A Phenomenological Examination Of How Student Army Veterans Describe Influencing Factors On Their Post-Service College Application

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF HOW STUDENT ARMY VETERANS DESCRIBE INFLUENCING FACTORS ON THEIR POST-SERVICE COLLEGE APPLICATION

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends who has stood by me throughout this process, especially those who have served their country. Without the support of my husband, Matthew Sejuit (Navy), I would not have been able to attend graduate school to earn my doctorate. Your service as a Corpsman with the 2ND Marine Division twice during Operation Iraqi Freedom and currently with our veterans through your work with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs inspired this research topic. I want to thank my mother, Denise Stover (Air Force), for always being my loudest cheerleader. I want to thank my father, Joel Stover (Air Force), for understanding my need to continue on with my education. My brother, Jared Stover (Army), always believed in me, even when I thought I would never finish. I also appreciate the support of my father-in-law, Wally Sejuit (Navy) and mother-in-law, Mary Sejuit, when times were tough during this process. Thank you my three late grandparents, Duffy Collier (Army), Wilma Collier, and Robert Stover (Army). Thank you to my surviving nana, Ann Stover. I am proud of Wally’s service to our country during the Vietnam War and Pappap Collier’s service during World War II. While I dedicate this to the Collier, Stover, and Sejuit families, this dissertation is mostly dedicated to the men and women who honorably serve this country. This includes my former unit with whom I deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the 203D MI BN. To those who never made it home, this is my thank you. All gave some, some gave all. God Bless America.
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation will explore how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on post-service college application. The qualitative research design in conjunction with the Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM) allows this researcher to generate a study with implications for the needs of Campus Professionals, Military Personnel such as U.S. Army Career Counselors and Army Soldiers, and Counselors to include Counselor Educators, School Counselors, Career Counselors, and Mental Health Counselors. The study explores what challenges are faced when working specifically with this population that may determine the choice to apply to college after serving on active duty status. The current study seeks to add to the lack of literature regarding college application on this specific population after serving on active duty or returning from deployment in Operation Enduring Freedom (2001-present) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-2011).
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

American society has always honored the service of its citizen-warriors by recognizing that their military service is not a career but a struggle-specific commitment. That perspective then demands attention to the post-service plans and opportunities for these veterans. The GI Bill, which is formally known as the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, helped lead student veterans transition to college from military life and make education attainable for many of them following World War II (Bauman, 2013; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013). The Post-9/11 GI Bill, which is formally known as the Post 9-11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008 (38 USC ch 33 (2008)), greatly expanded educational benefits for veterans and has helped them with college application though they may not always use these federal education benefits (Bauman, 2013; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; O’Herrin, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Vacchi, 2012; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013). Over 600,000 veterans entered higher education since 2009, and there are currently over 945,000 students using education benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in the United States (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). After being signed into law in the summer of 2008, the first year of college eligibility for veterans who enlisted specifically for the Post 9-11 GI Bill was 2012 (Vacchi, 2012).
As of 2014, of the more than 21 million veterans, 15 million do not earn a bachelor’s degree, though educational attainment is used as a military recruitment tool (United States Census Bureau, 2012; Wilson, 2014). While the professional literature is rife with articles addressing retention success and graduation, there is limited research on the influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans (Bauman, 2013).

Though there has been recognition of diverse student subcultures on campuses, only recently within the last ten years has there been an upswing in notice of student veterans (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Vacchi, 2012; Wilson, Smith, Lee, & Stevenson, 2013). A great deal of recent research focusing on student veterans may be due to recent military involvement in the Middle East. Many of the student veterans on campus include National Guard, Reserve, and non-active duty personnel who served in the Middle East in ongoing conflict which has increased the number of service personnel and hence the number of veterans (Bauman, 2013; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). While many of these students may join the military for education benefits, they often deal with military training and deployments that interrupt their educational pursuits (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). When the education of these students is interrupted, it can be difficult for them to enroll or they may become complacent in initial application.
In general, some of the recent studies which have addressed today’s college student veterans have done so regarding retention and success (Olsen, Badger, & McCudd, 2014) of both current and re-enrolling (Bauman 2009, 2013; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011) student veterans. After searching through the literature, the researcher concluded that there is no literature that looks at influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans using a phenomenological approach which provides the rationale for this study (Bauman, 2013). This study seeks to inform counselors, counselor educators, and student affairs administrators about the experiences of veterans who chose to apply to college after active duty service. Another thing to take into account as counselor education faculty is that they may be charged with creating meditation classes or serving as the point person for student veterans on campus when no student veterans organization is present (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011). A better understanding of the unique experiences of this subpopulation allows mental health and higher education professionals to better understand and support veterans.

