classes. Gonzo wanted to be sure he would not have to stop out of classes for another deployment before he committed to his degree program and classes. Gonzo also shared his feelings about his wife’s support saying, “Fortunately, I have a wife who pushes me.” And she asks, “Did you get your homework done?” Not all of the participants mentioned a support system that included friends or family. What many of the participants did share was the impact their military experience had on their ability to navigate the institution. The time spent in the military for these participants was a life changing experience. All the participants spent a different amount of time as a member of the military. The take-away from that experience helped shape who they have become and how they carry themselves and interact with others. The hierarchical structure and the much disciplined time regimen of the military is what the students have lived and experienced from one up to 26 years for one participant. How the student reacts in the university environment, less structured, less hierarchical on the face, and less regimented has a tremendous effect on their lived experience at the university.
Seven of the eight participants indicated their military experience was a support for their educational success. Having lived the structured life that was planned for them in the military, many of the participants found the regimen, structure each semester, and setting a schedule and sticking to it, provided for a positive quest towards their degree. “The habits that I learned from the Marine Corps helped me study and make sure that I was in class on time,” said Jason. Lily indicated, “It was a pretty simple transition after what I went through in the military.” The life this group of participants lived in the military appears to have assisted them in their experience as a military or veteran student.

Robert, Gonzo, and Milli indicated specifically, the time in the military shaped who they are and their experience at the institution. “It gave me the discipline to pay attention, take notes and not play around” (Robert). Gonzo shared:

You know a lot of the military comes in and says you know what, this is a challenge but you have to do it, you know there’s no other option, you know you can go around, you can go underneath, you can go over it, but we choose to go through it. That’s what drove my success here. That’s what we went through. That helped out, those experiences helped me out.

Milli shared a slightly different perspective, but still attributes her success and support to her military experience. “Really, really, really, it was basic training. It’s funny that military teaches you how to de-escalate. A lot of people don’t realize that, but it does, and it did for me. I think that was integral.”

Robert, Jason, and Steve all indicated their habits, which are now ingrained into their person, were attributed to the time spent in the military. “Coming from the military, have to be there by this time, drills, you know how it is. I’m pretty good now I guess you would say keeping track of my time and doing things without getting stressed” (Steve). Chester indicated that the military did not affect him so much as helped him stick to his goal of achieving good grades, he
“couldn’t take his military with him” when he went to campus. He knew he “had to do the same thing that all the other kid has to do, and my goal was to get an A in this class, a B in this class.”

Clearly, the military experience of this population of learners has shaped who they have become and through that lens, it has impacted their experience at the university. The regimen, structure, and discipline have played a large part in this group of participants reaching their goal of matriculation. Higher education has been an ongoing pursuit for many years for a couple of the participants; and for some, it has been a return after a military enlistment or during that enlistment while preparing for civilian life. The discipline and structure from military life has been carried forward to the institutional experience, as well as the memories of their time in service.

During the interviews, time was mentioned as a challenge for most of the participants. The time spent for classes, coursework and the required activities outside of class was a challenge for six of the eight participants. With all participants enrolled in different programs, there are no two that have experienced the same class schedule or required activities. Sometimes professors allowed leeway based on their previous experience and situation. For example, the military and veteran students had experiences that could cover many of the out-of-class activities that may be required.

Each semester, the course schedule is changed based on classes offered. With that being the case, the participants had to rearrange their other commitments repeatedly or find another way to handle this. For example, Jason shared, “I just picked whatever fit my schedule best. I was a student employee and then moved to full time, so I have always had to work around that schedule as far as classes.” Milli, being a single parent who also works while attending classes on a full time basis could not go to the bar to get started on a class project with her work group.
“I’m like I’m a grown up and I have kids and I don’t have time.” She also went on to talk about her job and indicated that her employer is very flexible with her and rearranges Milli’s schedule to meet her class needs.

Chester acknowledges that he does not necessarily have as many commitments as other veteran and military students. “I don’t have any kids, I’m not married, so it’s a lot easier for me, but still I’m an adult I have to work 40 hours a week.” Most of the traditional students do not have the burden of working full time while taking classes full time, although I am sure there are some who are doing just that.

One of Gonzo’s many challenges is time. He is also employed full time as a member of the military, completing an internship for his degree program, and taking classes. “I think that as a veteran you kind of know that nothing comes easy. You’ve got to work for it, you’ve got put in the time. Challenges, like I said, just mentally, time, money.” Gonzo continues to work hard (as are all of these participants) to fit all the requirements of his degree program into his life, with the largest sacrifice being time with family.

Steve has credited his military experience with his ability to not stress too much over the time issue even though he is in an intensive degree program. Steve stated that he “credits the military for time management.” Having already completed one baccalaureate degree at a military academy, he has been trained in proper study habits. He also indicated that his only challenge has been “just time management,” and he added, “I don’t have an outside job so that I could focus on being a full-time student.” Another challenge that was mentioned in the interviews was Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Although only mentioned by a small number of participants, their experiences are too important not to highlight.
Subtheme 3b: Not all veterans should be labeled or identify as being afflicted with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. During the interviews, the participants were not asked anything with regard to their mental health, physical health, or experience with either. It was not a focus of this study. Nevertheless, two of the participants shared their experience with Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in different ways. Jason described experiences while at the university; hearing students or faculty speaking in different languages made him uncomfortable. “There are times where it triggers something, but I usually just do my best to ignore it, we’re in a country which was built on diversity” (Jason). He described episodes of aggravation, anger and frustration. These episodes have occurred around campus, during travel to and from campus, in offices around campus, and particularly in classes that have a high number of Middle-Eastern students. Jason stated he has not been diagnosed with PTSD, but he still has episodes. “I feel like I am more well-adjusted, I still tense up.” He has indicated a heavy concern for the interaction of the international students and the military and veteran students due to the proximity of offices which serve both populations. Jason shared:

Anyone with serious PTSD, will have, at some point, it’s not a matter of if, it’s a matter of when, will have an episode there. It’s, there will be either physical violence, there will be an outbreak, something will happen and somebody, is either gonna get injured or there’ll be a lawsuit, something’s going to happen.

During the interview, I informed Jason of services both on and off campus that are able to help him if he felt the need for their assistance. These facilities include the VA medical center, local hospital, on campus medical facility, on campus counseling services; if he desired, I offered to provide contact information for the on and off-campus facilities. Jason indicated, “I wasn’t aware that we had, you’ve mentioned earlier that there were people trained to deal with veterans. I don’t know if that’s counselors or what the case may be, I had no awareness of that, and I work
here.” By the end of the interview, Jason was much calmer and thanked me for conducting the study. “Thank you for doing this . . . not focusing on the statistics and actually focusing on how people actually feel and how people feel like they were treated and their interactions. . . . I think this is going to make a difference.”

Milli’s experience was different. One of the faculty members with whom she sought career advice, appeared to her, to be more focused on the possibility of her having PTSD than the reason she actually went to see this person. This made her quite uncomfortable, stating:

He interpreted my sort of insecurities of my resume as being insecurities about myself and talk to me extensively, for much longer than I expected or anticipated, about if I was depressed, that I shouldn’t be scared to get a medication, and that I have access to people to talk to. . . . It was very well-intentioned and I know that, but it was also, almost insulting because it was like, do you think I need medication? What am I doing that makes you think that I am unwell right now? Which, I guess, if I was in a really dark place maybe he would’ve been a godsend and I would’ve said thank goodness he saw something, but it wasn’t helpful because I’m really okay.

She was insulted, aggravated, and did not seek further assistance from others after this experience. Milli also shared her concern for her fellow veteran and military classmates when students would recognize they were veterans.

The first question is always. Did you go overseas? Did you? Were you in combat? What did you guys do? I was like, I wasn’t, so that was really easy for me to answer no, but Mr. Marine, you don’t know what he’s been through, why would you say something like that? That was also, probably that, this was younger students. 20-year-old doesn’t think, I didn’t think that well at 20 either, about what you might say to somebody and how it might affect them.

Milli watches out for those she feels that camaraderie with and is comfortable with fellow veteran and military classmates. Milli indicated that students’ reaction and questioning is one of the reasons she does not always identify as a veteran. At the university, veteran identification is self-disclosed and if an individual is not using Veterans Administration benefits, the student is not required to share their veteran status.
Theme 4: The Difficulty and/or Ease Military and Veteran Students Experience While Wading Through the Institutional Bureaucracy

Much goes into the actual registration process when a student decides to attend a higher education institution. The military and veteran student is no exception. Student participants shared their experience with the process from their first contact with the institution through the last semester that paperwork was required in order to assure the receipt of benefits through the GI Bill.