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although newer research (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013) is attempting to understand challenges faced by student veterans, specific factors are overlooked or misunderstood. In many studies (Bauman 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013) veterans of all service branches and their
vastly different campaigns are lumped together in the hopes that their experiences are similar. While some experiences of Army veterans may mirror those in the Navy, Air Force, Marines, or Coast Guard, there appear to still be some inherent differences. Furthermore, experiences differ based on campaign or overall active duty status. Operation Enduring Freedom (2001-present) is comprised of several subordinate operations that include locations of Afghanistan, Philippines, Somalia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and the Sahara while Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-2011) was centrally located in Iraq. Army veterans serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom may greatly differ from Marine veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom because both branches have their own mission statement, which is why it is important to look at one branch of the military for this current study. These two campaigns vary, if only slightly but, they are much more closely aligned with one another than with the Korean War or Vietnam War. Therefore, veterans from these two campaigns should be interviewed separately from older adult students applying to college after serving in Vietnam or Korea. Another area research may falter is the way universities look at retention of this specialized population. Though retention is important, universities must first look to recruit student Army veterans who will apply to school.

Student veterans bring a wealth of knowledge and unique perspective to the classroom as a result of their military experiences (Bauman, 2013; O’Herrin, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). While much research has looked at student veteran retention, little has been done to truly understand the influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans (Bauman, 2013). Engaging in occupational context of a university setting and transitioning into the role of student can be a real
struggle for returning veterans (Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). Though some researchers have argued for the development of more specific programming for all student veterans, Vacchi (2012) disagreed. Instead, he suggested that the need to develop more specific programming should be for student veterans who are not undergraduate or graduate students on active duty but, for undergraduate students still serving in the reserve components made up of the National Guard and Reserves (Vacchi, 2012). It was explained that undergraduate National Guard and Reserve student veterans may experience more challenges due to transitioning between student and military member (Vacchi, 2012). The belief that National Guard and Reserve students struggle the most is in stark contrast to the views held by Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell (2009) that National Guard students fare better than other service members because each National Guard unit has an educational officer on staff to help with benefits issues.

While some researchers view the veteran population as a group facing many issues regarding performance and retention (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), others acknowledged that they adjust well to campus and outperform their nonveteran peers (Vacchi, 2012) or do not need academic support (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011) while working towards completing their college degrees. Student veteran college completion was attributed to better performance in the classroom, higher retention rates, and more successful transfer rates from community colleges to four-year institutions to student veterans being more intentional when deciding to attend college (Vacchi, 2012).

The results of this study are expected to shed light on the supports that can be put in place and are already in place to help student Army veterans successfully apply to
college. This study could have significant relevance to counselors working with this specific population in a therapeutic setting and counselor educators who may interact with these students in an educational setting.

1.2 NATURE OF STUDY

Literature using qualitative means to truly understand the experiences of student Army veterans regarding college enrollment and re-enrollment after serving on active duty is sparse. Furthermore, a literature review rendered literature addressing student Army veterans regarding college application after serving on active duty non-existent. Having previous professional experience in an educational environment, where the needs of non-traditional students to include veterans was frequently observed, and, as a both a combat veteran and professional counselor with a strong interest in military affairs and college student differences, the researcher in this study identified student Army veterans as representing a particularly intricate blending of identities. This study will use a qualitative methodology to explore how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application using a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research is used when a person wants to understand the meaning others have attributed to certain things and events. Qualitative designs emphasize context while focusing on individual meaning through open-ended data, emergent design, and inductive interpretation (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative research will allow for a fuller picture of this phenomenon of college application experiences to be explained more so than quantitative means could do. “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (Patton, 2001, p.104). This qualitative paradigm of the phenomenological approach best meets the aims of my study.
The researcher seeks to understand how student Army veterans make the choice to apply to college. Richer observations are generated that cannot be reduced to numbers and human experiences are explored in-depth (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). The rationale for using a phenomenological qualitative approach is to seek understanding of how student Army veterans make meaning of their experiences of seeking college education through college application while transitioning from soldier to student.

This somewhat unique population provided an opportunity to explore a significant aspect of college application in a way that moved beyond the theoretical and statistical into the realm of personal and social interaction, perception, and meaning, which was found through investigating student veteran experiences. Throughout this document, the terms student veteran and non-traditional student are used in correspondence with their use by each author and, when not specific to a cited author, sometimes interchangeably.

Interview Questions

(1.) People have different reasons for choosing to apply to college. Can you tell me about your decision to apply to college?
   - I am interested in knowing what influenced you to apply to college?
   - What financial factors influenced your decision to apply to college?
   - What social factors, if any, influenced your college application decision?
   - What personal factors influenced your choice to apply to college?
     - Family (parents, spouse, children, etc.)
     - Friends
     - Supervisors/ Mentors and Co-workers
   - What career aspirations influenced you?
   - What other factors influenced you that I did not mention?

(2.) Some people have difficulty deciding to apply to and attend college, and others decide fairly easily. What kind of decision process did you go through in thinking about whether or not to attend?

(3.) What influenced your decision to apply to this college/university?

(4.) Now that you have made the decision to attend college, how do you feel about it?
   - How would you describe your feelings right now?
What lingering doubts or concerns do you have?

(5.) What is your sense of the campus climate towards veterans specifically?

(6.) What are your expectations about how college will affect you personally?
   • What changes in yourself do you hope will result from your college attendance?
   • What do you hope to get out of your college experience?

(7.) Is there anything else you would like to share that was not addressed earlier?

Research Questions

How do Army veterans describe the influencing factors on their post-service college application?

1.3 PURPOSE OF STUDY

As explained earlier, much of the research that has been done on this special population of student veterans places members of all military branches together in one group. This study seeks to only look at Army veterans—recognizing the characteristic differences between branches. While past research has explored the challenges faced by veterans on college campuses in order to increase veteran retention, this study looks to influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans.

Empirically based studies (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009, 2013; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013) have begun to emerge in the past decades that focus specifically on how to serve the veteran population in higher education.

Though some studies look at the lived experiences of veterans (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014), minimal attention has been given to the
experiences of veterans when contemplating to initially apply to college (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Persky & Oliver, 2011) or re-enroll (Bauman 2009, 2013; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011), after serving on active duty status. In the past decade, different models and theories have been developed that speak directly to transitions people face (Schlossberg, 1984, 1989, 2011) to include student retention and departure (Tinto, 1987). Most recently, some studies have used either strictly Schlossberg’s transition model (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011) or a combination of Schlossberg’s transition model and Tinto’s theory of student departure model to understand the experiences of veterans. Using grounded theory, Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) later developed the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM) to understand the college transitions of veterans. This study looks to understand the influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans when applying to college using a phenomenological approach.

The purpose of the present inquiry is to investigate the influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans. Furthermore, it is my hope that this study helps us better understand, through qualitative means, how we can best support non-traditional students like student Army veterans by continuing to build a base knowledge on the experiences of student veterans (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Learning how to best support student Army veterans to build the base knowledge will be done by looking at Army veterans who chose to apply to college. This
study will then view the transition from soldier to citizen using the SVATSM (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011).

An implication of this study is to examine what interventions can be put in place in hopes to positively affect Army student veteran college application at four-year educational institutions. Consequently, my overarching research question is how do Army veterans describe the influencing factors on their post-service college application?

1.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is utilizing a qualitative methodology to explore the influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans when applying to college using a phenomenological approach. Patton (2001) noted the importance of qualitative methodology for its ability to explore and attach value to lived experiences. Qualitative studies on student Army veterans’ experiences when applying to college is limited. This researcher seeks to understand what leads some Army veterans to apply to college after serving on active duty. The benefit of using a phenomenological approach is that it includes the various aspects of participants’ experiences. “Phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective. Reflection on lived experience is always recollective” (Patton, 2001, p.104).

Qualitative methods are used to generate richer observations while exploring in-depth meanings of the human experience (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Qualitative research is also used when a researcher wants to be an active learner (Cresswell, 1998; Glesne, 2006). Using qualitative methods and a phenomenological approach this study will develop key themes and explore in-depth meanings of the human experience in order to generate richer observations not easily explained by numbers by emphasizing people’s
subjective thoughts and feelings (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rubin and Babbie, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

This study uses a qualitative methodology to explore the Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVASTM) to understand student Army veterans’ choice to enroll at a four year academic institution after serving on active duty. The Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM) developed by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) has also been influential within the area of student veteran transitions—which is why it discussed heavily throughout the current study. Using qualitative methods and a phenomenological approach this study will develop key themes and explore in-depth meanings of the human experience in order to generate richer observations not easily explained by numbers by emphasizing people’s subjective thoughts and feelings (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rubin and Babbie, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

After joining the military, the way in which educational attainment is viewed by those around them, can dictate whether or not they will use their military educational benefits and apply to college. As more Army veterans enter academic settings after serving on active duty, understanding their experiences applying college has the potential of affecting how career and academic counselors work with this specialized population. This study will seek to understand influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans. Though some studies took a grounded theory approach (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011), and the model that Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model
(SVASTM) developed by Livingston et al. (2011) specifically to illustrate the grounded theory explaining student veteran’s re-enrollment management, this researcher wanted to truly understand the experiences of college application of student Army veterans prompting the use of a phenomenological approach.

1.5 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

In this study, **active duty** is defined as serving full-time in the military or in an active duty capacity by getting deployed to a war zone or in support of peacetime efforts, or attending initial military training (IMT) consisting of basic training and advanced initial training for military occupation specialties.

In this study, **ambivalent climate** is defined as a climate that is, “most likely found at urban or commuter campuses, institutions with larger numbers of traditional students. It is an environment where military service is viewed as just another pre-college experience” (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009, p.73).