Subtheme 4a: There is a difference in applying, near or far. This experience was vastly different for this group of participants. Initial applications were completed in a variety of ways: via internet while on deployment, as a walk-in during an enrollment fair, or for most of this group, via internet after being discharged. How the process unfolded from the beginning through the completion of their degrees is discussed along with previous formal education for this group of participants.

Each student had to register individually for each course they wanted to take, each semester; this is no different than for any other university or college student. What does differ with this population of learners is how this process is accomplished from the initial application through their matriculation. If the student happened to be out of state or out of country, there was no easy way to get in touch with someone at the university to answer questions. Time zones if not in-state can be a problem, particularly if the applicant must be on duty and unable to call during what would be traditionally “business hours.”

Gonzo was out of country when he made his initial application for admission. “I started registering . . . and started sending in my transcript from overseas, which you know I’m pretty proud of myself for figuring it out from overseas.” He went on to say that it wasn’t that difficult,
but did require “some legwork on the individual, but if you keep stuff in order as we’re kind of trained to in the military you should be fine.” Chester did not indicate any difficulties with the registration process. He registered and began taking classes the semester following his matriculation from a local community college.

While attending classes during his first semester at the institution, Chester received an email at work on the base that indicated there would be representatives from the university in house to visit with prospective students. He was two months into his baccalaureate degree at that point. “When I was in my first semester, I just knew that this wasn’t what I was going to do. I couldn’t get every class done and work 40 hours a week.” Although passionate about the subject, it was “getting on my nerves.” He decided to talk to the representatives. During the meeting with those from the university he was told, “You don’t have to take this class during the day or this class at night or the weekends, we can tailor it, we can find the classes. We have a lot of latitude.” Chester changed his major and the change afforded the ability to use his time more efficiently.

Through the interviews, everyone who spoke of the registration process, had glowing remarks for the person handling the registrations for military and veteran students. Chester stated, “I’d walk over to talk to her, two seconds later I was out the door and she was handling the rest.” According to Jack, “It [registration] was a bit heavy on paperwork, like everything from the military.” Based on this experience, Jack chose “not take any time off during the summer where it would’ve gone inactive and I would’ve had to refill out the paperwork again.” Jason also had positive remarks about the person in registration, stating that “she was an amazing help. She made the paperwork easy.” Jason continued on that her follow-up was instrumental in his success.
Even when I forgot to fill out paperwork, she would email me “Hey, I noticed you’re signed up for classes, you forgot to fill this out, and also need to do this” and I would send it right to her.

Jason thinks very highly of this individual and posits, “She is a huge reason why veterans stay at this campus. She made things a lot easier.”

Milli applied for admission in person at a transfer orientation day. She said, “I came in and showed them my transcripts and showed them what I’d done. They were like here’s your acceptance letter.” She has had some difficulty when trying to register for her capstone class as she had what she called “a reverse hold” which would not allow her to schedule her classes. After some conversations with the registrar’s office, this was remedied and she was able to register.

At this institution, there is a single point of contact for the military and veteran student when registering. This person provides follow-up and makes sure that the military and veteran student has dotted their “i’s” and crossed all “t’s” required so as not to have a delay with funding or registration. It is clear the veterans and military students who participated in this study at this institution are satisfied with the registration process as they experienced it. As the participants tell it, their experience with funding their education was not quite as smooth.

**Subtheme 4b: The GI Bill is not the same for all.** The support of funds for the military and veteran student is provided many different ways. That is no exception with this particular group of students. Most people are familiar with the “GI Bill.” The GI Bill is not available for all veteran students, and it is not available at the same rate for all veteran students. There are also different chapters for the bill, meaning that there are different requirements which need to be met, to use a specific chapter. The military and veteran students that are eligible for the funding can sometimes use the funding for themselves, or for family members (depending on the type).
In addition to the GI Bill the students also use grants, scholarships, and traditional student loans to pay for their education. Many of the students interviewed for this study also work to supplement the funds received for schooling and other expenses.

Although there were no specific questions asked of the participants with regard to the chapter funds they were eligible for and using, the participants were very forthcoming with this information. Of the eight participants, all were using the Post-9/11 GI Bill funding. The type and amount of funding was not equal for all participants. Milli stated that she was receiving approximately 50% of the traditional funding due to her short time in active service. Chester specifically mentioned he was eligible for and using the Post-9/11 GI Bill Chapter 33 funds. There were other funding sources identified by the military and veteran students in addition to the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Milli indicated she had received a rather generous scholarship from her college that was initiated, funded, and recipients evaluated by the group funding the scholarship. This happens to be a group of military or veteran university alum who were looking to make a difference and provide assistance to those taking classes. There was no application; the scholarship was provided to those with the highest grade point average (GPA) in this particular college. Milli was ecstatic, stating it “was a total surprise” and she was able to meet the donors at a luncheon. Milli also uses financial aid to fund her education.

Gonzo is receiving state tuition assistance to supplement his use of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. He also stated that he has a son who is attending a four-year institution and Gonzo is assisting with his tuition. Robert, Jack, and Jason only indicated the use of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Lily used the Post-9/11 GI Bill, but mentioned there was difficulty based on her program. Lily shared, “The largest problem I had was reconciling the G.I. Bill with the program.” For Lily’s program,
in order to graduate, she needed to continue her training year round. For this particular training, the GI Bill would only pay for this specific training during the traditional fall/spring semesters. She went on to say, “I had some difficulty and I ended up running out of time, because it took longer to finish.” With the 36-month time limit on most Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for this time period, this was a concern for more than one of the participants. The other factor that affected their funding was previous formal education, most often credits that were transferred into this institution. Not all credits provided exceptions to courses, but they raised the number of credits that had already been used toward the funding of their degree.

**Subtheme 4c: The military and veteran students feeling shortchanged.** Many of the participants in this study had previous college experiences. The time spent, type of credits, programs of study, and transfer credits vary among the participants. Many of the participants indicated they attended an institution of higher education prior to enlisting in the military. They discontinued their enrollment for a number of reasons. Jack indicated, “I had about one semester of college at another school before I decided that that really wasn’t the thing I wanted to do at that time.” Gonzo had taken classes prior to enlisting and again before he started at this institution. Regarding the first enrollment prior to his enlistment, he quit because it was “expensive.”

Gonzo did have to stop-out during one semester prior to his enrollment at this institution due to a deployment. He continued to enroll in classes over the years. “I would take classes here and there when I knew it was safe and I was going to be able to work it into my schedule.” Since enrolling at this institution, he has not had to stop-out. Gonzo stated that he waited “until I knew I wouldn’t be shipped out” as he did not want to have to stop out again. Steve has a previous baccalaureate degree in a different field of study than the one he is currently pursuing.
Upon application to the university, the participants had credits transferred into the institution. For some, this did not prove to be a benefit. Previous to her time at the institution, Milli continued to take classes for six and a half years while her spouse was in the military. “My time while I was in the military and traveling around. Most of those credits didn’t transfer. A lot of credits from the military, from my tech school and those don’t transfer to anything to do with [my major].” During her last semester at the university, based on the number of credits transferred in and those earned at this institution, Milli has 173 credits. She said, “I tried hard and went to different schools and tried different things and paid for them. It’s not like I, you know it’s not like I haven’t paid for them.” Unfortunately, this has affected her ability to receive funding from federal sources if she would need to continue past this semester. Others had a similar experience or concern with regard to previous credits.

Jack was enrolled in higher education prior to enlisting in the military and took many courses throughout his military tenure. Jack had military credits that also transferred into the institution, but was unsure of the number. Jack had a fairly aggressive schedule to complete his degree, and stated, “I just wanted to make sure that my G.I. Bill didn’t run out before I was finished.” In completing his degree, he has not exhausted his benefits; in fact, he stated, “I still have about a half year and I’m intending to use it to get a second degree.”

Of the participants, Steve and Chester indicated they had prior degrees. As stated earlier, Steve has a baccalaureate degree. Chester has an associate’s degree which he completed the semester prior to starting at this institution. Robert indicated that 14 or 15 credits were transferred in from his military transcript which was beneficial to him. Those credits went toward his degree and “that did save me a semester.” Not all transferred credits from the military transcript or from previous higher education experiences.
Summary

Beginning in fall 2016, I reached out to the office that serves the military and veteran students on campus and asked them to send an email to any military or veteran student who had applied for graduation for that specific semester (Appendix A). After not having enough participants come forward from that first round of emails, I had the office send out the email again for spring 2017 and summer 2017 semesters. During this time, there were 15 students who responded or reached out to indicate their interest in participating in the study. After the three semesters, I was able to interview a total of eight military or veteran students of the 15 that had responded. All interviews took place during the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters. Throughout the interview process, I took the time to transcribe each interview immediately, completing transcription of each interview prior to beginning the next.