In this study, **campus climate** is defined as a set of “current perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that define the institution and its members” (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen, 1999, p.2; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009, p.72).

In this study, **challenging climate** is defined as a climate that is, “usually found at schools with a history of political dissent and strong anti-military movements. These types of institutions have climates that challenge any links between the campus community and the military” (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009, p.73).

In this study, **enrollment** is defined as attending an academic institution after serving the military on full-time active duty, in an active duty capacity by getting deployed to a war zone or in support of peacetime efforts, or through initial military training (IMT) which consists of basic training and advanced initial training for military occupation specialties.

In this study, **institutional structures** are defined as structures which, “encapsulate campus policies and procedures for administering veterans’ information, benefits, and services” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015, p.84).
In this study, military culture is defined as a culture that places an emphasis on, “service, respect, camaraderie, structure, discipline, and order” which may “differ from that of civilian or traditional college student life” (Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2011).

In this study, military-friendly is defined as “intentional efforts made by campuses to identify and remove barriers to the educational goals of veterans and create a smooth transition from military to college life” (Moon & Schma, 2011, p. 54). Also for the purposes of this, military-friendly will be interchangeable with veteran-friendly.

In this study, nontraditional student population is defined by a population that “has had different life experiences and circumstances compared to more traditional students” (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014, p.101).

In this study, personnel and services is defined as people and services focused, “on the existence of offices, services, and professionals that meet and understand student veterans’ unique issues and concerns” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015, p.81).

In this study, post-discharge is defined as a period of time after a person in the military has served the military on full-time active duty, in an active duty capacity by getting deployed to a war zone or in support of peacetime efforts, or through initial military training (IMT) which consists of basic training and advanced initial training for military occupation specialties.

In this study, social and cultural support is defined as, “veteran student representation in the study body, veteran-specific groups and services, and the quality of relationships student veterans have with peers” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015, p.87).

In this study, supportive climate is defined as, “campuses where institutionally based efforts are made to support veterans. Often, they are land-grant institutions located near a military base, or have a long history of successful and vibrant ROTC programs” (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009, p.73).

In this study, student veteran is defined as, “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable” (Tomar & Stoffel, 2014, p.430; Veterans’ Benefits, 38 U.S.C. § 101(2); Pensions, Bonuses, and Veterans’ Relief, 38 C.F.R. § 3.1 (d)). Because, “over 90 percent of student veterans are former enlisted members, not officers” (Vacchi, 2012, p.18), for the purposes of this study, student veteran will only encompass those who were enlisted. Veteran will be used interchangeably with student veteran unless it is specified the person is not enrolled in college.
In this study, **tracking** is defined as, “mechanisms to identify and track veterans in larger institutional systems to facilitate better transitions, allowing them to report on their progress and better target services” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015, p.84).

In this study, **veteran-friendly** is defined as institutions who have “congruence between the services and supports they offer and extant research documenting the needs of returning student veterans” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015, p.77). For the purposes of this study, veteran-friendly will be used interchangeably with military-friendly.

In this study, a **war zone** is defined as, “turbulent, disquieting, and life-threatening environments, unlike traditional community living” (Tomar & Stoffel, 2014, p.435).

### 1.6 ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Several assumptions regarding the influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans guided the development of this research study. One of the most basic philosophical assumptions of using the phenomenological approach is, “we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness” (Patton, 2001, pp. 105-106). First, it was assumed that any time spent on active duty including military training or deployments would create a transition for veterans to navigate once they returned to their or civilian lives. Patton (2001) makes note that it is important for another person experiences by experiencing, “the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves” (p.106). The second assumption assumed that student veterans would be opened to discuss their experiences when applying to colleges after serving on active duty with someone who also served in the military. Additionally, it was assumed that student veterans who chose to apply to college face academic and social challenges unique to this population. A final assumption was that the student Army veterans would be provided enough help to navigate the university or college setting, leading them to apply to that school.
Addressing the first assumption, some researchers have acknowledged the impact of transitions on all people by developing models (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Schlossberg, 1984, 1989) and theories (Tinto, 1987) with special attention paid to whether a change was anticipated, unanticipated, or a nonevent (Schlossberg, 2011). It seems likely that an Army veteran goes through some form of transition when shifting from civilian to soldier and then back to civilian. To address the second assumption, it is safe to infer that Army veterans may be more inclined to speak freely with someone who has also experienced serving in the military. Because Army veterans choose to apply to an institution of higher learning, there must have been some positive factors associated with the idea of attending school. These Army student veterans may easily share the positive aspects of applying to college with most people but, feel more comfortable opening up about the negative aspects with someone in their in-group. Another assumption has been addressed throughout the literature that veterans face to include academic challenges which include being at a higher risk for failing out and having low GPAs (Francis & Kraus, 2012; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) and difficulty relating to perceived immature and unfocused peers (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Bauman, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Elliot, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Glasser, Powers, & Zywiak, 2009; O’Herrin, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Vance & Miller, 2009; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013; Wilson, 2014). The last assumption is based on understanding that veterans are less likely to hide their military affiliation on a campus.
that is military-friendly and supportive (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). If these student Army veterans feel as though a college or university was easy to navigate during college application, it could make the school appear to be more military-friendly. It is also based on the idea that at a university where this research will be conducted is known as a military-friendly campus with a high-profile group of veterans, a member of the in-group can work towards finding student Army veterans who will self-identify because their primary identity may be of veteran (Francis & Kraus, 2012).

The researcher identifies the following limitations of this study:

1. The study is limited to various colleges and universities in the state of South Carolina.
2. The demographic variables are few and may not recognize other probable factors that may influence college application after time spent on active duty.
3. The data used in this study will be obtained from interviews and observations which are specific to this particular group.

The primary limitation is that of the inability to generalize results from the sample to a larger population. This study is limited to ten participants recruited and selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). Participants will be recruited and selected from various colleges and universities in the state of South Carolina. Participants must have belonged to the Army Reserves, Army National Guard, or served on Active duty in the Army. Participants must also be veterans as defined by this researcher. Qualitative work is intended to provide a general idea and is not intended to be generalizable (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Instead, a qualitative study regarding student veterans and their perceptions of how they have been treated serves as a means to help institutions
understand through the lens of those they serve (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Because this study will recruit at various 4-year degree granting institutions, it should be noted that the student veterans who choose to participate may have particularly strong positive or negative experiences to share and should be considered when interpreting the findings (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Some of the limitations of this study have to do with the researcher’s own subjectivity, position, and conviction. In qualitative research the researcher is the instrument of the study. Interpretations of data collected is limited to the researcher. Biases may be introduced based on the researcher’s experiences within the military. These may be limited by the fact that the researcher is a member of the in-group in which she hopes to study as a student Army veteran; however, as a current doctoral student who is no longer an undergraduate, she is somewhat of an outsider to this population. As the researcher who served over ten years ago, she is not even within their generation of deployments as members of the Army. This researcher has not experienced what these veterans have experienced. It is the hope of this researcher that these veterans will feel comfortable enough to share their experiences with her. Hopefully, they will see this researcher as an interviewer and not an administrator or college professor who has taught courses in different areas on campus. Also, this researcher does not wish for them to try and please her by feeling they have to participate in this study due to her position as the military affairs liaison of the Graduate Student Association. Some of these veterans who will be involved may not be particularly model soldiers or students and may have had disciplinary or academic problems. This researcher must allow them to speak candidly and truthfully without passing any kind of judgment on them. This study is dependent
upon self-reports, creating a possibility of social desirability bias. Although efforts will be made to control for this bias in establishing and communicating the confidentiality of participant responses, the study is limited by the self-report nature of the questions asked in a qualitative study.

Because research has shown that many student veterans do not choose to self-identify, this study, which will be using a purposive sample, may struggle to find veterans who are willing to talk and could lead to snowball or convenience sampling. Although attempts will be made to ensure a sample that is demographically representative, the study is bound by the limitations of a sample that may include mostly male, European American participants. The last limitation to this research is that lack of research experience of this researcher may introduce errors not initially foreseen.

This study seeks to determine the self-reported influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans. This study currently only looks to enlisted student veterans at four-year educational institutions who served in the Army on active duty, Reserves, or the National Guard. Because this is a qualitative research study, findings cannot be generalized outside of these parameters.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

1.7.1 Knowledge Generation

This study will look to generate knowledge in areas ignored by earlier researchers. Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy (2014) noted that a sample of ten students out of 500 student veterans at the University of Kentucky may be a real limitation. Furthermore, they explained that future studies should capture diversity and additional demographic variables by including respondents’ academic performance, choice of
majors, and military experience beyond what was presented in their study (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). Tomar & Stoffel (2014) also noted a small sample size of 2 students and recognized the importance of speaking with student veterans from ethnic backgrounds other than Caucasian.

**Awareness.** Some student veterans believe that awareness of support programs could be improved through better intentional marketing strategies and maintaining a connection with them while deployed (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). Student veterans could also benefit from increased awareness of military culture on campus to include acknowledgement of Veterans’ Day, Memorial Day, and September 11th and recognition by being offered red, white, and blue honor cords for graduation (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014).

The significant strengths of student veterans can be highlighted by receiving appropriate social support from those who understand their experiences (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Awareness can also take the form of informing legislators about the issues faced by student veterans. The University of Kansas SVO proposed legislation to cover tuition costs for veterans that leave GI Bill money for living expenses that did not pass but, helped secure a limited number of state-funded scholarships for veterans and served as an invaluable learning experience (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). By helping legislators see the need for more
funding to be put in place for student veterans, the SVO at KU was able to successfully advocate.