Those interviewed came from a variety of military backgrounds, included males and females, and a mix of races across the participating group. Participants have been deployed to active war zones and areas in support of the war. All participants are using some version of the GI Bill to pay for their schooling. A small number of the participants mentioned other funding sources such as grants, scholarships and FAFSA loans, while most participants are working full or part-time to supplement the GI Bill funding.

Once the interviews were transcribed and sent to the participants for member checking, I was able to organize the material. I began to immerse myself in their stories and experiences using the constant comparative method which allowed me the opportunity to pursue items that were shared during subsequent interviews. After completing and transcribing eight interviews, I determined that saturation had been reached.
Through a careful step-by-step process outlined above, four large themes and associated subthemes emerged:

1. Differences in mentality helped shape the institutional experience of the military and veteran students.
   a. Students were sensitive to actions, perspectives and opinions that are in conflict with their own.
   b. Students were sensitive to the ways in which the classroom environment and relationships make them feel either comfortable and connected or disconnected.
   c. Reasons behind a military or veteran student’s taking hybrid or online courses may be different than the traditional student.

2. Military and veteran students’ choice to engage or socialize beyond the classroom: the impact of military vs. civilian experiences.
   a. Lack of time or desire to spend more hours at the institution outside of the classroom.
   b. Feeling like I don’t belong.

3. The influence of military training on coping and the need for support identified by the military and veteran students.
   a. The lingering effect military experience has on the student’s university life.
   b. Not all veterans should be labeled or identify as being afflicted with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

4. The difficulty and/or ease military and veteran students’ experience while wading through the institutional bureaucracy.
   a. There is a difference in applying, near or far.
b. The GI Bill is not the same for all.

c. The military and veteran students feeling shortchanged.

Within the identified themes, the participants experiences spoke to me about the period of time they had been at the institution, their goals and drive to succeed and earn their degree, how their military service impacted their classroom experience, how engaged they were with the activities at the university, how they coped with challenges and what the administration piece was like. I presented their experiences with the good, the bad and the awesome times they had while students at the university.

Overall, six of the eight participants shared having a positive relationship with at least one of their professors. All of the participants shared experiences of interaction with students in the classroom, many of them stating that they feel disconnected from the 18-, 19-, and 20-year-old students. Most of the students took a distance learning or hybrid class to complete their studies quicker or on-schedule.

Reviewing the participants’ level of engagement with the university, RSOs and military and veteran themed office and activities, the amount of participation was low. The main reason identified was a lack of time. Many of those interviewed work full or part time while taking classes and a few of them have families at home which they feel is more of a priority.

Overall, there has not been use of “professional” coping mechanisms. Many of the students did not realize there are facilities and members of the campus community that are trained to assist the veteran and military community if in need. Assistance can range from medical and mental health care to tutoring for a particular subject. Not one of the participants indicated during the interview, any involvement with these services. The coping mechanism most often identified was their military training. Six of eight of those interviewed indicated time
management was a huge challenge while at the university and credit the military structure and training as the reason for their time management skills.

Registration and administration was heralded as a positive experience with the identified dedicated person within the offices to assist veteran and military students. It appears this person is extremely helpful and has an impact on the educational experiences of those she has interacted with. All those who shared their registration experience, spoke positively of this individual and that they had no problems and were provided a quick turn-around on all paperwork.

As veteran and military students, they have much in common with regard to their experiences at the university. All are in different programs, seeking a four-year degree, and very diverse in their military experience. The time in service, where they served, and the branch served was not common across the participants.
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION

In order to pay for their education, most of the military and veteran students use some version of the GI Bill. This has allowed many servicemembers to receive a vocational certificate and/or an associate’s degree and/or a baccalaureate degree. The institution is charged with meeting the needs of the veteran and military student.

This phenomenological bounded case study focuses on the lived experiences of military and veteran students who pursued and completed a baccalaureate degree at a “Military Friendly” institution of higher education in the Midwest. In responding to the questions, I will be looking through the lens of both the Adult Learner Theory and Transition Theory. Below I will address how well the information I gathered answered the research questions.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following questions. How do post 9/11 active duty and veteran military personnel who served either as support personnel or engaged personnel during military conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, or other conflicts, successfully navigate the transition to becoming undergraduate students at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” higher education institution and persist to completion of their degree?

Sub-Questions:

1. How do the active duty and veteran military students (as described previously) describe their experiences transitioning from active military duty to becoming university students?
2. How do they describe their acclimation to higher education and account for their progress to completion?

3. What particular challenges did they encounter on the path to completion and what campus experiences, programs, or services, if any, did they utilize to overcome those challenges?

4. How was the program designed, shaped, and implemented to support the veteran and military student?

5. How do the veteran and military students’ experiences intersect with programs and services offered by the institution?

In responding first to the sub-questions of this study, the initial research question will be answered.

*How do the active duty and veteran military students (as described previously) describe their experiences transitioning from active military duty to becoming university students?*

The theme I find connected to the military and veteran students’ transition is the first theme: *Differences in mentality helped shape the institutional experience of the military and veteran students*. The data received from the participants respond very well to this research question and provide a detailed view of their experience in transitioning. Looking deeper into the theme identifies the subthemes: *The students were sensitive to actions, perspectives, and opinions that are in conflict with their own* and *The students were sensitive to the ways in which the classroom environment and relationships make them feel either comfortable and connected or disconnected*. The participants’ transition was heavily influenced by students they had interacted with. Jason and Gonzo are the two participants who shared struggles in their transition. Jason stated, “It was very difficult.” His main difficulties were trying to “set a schedule where I
could form habits here” and changing his mentality: “Mentality was very difficult transition wise.” Gonzo has stated his transition was hard, particularly challenging for him was “dealing with young kids.” All of the participants indicated interaction with students in the classroom and how that affected their transition.

This study agrees with the literature in multiple ways. Through the lens of the Adult Learner Theory, Schlossberg et al. (1989) indicate adult learners are heterogeneous, different ages, and have different life patterns which become more and more divergent; along with the changes in their life patterns the bureaucracies are more rigid and hierarchical which then encourages more of a dependence than autonomy (p. 1). This demographic of learners has a range of ages with different life patterns, each having a differing level of involvement with their military tenure and past educational experiences. Each of the participants experienced transition differently. Ackerman et al. (2009) posit, “The experience of war makes those who fight a special group within this population” (p. 1). Their educational experience will be impacted by those with whom they interact before and during their transition along with their unique history.

There were two participants, Gonzo and Chester, who were still considered active duty while attending the institution. All participants had a different experience with regard to time in service, location of service and the amount, if any, of previous higher education experience. Schlossberg et al. (1989) discussed the unique learner and that interviews with those learners “will reflect common needs for competence, autonomy, identity, relationships, purposes, integrity, and emotional development” (p. 36).

The remaining participants were positive in regard to their transition from military to student. Jack was prepared by the U.S. Air Force for his transition. Jack stated the U.S. Air Force had courses which prepared them for “things you can expect . . . things that will help you out . . .
how to use your GI Bill.” He indicated that the course on the GI Bill “was very useful.” Robert credited his military experience for a smooth transition stating, “It gave me the discipline to pay attention, take notes and not play around.” Steve, Lily, and Chester used “great,” “seamless,” “pretty easy,” and “really smooth” to describe their experience. Milli also shared her experience was “really pretty easy, because I had tried going to school before joining the military . . . the military gave me the sense of structure.” Based on the responses, the participants did not have much difficulty transitioning from active duty military to student. Most described their transition in positive terms.

*How do they describe their acclimation to higher education and account for their progress to completion?*

The themes and subthemes of *Differences in mentality helped shape the institutional experience of the military and veteran students, The influence of military training on coping and the need for support identified by the military and veteran students, The lingering effect military experience has on the student’s university life,* and *Not all veterans should be labeled or identify as being afflicted with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* seem to respond to this question well. Through the interviews, the participants were clear that their military experience set the tone for their university life: laying out the plan, no deviation, get it done. The acclimation to higher education was described by Milli as “really smooth, like this is what you need to do, this is when you need to do it by and I followed that exactly.” As far as her success, she credits her time at basic training and her personal stick-to-it attitude. Robert credits his military career as he stated, “I really think my military career played a lot in my success.” Jack indicated his success came from “Hard work, good people here to interact with and studying [sic] with.” Military training and regiment was significant when it came to the students having the ability to acclimate to the
institution and their degree completion. The participants were not ready to separate themselves from the military and become something different. They were not ready to turn 180° and become something unfamiliar, life changing. The military regiment worked and they continued with what they knew and were comfortable with. Once courses were identified the student knew what had to be done and “just did it” (Gonzo). Time management is key to the success of the students. Research supports the behaviors this group of learners has adjusted to in order to meet their goal of degree completion. Schlossberg et al. (1989) posit, “For adults pressed by many competing demands, time management is essential” (p. 126). This group of learners is no exception.

The participants’ interactions with professors were often positive, thinking of those interactions as more of a peer relationship. Speaking in terms of their interactions with other students, most did not build relationships, choosing only to interact as needed during the class or during required activities. As Jason stated, “I just sit in the back of the room and I don’t talk to people. It’s easier that way. Most people are very different from me.”

Examining the theme The influence of military training on coping and the need for support identified by the military and veteran students and the subtheme of The lingering effect military experience has on the student’s university life addressed this question. Based on the responses shared by the participants, the majority of their coping mechanisms were derived from their military training. As for support, the participants credit professors, university leadership, faith, family, and friends. The structure of the university was helpful to some—knowing what was required of them. The institutional practices were not helpful to others as there were changes each semester. The schedule of classes and times were always in flux and time is a major piece of their puzzle. Even with their military training influencing their abilities to cope, it could be difficult at times. Gonzo’s experience was made more difficult due to working and having to
travel to campus stating, “Being active still that takes most of my time and living about an hour away from here, but timewise and distance and then having a full-time job just doesn’t really mesh with my schedule.”

The students had difficulty combining their family/home/work schedules with class schedules. Jack indicated the most difficult was learning to adjust to the multiple locations for campus with the time piece, stating, “It was just more so going from oh hey you’re here in this office working and doing this thing for the entire day versus oh hey, now I need to bounce between classes and campuses.” Baruch, Biener, and Barnet (1987, as cited in Schlossberg et al., 1989) state, “In their examination of ‘role overload’ . . . they find that a person’s investment in two spheres of life is not the cause of overload or conflict; rather the cause is the imbalance of psychological demands and control in each sphere” (p. 102).

Exploring the subtheme of Not all veterans should be labeled or identify as being afflicted with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Jason’s experience in the classroom was difficult for him. Jason did share what he felt were negative experiences with those professors or students for whom English was a second language, stating that their language and accent could be a “trigger.” Research has not indicated language to be a trigger as mentioned by Jason. With Jason’s very strong reaction, I believe this is an area where the literature could be expanded. Jason indicated he has not been diagnosed with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but spoke of many reactions and triggers during his interview. Milli indicated she has not been diagnosed with PTSD, but one professor she went to seeking assistance with her resume assumed she suffered from the disease and truly insulted her.

In addition to crediting military experience, hard work, focus, dedication, and support, time management was mentioned by six of eight participants as a component of their success in
completing their degree. The time management aspect was ingrained during their military service and it appears to have stayed with each of those interviewed.

What particular challenges did they encounter on the path to completion and what campus experiences, programs, or services, if any, did they utilize to overcome those challenges?

In examining this question through the theoretical lens of the Adult Learner and Transition Theories, nearly all of the themes and subthemes respond to this question. Not unlike traditional students, the theme Differences in mentality helped shape the institutional experience of the military and veteran students with its subthemes emphasize the challenges this group of learners faced while working towards completing their degree. Challenges that were mentioned include time, money, mental health, family obligations, work and having to adjust schedules each semester to fit classes around work obligations. Each student was challenged throughout their time at the institution.

The transition model describes how institutions can help assess or assist with strategies for this population of learners. Schlossberg et al. (1989) suggest, “What adult learners need when moving in . . . is not the same as what adult learners need when moving through” (p. 108). Professionals at the university can help assess the needs of the student based on their current situation, supports, and strategies. “The model suggests what activities each individual might (or might not) undertake so that he or she can cope more creatively with the learning process and its issues” (Schlossberg et al., 1989 p. 108).

Identifying the limited involvement of the students outside of the classroom, the second theme Military and veteran students’ choice to engage or socialize beyond the classroom: the impact of military vs. civilian experiences and its subthemes is appropriate. There was little interest to join with campus groups. The interaction was purposeful for those who engaged with
a campus group. For example, Steven and Lily each interacted with a student group specific to their major. Both of the groups were strategic for their future goals. Other challenges mentioned include navigating campus—getting from point A to point B, required courses not available when they needed them, and finding the time for family and work as they scheduled around the class times and required work. Robert, Jason, Milli, Chester, Steve, Gonzo, and Lily all credit their military experience for their ability to overcome challenges while attending the institution. The habits learned, training provided, the continued military attitude and mindset, have all played a role in their coping with educational trials. Jason and Milli had difficult experiences which felt more serious. Schlossberg et al. (1989) indicated that there are different levels or degrees of support for each person that is needed.

The influence of military training on coping and the need for support identified by the military and veteran students, and the subtheme of Not all veterans should be labeled or identify as being afflicted with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder are relevant here. Jason had an experience at the institution that brought reminders of being in theater (in the combat area). One of the criteria and symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as shared by Kennedy et al. (2007), is “Symptoms of re-experiencing, such as recurrent and intrusive memories, nightmares, a sense of reliving the trauma, or psychological and physiological distress when reminded of aspects of the trauma” (p. 897). The memories of the incident triggered something during our interview and Jason became upset.

Milli had an experience where the professor with whom she was interacting, focused only on the possibility of her having PTSD and that she should not be ashamed, rather than the reason for their interaction. This greatly upset Milli as she went to ask for assistance in a technical area and does not struggle with PTSD. As Jenkins (2016) ponders the need to redefine the
relationship that exists between students and professors, he posits, “It seems to me, after 31 years of college teaching, that the lines have grown blurrier, the misconceptions more profound” (para. 3). The professor in Milli’s example lost focus of the purpose of their meeting and did not provide the technical support requested.

Schlossberg et al. (1989) posit, “The amount or kind of support needed varies from one person to the next, but a certain amount is essential and can make the difference in how people cope with transitions” (p. 104). The support used by this specific population of learners was largely internal, they used their military experience to cope and those same things presented challenges. They could not let go of the military structure; it is what helped them to survive. Schlossberg et al. indicated two different types of support which the university has provided. The first is laying out the welcome mat to non-traditional students or older adults which may be the precipice for these students to enroll. The second is caring. Schlossberg et al. shared, “The word caring captures the essence of the kind of support the adult learners talked about most” (p.106). Other coping strategies include faith, family support, and professors who support the student.

These students’ experiences with their professors lean toward the support of their professor as a friend, almost indicating an equal peer-to-peer type relationship rather than that of a teacher-student authoritative relationship. When discussing the relationship among teachers and adult students, Cranton (2006) posits, “The better the relationship among the people, the more meaningful the communication will be” (p. 114). The relationship with the professor provides for a positive learning environment. Schlossberg et al. (1989) posit the suggestion that “the crisis of identity is reawakened whenever an individual experiences a major transition” (p. 37). Having faculty and advisers who are knowledgeable, accessible, and that advocate for the student is an important part of their experience (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 106). I found that
students’ experiences with professors have a tremendous impact on their overall time at the institution. It is important to note that Cranton states, “Not only does authenticity in teaching help create honest and open relationships with students, but it also serves as a model for learners working to define who they are” (p. 115).

It is important to empower the adult learner in order for transformative learning to take place. Learning is the ultimate result of seeking a degree and completing the requirements of that degree. “Educators can support learner empowerment in many ways, most of which exist in the small, ordinary, everyday interactions of the teaching and learning environment” (Cranton, 2006, p. 133). Empowering the student, supporting the student, and allowing the student to grow and foster an understanding of the subject matter should be the desire and goal for all professors.

In addition to the necessary support of professors, Schlossberg et al. (1989) discussed the roles that friends take in assisting adult learners reaching their goals (p. 105). Schlossberg et al. stated, “When asked whether their friends were supportive, male adult learners responded that friends did not enter in to the picture one way or another” (p. 105). In regard to female adult learners, Schlossberg et al. indicated that they “generally said their friends were supportive, but few of the learners considered their friends to have been significant enough to mention them without being asked about them” (p. 105). Although two of the six participants interviewed were female, there was no mention of a “friend” as a support for either of them.