1.7.2 Professional Application

**Counselors and Counselor Educators.** Section F.7. of the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014) addresses Responsibilities of Counselor Educators. Section F.7.c. Infusing Multicultural Issues/ Diversity states, “Counselor educators infuse material related to multiculturalism/ diversity into all courses and workshops for the development of professional counselors.” Contextual and identity issues that can shape counselor education include gender identity, age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, health status, ability status, nation/ region of origin, education, religion/ spirituality, sexual orientation, body size and appearance, family of origin, generation of birth, values, biases, beliefs, prior learning experiences, privilege, oppression, discrimination, marginalization, and many others. An examination of the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014), however, produced no reference identifying personal veteran status as a relevant characteristic for purposes of counselor awareness, non-discrimination, or diversity considerations. With such a strong basis in multiculturalism, including veteran status within the *ACA Code of Ethics* may be something that needs to change for the benefit of future research.

**Educating Nonveteran Professionals.** It is important for services and campus professionals to understand the unique needs, issues, and concerns of student veterans by being prepared to assist them when they come to campus (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). It is also important for
administrators to know that the VA disability rating process can be confusing because even though the military or VA finds a veteran to be entitled to disability benefits, that does not automatically entitle the person to receive academic supports in a postsecondary setting, according to the Office of Civil Rights (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Office of the Assistant Secretary, 2008; O’Herrin, 2011). With the widening of access to higher education for many veterans thanks to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, institutions must work to create and promote opportunities for continued success of student veterans’ transition success by hiring individuals who understand this population’s needs and concerns (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). The Post-9/11 GI Bill is a useful tool for veterans to attend college but, there should be more support put in place for this benefit. Campus personnel and services must be well-versed in student veteran needs because the director of veterans’ offices on campus usually serve as the advocate for this population and on campuses that lack veterans’ offices, such as at Eastern University, advocating for student veterans may fall on the shoulders of faculty and staff in the College of Education—most notably in adult education (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Mental health services at universities should also take the lead to coordinate services among campus services to hire staff members who are trained specifically to deal with veterans (Elliot, Gonzalez, and Larsen, 2011; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Faculty and staff should also be willing to accommodate the needs of student veterans such as special seating arrangements near an exit or with their back against the wall, an opportunity to leave the classroom when needing relief from anxiety, and extra time required for exams for those with a documented disability (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Vacchi, 2012). Though many
universities do not have an interested professional staff member with the responsibilities of helping with SVOs and other veteran concerns, issues could be rectified for student veterans if universities choose a point person who can educate, advocate, and push structures to coordinate services for them (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Partnering with the VA certifying official in order to identify faculty and staff members who are veterans can help create a locus of support for student veterans and serve as a source of advocacy for student veteran organizations (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Once veteran faculty and staff members have been identified, their names should be published on a web page for student veterans to contact them for assistance and mentorship because returning veterans particularly trust those who have experienced combat (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009).

**Educating Faculty and Staff.** If teaching a class that has nothing to do with the military or ongoing wars, it may be viewed as a waste of time and offensive to student veterans when giving opinions about such matters (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Vacchi, 2012). For professors who have not been to Iraq, credibility can be lost and student veterans can be negatively affected and feel threatened when derogatory statements about military intervention in parts of the Middle East are discussed (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Vacchi, 2012). One
way to educate faculty and staff on the student veteran population is through professional development opportunities and different programs like Green Zone training (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Francis & Kraus, 2012; O’Herrin, 2011).

1.7.3 Social Change

**Academic Policies and Procedures.** Special policies considering college applications of student veterans without placing a great deal of weight on entrance test scores should be created to benefit this special population (Vacchi, 2012). Prior academic work while serving in the military should also be taken into consideration when evaluating transcripts to award fair credit to student veterans using the Army/ American Council on Education Registry Transcript System or for re-enrollment back into programs where they were already accepted (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011; Vacchi, 2012; Wilson, 2014). Unfortunately, some student veterans know about getting credit for military experience while others have no idea it is a possibility (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). Universities can also offer deployed students or students using the GI Bill priority registration (Francis & Kraus, 2012; Moon & Schma, 2011). Because the difficulty of tracking student veterans has been noted, one way to identify these students when they apply is for both admissions and registrar’s offices to add a veteran data field to college entrance applications (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011).