The participants had much gratitude for being at the institution, but I still sense some challenges. They are succeeding not without challenges and pressures, and their military experience has helped them get through. On the other hand, their military experience has also been a source of challenges. In looking at their challenges, the third theme of The influence of military training on coping and the need for support identified by the military and veteran
students is key. Schlossberg et al. (1989) stated, “Supports are particularly critical for the adult learners” (p. 104). The degree of their challenges was different and how they coped with those varied among the participants. The differing scale of needs by this group of learners is supported by the literature. According to Queen and Lewis (2014), during the 2012-13 academic year at Title IV eligible degree-granting post-secondary institutions, only 12% reported peer mentoring and 11% reported group counseling for the military and veteran students (p. 2). If there was a greater need identified, more institutions would have these supports in place.

To my knowledge, the only formal supports on campus that have been utilized by this group of participants are the office which serves the military and veteran student and the designated staff person in the registrar’s office.

The fourth theme, *The difficulty and/or ease military and veteran students’ experience while wading through the institutional bureaucracy* helps to explain the experience of these participants. With the subthemes of *There is a difference in applying, near or far* and *The GI Bill is not the same for all* provides a clearer, detailed lens to identify the challenges faced by this group of learners. Examining the experiences of the military and veteran students as they dealt with the bureaucracy at the institution indicates much difficulty—unclear bureaucracy is stressful for this population.

Milli, Robert, and Lily all had challenges with the GI Bill funding. When Milli applied to the institution, she had her transcript evaluated. As a result of that evaluation there were many credits transferred in that did not count toward her degree. Palmer and Ludwig (1991) in a study to determine how colleges and universities assess prior learning of military servicemembers, indicate that “an educational record which, while extensive, includes a scattering of courses and training undertaken in a variety of settings that may not lead to completion of a degree” (p. 213).
This was the case with Milli. As she was only eligible for 50% of the GI Bill funding, her education was supplemented by federal loans and followed their guidelines. When she was nearing completion of her degree, she received notice that she would not be eligible for additional loans due to the number of credits she earned while attending multiple colleges during her time as a military spouse. Fortunately, for Milli, she was at the end of her degree and was able to finish. She had stated, “I wouldn’t be able to finish my last year if I had crossed that threshold any earlier than I did.” Robert also had an issue with GI Bill funding. There was a semester during which his payment did not go through. After contacting the office which serves the military and veteran students on campus, the issue was resolved.

Lily’s challenge with GI Bill funding was due to her major. In this particular major, there are training elements required that traditionally take place year round. Her experience was “The G.I. bill will only pay for (deleted for confidentiality) if it’s during specific semesters, but [this] isn’t something you can schedule around semesters.” Needing the funding to complete the program and the limits on the time set to use the GI Bill, she ended up running out of time to complete her program with GI Bill monies.

*How was the program designed, shaped, and implemented to support the veteran and military student?*

Themes three and four respond to this question: *The influence of military training on coping and the need for support identified by the military and veteran students* and subtheme *The lingering effect military experience has on the student’s university life*, as well as, *The difficulty and/or ease military and veteran students’ experience while wading through the institutional bureaucracy* and all associated subthemes. The subthemes associated with theme four are: *There is a difference in applying, near or far, The GI Bill is not the same for all,* and *The military and*
veteran students feeling shortchanged. According to Professor, the impetus for the program came from “a passion, we wanted to be military friendly, period.” An advisory committee was put together of campus members to shape and develop a program. With the new Post 9/11-GI Bill, “There were a lot of exiting veterans who were looking at higher education” (William).

There were several things that needed to be addressed in order for this to happen. Accreditation was huge, as was the 8 Keys to Veterans Success. The 8 Keys provided guidance to the institution as to what needed to be in place for the institution to receive GI Bill monies “but not so much guidelines on how to structure services” (William). Some of those items are a culture of trust and connectedness, consistent and sustained leadership support, early alert system for academic career and financial matters for the veteran, centralized campus efforts and dedicated space, collaboration with communities and organizations to align services, a uniform set of data tools to track veteran information, provide professional development for faculty and staff on veteran challenges and develop effective practices for veterans. As shared by Whikehart (2010), for the institution to have success with students reaching graduation, the following is required: “The infrastructure of the mission must be sustainable, focused, and designed for flexibility and rapid response” to this population (p. 921). The research agrees there are key items that must be in place for the success of the military and veteran student (ASPCU, 2013; Cook & Kim, 2009; Queen & Lewis, 2014). The institution has met the standards to be eligible to receive the GI Bill monies and has continued to operate at a level that earns yearly recognition for the practices in place. Are the standards sufficient for this population of learners? The literature can be expanded by focusing more on the actual needs the military and veteran student express. Although there are small percentages of supports used (Queen & Lewis, 2014), are these supports the right ones for success of these learners?
Supports that have been established are in-state tuition for the students, setting up a space for the military and veteran student, and communicating to them about the services available on campus. Support services in the form of a temporary loan from the registrar’s office when the GI Bill funding lags behind, the Yellow Ribbon Program to provide extra dollars when the GI Bill is not sufficient to meet their needs, priority registration, and specialized counseling at the campus office for students are in place.

There are initiatives still in discussion at the university to improve the services provided to the military and veteran student population. These are items that are still being discussed and have not been resolved such as more online courses for the university and reduced tuition for the military and veteran student. Both of these items would provide for a more flexible and less costly (in time and money) experience for the military and veteran student. There are institutions that have both more online courses and reduced tuition for the military and veteran student.

As stated by John, when needs arise or it is discovered that a program put in place is not working as expected, they are addressed. Examples include the following. The military and veteran students complained about the lack of security for the lounge that was designated for this population. Just this year, there is a secure card swipe type entry that is only accessible by those who have been identified as military or veteran students. The university created a course designed to assist military and veteran students as they acclimate to the university during their first year. The first time it was presented, the reception was not positive and students did not attend. The program was revamped and headed/presented by a veteran at the institution and it has received positive feedback.

*How do the veteran and military students’ experiences intersect with programs and services offered by the institution?*
The themes and subtheme recognized as responding to this question are Military and veteran students’ choice to engage or socialize beyond the classroom: the impact of military vs. civilian experiences, The influence of military training on coping and the need for support identified by the military and veteran students, Not all veterans should be labeled or identify as being afflicted with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, The difficulty and/or ease military and veteran students’ experience while wading through the institutional bureaucracy, and The military and veteran students feeling shortchanged. It appears that most needs of the veteran and military students are addressed through the programs and services in place. Although each student is an individual, there are some commonalities with this group of learners.

The office which serves this group of learners has connected by phone, email, or in person with all of the eight student participants. The office is contacted when needed and two of the participants indicated they visited the office just to visit. Gonzo shared, “The office kind of guides you.” Jason did share his concern for the location in terms of other offices nearby. His unease stems from the international students that are often in the area and the possibility of servicemembers experiencing an episode of PTSD. The office occasionally provides tickets to campus and community events and this has been mostly well received. Lily did state that she asked to be taken off of their email listing as she had no interest in these events. There was limited involvement with the veteran Registered Student Organization (RSO) on campus. Those who were involved only did so for a very short period of time.

The fourth theme, The difficulty and/or ease military and veteran students’ experience while wading through the institutional bureaucracy is supported by literature and findings from the students and the key informants (Cook & Kim, 2009; Queen & Lewis, 2014; Schnoebelen, 2013). The need for an expert in the bureaucratic side of things, an expert on funding and the GI
Bill has been a crucial piece of the completion success of this population of students. This person has been tapped by each of the students that participated in this study. Each person has had glowing remarks for the designee and I would say that this person is a valuable part of the institutional experience.

During the interviews and document review, I found no evidence that other services provided for the military and veteran student were specifically used by this group of participants. There was no indication that the Veteran Success and Campus Coordinator has interacted with these participants. No evidence of counseling services or other specific educational supports, other than those mentioned previously, used by this group. Although not supported by this study, research has shown use of these services at other post-secondary institutions (Queen & Lewis, 2014). Further examination of the services available and their use at this institution and others may expand the literature.

The research question asks: *How do post 9/11 active duty and veteran military personnel who served either as support personnel or engaged personnel during military conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, or other conflicts, successfully navigate the transition to becoming undergraduate students at a ‘Top 100’ Military Friendly’ higher education institution and persist to completion of their degree?*

Using the theoretical lens of both the Adult Learning Theory and Transition Theory, it is evident the military and veteran student’s success comes from military experience and regimented training. By this, I mean the everyday schedule and commitment to complete the task. Hard work and dedication to their goals are also a part of their success. Identifying the end goal and being persistent in their quest to complete their degree helps to keep them in line and on track for success.
The financial piece of the GI Bill is a tremendous assistance in achieving their success. Of the eight military and veterans students, five indicated that they have worked full or part-time while at the institution while pursuing their degree. Two did not work and one did not share if he did or did not work during this time. It is not known if any of these participants are receiving funding from the Yellow Ribbon Program.

Time management, learned in large part through their military experience, has been a major influence in their success. The ability to schedule around other necessary commitments has been crucial to their success. As for support, the support of family or friends, as well as the support from the professors in their program, have made a positive impact on their degree completion.

**Implications of Findings**

My study focused on the lived experiences of military and veteran students in the context of a “Military Friendly” Midwestern institution. Using the theoretical lens of both the Adult Learner Theory and Transition Theory in responding to the research question, I found both fit this population of learners and their experience extremely well. For these students, their needs were simple. Show them what needs to be done, which classes are required, how to get their GI Bill funding, and who to speak with if there is a problem. The military and veteran students have developed their own system of coping and have not relied often on the support programs put in place for them at the institution.

What I have gathered through interviews and reviewing the data is that the institution is meeting the basic needs of the military and veteran students. Their coping skills and experiences have provided the framework for success. They emphasized their training in the military prepared them with time management, following the process, but what they don’t realize is the
mentality that they integrated into themselves – go in, do what you are supposed to do, don’t ask for a lot, and be self-reliant. While these are good skills that helped them negotiate the military, not all of them translate well to higher education. At large bureaucratic universities, you have to ask for what you need or you will not get it. The students shared no outstanding items which they felt were critical to their success in degree completion that were not addressed.

There are bits and pieces of what I have gathered through the data and interviews that support the need for a number of the 8 Keys. Those that are accessed by the military and veteran students are the designated individual for all things relating to their funding, the office for the support of this population on an as-needed basis, and the lounge. As for the others, there was little mention from the students in this study. The military and veteran specific orientation, although not discussed by the students, is germane to a successful acclimation process as described by the key informants. Not knowing the date of orientations that have been held, this group of participants may not have had an opportunity to attend. This is important because there was much information they did not know about that could have impacted their experience at the institution. There are services available, such as counseling and the Vet Success Coordinator on campus that they clearly needed but didn’t even know existed.

Based on the interviews from the key informants, I am not sure the institution was provided the necessary information with regard to practice, for meeting the needs specific to this population. As William shared, “There was, you know the government or veterans’ organizations don’t come down and say you must do this, but there are best practices. They come down and say you have to do this if you want federal funding.”

The bureaucratic side of the GI Bill was stipulated and some areas that should be addressed were listed with much detail. However, there was limited guidance for design and
implementation of the 8 Keys. Professor shared his thoughts with regard to the institution meeting the needs of this population,

Here is what we have been good at doing at [this institution]. We have been able to identify what I will define as a special population and recognize that that population needs a different set services. We have been able to budget and provide for those services. I think veterans was one of our best examples.

Although Professor believes all the needs were met and budgeted for, that same feeling was not shared by others, key informants or student participants.

The location of the office which serves this group of students was concerning to some participants. One participant in particular, Jason, felt very strongly with regard to its location and the potential problems that could arise. The office is located where there are many students from the institution who are international, this includes those from all areas of the globe. When speaking with William with regard to the physical location of the office and the concerns of the participants, the response was “I think eventually the vice president just landed on [this office], maybe because he was gonna fund it… the discussion was pretty broad, it just landed here.”

A function of the institution was to implement training for the faculty and staff. While the staff and faculty training program has been created, I am not sure how often that training is used. There was limited guidance with regard to services, and clearly there is a need for more opportunities to interact, socialize, and build relationships with other military and veteran students, and identify the support services on campus. Based on the interviews with participants, this is sorely needed.

It is clear that this population of learners has come to the institution with discipline and leadership skills. It would behoove the university to tap into those skills and experiences for
classroom discussions, university events, and providing insight for programming for this population.

**Limitations**

Limitations to this study include the lack of available data, slow response in participants, and low numbers of respondents. Although I reached out to different offices on campus and did receive a plethora of data, there was no consistency. Data collected from one office did not always match that from another office. The institution had difficulty collecting these data in the first years the office was in place that serves this population. Once the applications were aligned, the data have been provided more consistently, but they have not been collected into a usable system allowing for review.

Despite 130 military and veteran students who had applied for graduation, the response to the study was slow. The first interview was nearly eight weeks after the first email was sent. With 130 military and veteran students targeted as having applied for graduation, there were only 15 total responses over nearly a one year period. Although I feel confident saturation was reached, a different pool of participants may have provided for a different outcome to this research study.

This study provided a glimpse into the lived experiences of military and veteran students at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” university. There is much more that can be explored. As military and veteran students continue to enroll at the university, the personal experiences and dynamic may be quite different from this group of participants. We know from the literature that many join the military as a way to support themselves through higher education and/or because their first experience in college did not go well (Grossett, 1993; Hoyt & Winn, 2004). My study
aligns with that literature. As the U.S. military continues to be involved in conflicts globally, it is expected the number of military and veteran students will continue to rise.

**Recommendations**

This phenomenological bounded case study research examined the essence of the military and veteran students experience in the context of a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution in the Midwest. Past studies have explored practices around welcoming the student to the university, the best approach to serve this population, completion rates for Vietnam Veterans, and collaborating with outside agencies (Brown & Gross, 2011; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; “Completion Rates for Education,” 1976; Gaines, 2004; Lokken et al., 2009; Mangan, 2009).

What has not been examined in previous research is the personal experience of the military and veteran student as they navigate higher education to earn their degree; studies have not explored the aspect of military and veteran students’ experiences while attending a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

My recommendation to offices in higher education whose purpose is to serve this population is to survey the entire military and veteran student body to determine what their needs are. I believe, based on the findings from this study, that there may be a difference between what the government states is needed and what this population of adult learners identify as needs. In addition to needs, I would also explore what they “want” as well. Do they have desires that the institution has not put in place that would make their transition and tenure at the university less tenuous and stressful? Each group of military or veteran students enrolling for a new semester may have had different experiences, particularly as the War on Terror (WOT) has decreased in the number of military members serving in combat forward areas. Based on their different
military experiences, their needs may diverge from the current group of students. In addition to
the new students, the existing students should also be surveyed. As Schlossberg et al. (1989)
posit, “Once adult learners are well entrenched in the institution and know the rules and norms,
their concerns or issues change” (p. 109). This population should be surveyed on a yearly basis
to provide insight to the institution with regards to their changing needs.

Further research into distance learning and the impact that this has on veteran and
military students’ enrollment at institutions is needed. My study did not show high usage of
distance learning; this finding seemed to conflict with the highlighted concern with time and
constantly changing schedules for classes. Through my study, it was shown that distance
learning courses were not taken by choice, but more as a necessity with this group of
participants. Would more distance learning courses be valued, used occasionally due to
scheduling, or would the military and veteran student only enroll if there was not another option?
William indicated there was a strong desire for the institution to provide more distance learning
opportunities for the military and veteran students; it would behoove the institution to first
determine if it would be beneficial to this population.

Although this study did not look specifically at gender, age, race/ethnicity, family status
of the military and veteran student, I recommend further inquiry into the specific composition of
this population of learners. While the overall basic needs appeared to be met by the institution
for this group of participants, the outcome could be different if the focus was on female veterans,
minority veterans, those with children, identified physical or mental disabilities, or those who
have other specific identities. Do those individual populations have a different experience as they
work towards degree completion? Do these individual populations have a different experience as
they work towards their degree?
Recommendations for Practice

Recommendation with respect for future planning is to define the support structure and identify these supports widely to the military and veteran population. There is more the university needs to do to work with this population. Yes, these students are succeeding with reaching matriculation, but more intentional support would make it less stressful. This group of students has a sense of gratitude for being at the institution, but the challenges and pressures could be lessened if more focus was placed on their specific needs while also addressing the governmental requirements. The new GI Bill is significantly different than previous and may require changes in structure by the university.

With recent changes to the GI Bill, the dynamic of the military and veteran student may change. The latest version of the GI Bill is called the “Forever GI Bill.” The Forever GI Bill provides greater benefits than any GI Bill in the past. In addition to providing a greater percentage of benefits for less service time it also removes the time limitation to use the GI Bill. Another change in the bill which may heavily impact the number of veterans seeking to enroll in higher education is that for Purple Heart Recipients. The Forever GI Bill states, “Servicemembers and honorably discharged Veterans who were awarded a Purple Heart on or after September 11, 2001 will be entitled to Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits at the 100-percent benefit level for up to 36 months” (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017, para. 2). This may significantly increase the veteran population on campus.