**Financial Literacy.** Administering veterans’ benefits and services proves a need for specific campus policies and procedures (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma,
One way to mitigate financial stress while attending college is for universities to create scholarships, change the way financial aid is handled regarding the GI Bill by allowing benefits to not be subtracted from the amount of aid received, refunding students their tuition and registration fees when called upon to active duty, and helping them navigate other tuition assistance programs (Bauman, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Understanding that GI Bill benefits are paid out on a monthly basis rather than the start of the semester and accommodating student veterans by not expecting payment until after the first day in October when using GI Bill benefits shows awareness of the federal government’s fiscal year on the part of administrators and can alleviate financial stress for veterans (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Vacchi, 2012). Schools like Eastern University have found a way to support student veterans and mitigate financial stress by viewing GI Bill benefits as a guaranteed source of funds and placing the credit on their accounts once the benefits have been certified (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Both the University of Kansas and Western Michigan University have a working collaboration between student veterans and administrators which helped to develop an interest free payment program for books and tuition and KU and the option to access emergency loans through the university at WMU (Moon & Schma, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Western Kentucky University (WKU) offers a program similar to KU and WMU through their Textbook for Troops program that allows veterans and dependents without textbook benefits to check out a textbook and return at a later date when the semester ends (Wilson, 2014). Western Michigan University instituted a program to provide current and future deployed students with funding through the Returning Veterans Tuition Assistance Program and students
receive in-state tuition for subsequent semesters (Moon & Schma, 2011). Other schools may help veterans by not requiring tuition and fees be paid up front in a lump sum, offering tuition deferment as they wait on GI Bill benefits, and allowing students receiving the GI Bill priority registration (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Moon & Schma, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009).

**Other Suggestions.** The re-enrollment process and transition is often experienced alone for veterans, exacerbating reliance of self (Bauman, 2009; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Student veterans groups on many campuses have persuaded administrators to adopt withdrawal and re-enrollment policies to protect students who are called to active duty (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Providing better support services for students can include keeping in contact with student veterans who get called to active duty and emailing them updates (Bauman, 2009; Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). Campuses can also consider offering more online classes and classes at times that are convenient for students who work full-time because some military benefits make it difficult to attend college full-time (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; O’Herrin, 2011). Providing student veterans with more accommodating classes can be a great way to help students feel as though their administration cares about them and respects their military commitments. Another thing to consider is if student veterans are able to verify VA health coverage, campuses should work to establish a policy to waive all relevant health insurance fees (Vacchi, 2012). By recognizing their struggles and trying to fix them, faculty and staff can show this special population that they care.
Based on the theoretical support and research findings presented, it seems important, for counselors and counselor educators to be aware of and better understand the personal and social implications of being a student veteran on a college campus. From a multicultural counseling perspective, that identification may present unique challenges for some student veterans who carry a self-identified title that is inconsistent with the majority of his/her traditional student peers. It would also seem prudent to know how the experiences or military identification of a counselor, counselor educator, counselor-in-training, or client might impact on the therapeutic or supervision relationship and on the collaborative formulation and implementation of treatment approaches. In the absence of such knowledge and self-awareness, a number of issues represent potential major concerns for counseling professional, counselors-in-training, and clients.

1.8 CONCLUSION

The issue of effectively serving our veterans will continue to be an important area of research for the near future. A main finding of my research, I hope, will be that family involvement, military commitment, mentorship, and school engagement in a university setting may affect the college application of student Army veterans. For future counselor educators, this information is useful in providing insight as to how they can help increase and support student veteran college application from the perspective of student Army veterans. It is the duty of counselor educators to help prepare future counselors so that they can effectively work with this special population. In the future, research would benefit from working alongside the Department of the Army and other entities like the Department of Defense to help shape policy that affects student veterans on college
campuses. It may be useful for research to later expand by looking at other branches of the military to give every veteran a voice on this topic.

The preceding chapter introduced the reader to the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the study proposed. Chapter 2 explores the literature pertinent to the question of the influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans. The third chapter describes the methodology of this study. The fourth chapter outlines the results of this study while the fifth chapter will analyze those results in order to present the conclusions, implications, and limitation.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Veterans are a very unique population that deserves to be studied. Recognizing that many veterans hold no degree though they are offered educational benefits for their military service coupled with the fact that many studies done with the veteran population focus on retention and not necessarily college application provides the rationale for this study. This literature review will include qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and conceptual articles. Included are summarizations of the professional literature relating specifically to student veterans. A review of the literature relating to veterans is explored in relation to how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application using a phenomenological approach.

All resources cited in this study and included in the following review of literature were deemed by the researcher to be relevant to the positive and negative factors that influence college application of student Army veterans. The included book sources were acquired by taking classes in which they were used in the Counselor Education, Social Work, Psychology, and Health Promotion programs at the University of South Carolina. Articles were selected from journals representing education, military affairs, counseling, mental health, sociology, psychology, and other multi-discipline fields. A search of cited article references produced new listings relevant to this study. Colleagues in the field located journals proving to be beneficial towards this study. Of the articles used, other
than six based on particular theories (Tinto, 1987) and models (Schlossberg, 1984, 1989, 2011), fifteen were published between 2000-2015.

Wadsworth, 2013; Wilson, 2014). Categories that comprise these components include military influence, invisibility, support, campus culture and, navigating re-enrollment.