Reflecting on the experiences of the veteran and military students who participated in this study, there are a few items that stand out to me. Based on my experience and research as a veteran, there are needs this population has expressed, but have not been addressed by the institution. First, I understand that space is at a premium, however, the impact of the location of
both the office which serves this population and the space for the lounge for this population had a distinct negative effect on the military and veteran students. Due to the location, one participant, merely discussing the location, became visibly upset. The institution needs to be very intentional with regard to the space for the veterans, including safety and location. The location may make sense to the administration, but it may be a disservice to this population – the military and veterans and their needs should be considered. A card swipe has been added that addresses the lounge area, but there are still safety concerns for the office itself. In its current location with offices that serve international students regularly, this may not be the best location if considering the needs of the military and veteran student population.

Secondly, I understand how the office which serves this population has evolved, and amazing things have been accomplished, but the instability in recent years with staff turnover has had a negative effect with those who have reached out for support. The office that serves the military and veteran population on this campus has been challenged with increased workload and decreased budget. In order to fulfill the staff needs, it would be advantageous to advertise with graduate programs on campus. Most graduate students have a need for internships and/or practicums. The graduate students would be able to fill some of the office needs such as gathering and compiling data.

Third, I would also recommend the office reach out to the overall population of military and veteran students on campus on a regular basis. At a large campus with more than 23,000 students, this population still indicated feeling isolated. The overall identified population of military and veteran students is less than 1,000, they should still feel a part of the university community. The institution has still not figured out a way to successfully address this need. Looking to the 8 Keys and the need for a community that the military and veterans can belong to
has not had the effect the university has hoped it would. Reaching out and engaging the military and veteran student in office events, sporting events, study programs, and other activities does not take a significant amount of time, but would allow the student to connect with others in order to build comradery. All of the participants mentioned the desire and need to connect with other veterans.

**Summary**

In conclusion, this study has examined the lived experiences of veteran and military students in the context of a “Military Friendly” institution. The institution is considered a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” university. Interviews with the students do not bear out awareness of this distinction. There are programs and processes in place at the university to support the military and veteran students. Military and veteran students, in most cases, who had specific needs during their tenure at the institution reached out to those in a position to assist. For example, complications with funding or registration and the military and veteran student reached out to the one person on campus who is an expert and could assist. The office which serves this population was known to the members in this study. If needed, they knew who to contact, but most did not visit the office.

The institution has begun to collect the data on the numbers of military and veteran students enrolled, but this is only the beginning. We know the needs of the participants of this study were met. We know that there are many additional supports on campus for this group of learners that we cannot verify if they have been used. Identifying the specific needs of this population has been instrumental in determining how they transitioned into their role as students and reaching success with the culmination of their degrees.
There are processes and programs in place for the military and veteran students at this institution, but the body of students is not aware of the many supports available. The military and veteran students also indicated that their needs were met and time was well prioritized. The two things I keep returning to is the safety and security surrounding the office which serves this population and the lack of relationships. As many of our military and veteran students have served overseas during a time of conflict, it is understandable for them to be uncomfortable in a space that international students are prominent. It would behoove the institution to address this. As for the lack of relationships, the military has a history of building comradery with others who become their family. With this population, there was a noticeable lack of relationships with other students, more specifically, military and veteran students. Reaching out to the military and veteran student and connecting them with the office that serves the population will begin to link them with others who have served. These students found a way to get through and succeed, but did not find a “place” while at the institution. The relationship piece has been identified as a missing link for the military and veteran students at this institution.
REFERENCES


*Completion rates for education and training under the Vietnam era GI bill.* A study submitted by the Veterans’ Administration to the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, United States Senate. Ninety-Fourth Congress, 2nd Session (Senate Committee Print No. 48). (1976). (ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED139917)


Appendix A

Recruitment Email
Dear [insert name],

My name is Gail Rouscher and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership –Higher Education program at Western Michigan University. I am asking you to participate in my research study about the meaning made of your experience at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. You may be eligible to be in this study because you are a veteran or military student, and have applied for graduation at the university. The other criteria is that you must have served a period of active duty since 9/11/2001. It is not necessary to have served in a combat zone. I have asked the Office of Military and Veteran Affairs to distribute this email.

If you are interested in participating in this study, we will set up the time to discuss the Consent Form which must be signed before you can participate in my study. At that point, we can proceed or set up another time for me to interview you regarding your experiences as a student at WMU. This interview will last approximately one hour.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at gail.y.rouscher@wmich.edu or (269)317-5936.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Gail Y. Rouscher
Appendix B

Follow-up Recruitment Email
Dear [insert name],

My name is Gail Rouscher and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership –Higher Education program at Western Michigan University. I am asking you to participate in my research study about the meaning made of your experience at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. You may be eligible to be in this study because you are a veteran or military student, and have applied for graduation at the university. The other criteria is that you must have served a period of active duty since 9/11/2001. It is not necessary to have served in a combat zone. I have asked the Office of Military and Veteran Affairs to distribute this email.

If you are interested in participating in this study, we will set up the time to discuss the Consent Form which must be signed before you can participate in my study. At that point, we can proceed or set up another time for me to interview you regarding your experiences as a student at WMU. This interview will last approximately one hour.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at gail.y.rouscher@wmich.edu or (269)317-5936.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Gail Y. Rouscher
Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer
Veteran and Military Student Study

Be part of an important veteran and military research study

- Are you a veteran or military student who has applied for graduation at [redacted]?
- Have you served a period of active duty (combat action not required) since 09/11/2001?

If you answered YES to these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this study is examine veteran or military students experience at a “Top 100’ Military Friendly” university. In particular, this study will look at the students’ institutional experiences as they completed their degree.

Veteran and Military students (18 – 65 year of age) are eligible to participate.

This study is being conducted at [redacted] USA

Please contact Gail Rouscher at gail.y.rouscher@wmich.edu or (269)317-5936 for more information
Appendix D

Informed Consent for Research Participation:
Student Participants
Western Michigan University
Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology
Informed Consent for Research Participation

**Principal Investigator:** Donna Talbot  
**Student Investigator:** Gail Y. Rouscher  
**Title of Study:** A Phenomenological Case Study of Veteran and Military Student Degree Completion

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled "A Phenomenological Study of Veteran and Military Student Degree Completion." "This project will serve as Gail Y. Rouscher’s dissertation for the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology." This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

**What are we trying to find out in this study?**

This study will explore the essence of the veteran and military students’ institutional experiences which enabled or slowed their successful degree completion. Additionally, this study will examine where, how and why these veterans utilize the special programs and services that qualify the institution they attend to be classified as a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution.

**Who can participate in this study?**

*Veteran and military students who have applied for graduation at a [blank] and have served on active duty in the military during a time of conflict post 9/11/2001. Students enrolled in the [blank] Program will be excluded.*

**Where will this study take place?**

I will be identifying a private location on campus where the student can meet with me without being identified as a potential participant in my study. [blank] or other neutral location as available.

**What is the time commitment for participating in this study?**

Potential participants will meet no more than four times. Once for purposes of obtaining informed consent from potential participant, subjects interview which will last approximately 60 minutes, and possibly a follow-up interview as I will be using a constant comparative method of
comparing data as I progress, and lastly for member checking. I will allow you to read your transcripts and add or clarify the information in your interview transcript. You may have an additional 30 minutes for this process.

*Total time for participation would be approximately 120 minutes.*

**What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, I will be asking questions related to your enrollment and time spent as a student at Western Michigan University. The interview will be recorded on a digital voice recorder for purposes of fully capturing responses to interview questions. This will be a semi-structured interview, I will ask a direct question for you to respond as you wish, additional prompting based on your response may occur.

As I continue through the study, if I discover a recurrent theme, I may ask for a second interview to clarify or delve into your previous responses deeper. When transcript from your interview is typed, I will ask for you to read through for accuracy.

No real names will be used in the study or for any documents connected to this study. You will be asked to pick a pseudonym to be used throughout the study. If this study is published, your real name will never be connected to the transcript and all information will be obscured so that your identity cannot be defined.

**What information is being measured during the study?**

This section will describe the measurements that we are going to take during your participation in the study.

As this study is based on the meaning made of your involvement at the undergraduate institution, I will also collect enrollment date at the undergraduate institution and graduation date. Individual responses may be pulled from each interview to be included in the written study results.

**What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?**

You may experience loss of time (time for participation has been identified. As you proceed through the interview, you may experience the recalling of traumatic or distressing events (you will be provided a list of resources which can be helpful should counseling needs related to recall occur). You may experience the identification of disorder, disturbance or inferiority being brought out as a result of research (I have designed questions to minimize this risk). You will be provided a list of resources which can be helpful should counseling needs present). You may experience feeling deficient or undesirable as a participant in a minority group (you will be informed of the purpose of this research.

**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**
You may benefit from informing practice at higher education institutions which interact with veteran and military students.

Other potential benefits are an opportunity to discuss your experiences with someone likely to understand your experience. An additional benefit of talking with someone who understands your experience and will share information learned through the study with the institution, so it may help the institution better understand how to service the veteran and military student population.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**

No costs are anticipated for involvement with this study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**

There will be no compensation for your participation in this study, monetary or otherwise.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**

This study is being conducted as a research study as partial requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree. It is my intention to publish this study and/or present at a conference, not specified at this time. Any potential participant should be aware that your identity will be kept strictly confidential by the investigator and the participant will be provided a pseudonym. Pseudonyms will be assigned upon initial participation. Identifying information including gender, age, and military service, if applicable, will be included in the study.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**

*You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study.*

The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Gail Rouscher at (269)317-5936 or gail.y.rouscher@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Principal Investigator/Advisor Donna Talbot at (269)387-3891. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.
I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

___________________________________  _________________________
Please Print Your Name

___________________________________  _________________________
Participant’s signature                Date

___________________________________  _________________________
Investigator’s signature               Date
Appendix E

Informed Consent for Research Participation:
Key Informants
Western Michigan University  
Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology  
Informed Consent for Research Participation

Principal Investigator: Donna Talbot  
Student Investigator: Gail Y. Rouscher  
Title of Study: A Phenomenological Case Study of Veteran and Military Student Degree Completion

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled "A Phenomenological Case Study of Veteran and Military Student Degree Completion." "This project will serve as Gail Y. Rouscher’s dissertation for the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology.” This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?

This study will explore the essence of the veteran and military students’ institutional experiences which enabled or slowed their successful degree completion. Additionally, this study will examine where, how and why these veterans utilize the special programs and services that qualify the institution they attend to be classified as a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution.

Who can participate in this study?

You can participate if you are one of the Key Informants who were tasked with the development, implementation and follow through of the programming for the military and veteran students at the institution.

Where will this study take place?

Interviews will be held at a site on or near the university, identified by you, where you would feel comfortable providing your perspective and insight.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?

You will meet no more than two times. Once for purposes of obtaining informed consent from you and a subjects interview which will last approximately 60 minutes, and once for member checking. I will allow you to read their transcripts and add or clarify the information in your interview transcript. You may have an additional 30 minutes for this process.
Total time for participation would be approximately 90 minutes.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?

If you agree to participate in this study, I will be asking questions related to your role in development, implementation and follow through of the programming for the military and veteran students at the undergraduate institution. The interview will be recorded on a digital voice recorder for purposes of fully capturing responses to interview questions. This will be an intentional interview, I will ask a direct question for you to respond,

When the transcript from your interview is typed, I will ask for you to read it through for accuracy.

No real names or specific titles will be used in the study or for any documents connected to this study. You will be asked to pick a pseudonym to be used throughout the study. If this study is published, your real name will never be connected to the transcript and all information will be obscured so that your identity cannot be defined.

What information is being measured during the study?

This section will describe the measurements that we are going to take during your participation in the study.

As this study is based on the meaning made of the participants involvement at their undergraduate institution. I will also collect enrollment date at the undergraduate institution and graduation date. Individual responses may be pulled from each interview to be included in the written study results.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?

Possible risks associated with this study are as follows:

There are no risks associated with this study as a key informant participant. As you will be discussing a university program at the university which can be considered typical university business.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

You may benefit from the study through informing practice at higher education institutions which interact with veteran and military students.
Other potential benefits are an opportunity to discuss your experiences with someone likely to understand your experience. An additional benefit of talking with someone who understands your experience and will share information learned through the study with the institution, so it may help the institution better understand how to service the veteran and military student population.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**

No costs are anticipated for involvement with this study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**

There will be no compensation for your participation in this study, monetary or otherwise.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**

This study is being conducted as a research study as partial requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree. It is my intention to publish this study and/or present at a conference, not specified at this time. Any potential participant should be aware that your identity will be kept strictly confidential by the investigator and the participant will be provided a pseudonym. Pseudonyms will be assigned upon initial participation. Identifying information including gender, age, and military service, if applicable, will be included in the study.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**

You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study.

The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Gail Rouscher at (269)317-5936 or gail.y.rouscher@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Principal Investigator/Advisor Donna Talbot at (269)387-3891. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.
This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

___________________________________  ________________________
Participant’s signature               Date

___________________________________  ________________________
Investigator’s signature              Date
Appendix F

Military and Veteran Interview Questions
Hello [Insert name], thank you for taking the time to talk with me about your experience here at the institution.

1. In which branch of service were you in and where did you serve?
2. Talk a little bit about what it was like to transition to being a civilian and student.
   a. Prompt (only if not mentioned): When you started classes, were you still active duty, reserve, or National Guard?
3. Describe your experience as a veteran or military student at this institution
   a. Prompt: Any involvement with other students or student groups?
   b. Prompt: challenges you may have had?
   c. Prompt: What helped you be successful?
4. Describe your success in completing your degree?
   a. Prompt: Timeline?
   b. Prompt: challenges?
5. Is there anything I didn’t ask or that you forgot to mention that would be helpful for me in understanding your experiences as a student here?

Thank you for sharing your experiences here. I will take the recording from today and transcribe it. Once that is complete, I will send it to you for review. At that time, if there is anything not correct, or anything you feel needs further clarification, we can get together again. If you feel it is accurate with nothing to add, you will only need reply to my email.

If you have any further questions or concerns, you can contact me at (269)317-5936 or gail.y.rouscher@wmich.edu.
Appendix G

Staff/Key Informant Interview Questions
Hello [insert name], thank you for taking the time to answer some questions regarding the programs developed for the military and veterans students.

1. What was the impetus for developing a military and veteran program at the institution?
2. Were there specific actions that were required to be addressed to become a “military friendly” institution?
3. How were the guidelines developed for the program at this institution?
4. Is there continued development of the existing program?
5. Have you requested/received feedback from the military and veteran students as to what their needs are?
6. Is there any monitoring of the program?
7. What do you suggest I read or review to better understand this program?
8. Is there anyone else I should speak with to get a clearer picture of this program?

Thank you for taking the time to tell me about the program. It has been enlightening and will be pertinent to the outcome of the research study. If you think of anything after I leave today, please feel free to contact me at (269)317-5936 or gail.y.rouscher@wmich.edu.
Appendix H

Not Selected – Saturation
Dear [insert name],

Thank you for your interest in being a participant in the research study about the meaning made of your experience at a “Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. Fortunately, I have had more volunteers than I needed for this study, so your participation will not be necessary. Please know that I do appreciate your willingness to talk with me. Thank you for your service and good luck after graduation.

Sincerely,

Gail Rouscher
Appendix I

Not Selected – Did Not Meet Criteria
Dear [insert name],

Thank you for your interest in being a participant in the research study about the meaning made of your experience at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. Please know that I do appreciate your taking the time to respond to my study. The criteria for participating in the study are very narrow. Unfortunately, it does not fit the information you shared; therefore I will not be able to interview you for this study. It appears you do not meet the criteria of the research study as you have not experienced “active duty” while serving in the military.

Thank you for your service and good luck after graduation.

Sincerely,

Gail Rouscher
Appendix J

Not Selected – No Active Duty During Timer Period
Dear [insert name],

Thank you for your interest in being a participant in the research study about the meaning made of your experience at a “‘Top 100’ Military Friendly” institution. Please know that I do appreciate your taking the time to respond to my study. The criteria for participating in the study are very narrow. Unfortunately, it does not fit the information you shared; therefore I will not be able to interview you for this study. It appears you do not meet the criteria of the research study as you have not served a period of “active duty” during the time since 9/11/2001.

Thank you for your service and good luck after graduation.

Sincerely,

Gail Rouscher
Appendix K

Transcript Member Check
Dear [insert name],

Thank you for sharing your military or veteran student experience with me during our interview. Attached you will find the transcript from that interview for your review. If there is something that is incorrect, not factual, or needs additional clarification, please identify and provide additional information. If you feel we need to discuss this further, please contact me.

It is essential that the information contained is correct. Please review and respond with any necessary information, or a note that states it is correct, by next week [insert specific date]. If you have questions, please contact me at (269)317-5936 or gail.y.rouscher@wmich.edu. If I do not hear from you within a week, I will assume that the transcript is accurate and will proceed with my study.

Sincerely,

Gail Rouscher
Appendix L

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board
Letter of Approval
Date: June 27, 2016

To: Donna Talbot, Principal Investigator
   Gail Roucher, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 16-06-15

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “A Phenomenological Case Study of Veteran and Military Student Degree Completion” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study.”) Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: June 26, 2017