The current literature was compiled utilizing articles available in full text from peer-reviewed journals. Aside from simply searching for specific terms, this researcher used the most recent article relevant to the study and did a background search of articles used within it—leading to more resources within those articles. The following Databases were selected: ERIC; Education Full Text: PsychInfo; PsychArticles; Education Source *and* ERIC; Academic Search Complete; and GoogleScholar. The key words used to generate search results were: enrollment; college enrollment; military; veterans; transfer; and nontraditional student. Other key words used to generate results relating to college application of student Army veterans included: college application and military with one result; college application and veteran(s) with three results; college entrance and military resulting in two articles pertaining to West Point and officers; college entrance and veteran(s) with nine results pertaining to Affirmative Action and nothing of value for the current study; college application and motivation with eight results and only one usable from 2010 which discussed intrinsic and extrinsic motivation not particular to student veterans; college application, motivation, and military with zero results; and finally college application, motivation, and veteran(s) with zero results. The most useful information, however, came from doing a backwards literature review of articles used in the most recent peer reviewed article done by Griffin & Gilbert (2015). Before using any of the articles from the backwards literature review of articles, each was checked to determine whether or not they were published in peer-reviewed journals. Resources are
grouped and discussed based on their relevance: a) theoretical framework, b) methodology, and c) limitation to prior research.

This review contains summaries and comparisons of literature used to support conceptual and structural areas of inquiry into understanding how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application using a phenomenological approach. The common themes of cornerstones, auxiliary aid, and environment that are associated with positive and negative factors that influence college application of student Army veterans will further be elaborated upon below in this section of the current study.

SVASTM. In order to best support student veterans, there must be a basis to view their transition into the college setting. Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) developed the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVASTM) which looks at the three important components: cornerstones, auxiliary aid, and environment. Categories that comprise these components include military influence, invisibility, support, campus culture, and navigating re-enrollment.

Cornerstones. Military influence and invisibility comprise the cornerstones component of the SVASTM. Military influence can affect how student veterans view themselves in comparison to their non-military peers on college campuses. They may perceive themselves to be more mature, self-reliant, focused, and in need of less supports than traditional students. Invisibility explains how disclosure of self-identity or lack thereof to avoid deferential treatment makes it difficult to track what students are veterans in order to better support them.
Military Influence. There are four subcategories that make up military influence: (a) academic emphasis, (b) maturity, (c) difficulty relating to peers, and (d) pride (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). It is important to recognize that the military can influence many things in that person’s life to include where they live, work, seek medical attention, and attend school (Francis & Kraus, 2012).

academic emphasis. Some student veterans believe that their military experience prepares them for college. In fact, many universities try to offer college credit for their experiences (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Vacchi, 2012; Wilson, 2014). Some researchers even argue that, if they do not, universities should consider offering college credit for military experiences (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Moon & Schma, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). It has also been suggested a critical piece of a holistic approach to support student veterans is to offer academic advising services (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Recognizing that many veterans were not successfully transitioning into higher education, Cleveland State University created the Supportive Education for Returning Veteran (SERV) Program (O’Herrin, 2011). Some schools, like Western Kentucky University, offer a Veterans Upward Bound program funded by the federal TRIO grant to help veterans with skills training and college preparation (Wilson, 2014). These initiatives have proved successful for veterans transitioning from military personnel to student.

maturity. Some student veterans may struggle to connect with traditional aged college students due to having little in common with them and feeling as though significant barriers to social connection include maturity and attitudes of their peers
(Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Bauman, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; O’Herrin, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013). In fact, some veterans may view their nonveteran peers to be unfocused and undisciplined (Wilson, 2014). One tour of duty can create a strong military socialization and sense of camaraderie for members of the military that is not often a trait of their civilian counterparts (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Vacchi, 2012).

**difficulty relating to peers.** Student veterans live off campus and have different responsibilities than their civilian student counterparts including significant work commitments outside of school and families to support which makes them less likely to get involved in campus activities and feel like they fit in with their peers (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). In fact, many student veterans feel that emotional support and camaraderie from other civilian students is lacking, which makes them contemplate returning to the war zone (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014).

**pride.** Often times, student veterans choose not to seek guidance from people on campus because they have too much pride—a virtue introduced in the military (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Educational experiences can be influenced by the attitudes of nonveteran people to include students and professors (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013).
If student veterans feel as though they will be criticized by students and professors for their views or military service, they are less likely to ask for help (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mithcell, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013). It can be a difficult transition from veteran to student because student veterans leave an environment that operates within rigid structures and protocols when in the military to a loose structure on college campuses (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011).

**Invisibility.** There are two subcategories that make up invisibility: (a) connection to campus and (b) selective identity (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011).

**connection to campus.** Because many student veterans do not live on campus, they are less likely to get involved in on-campus activities (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). Massachusetts Mount Wachusett Community College partnered with the nonprofit organization Veteran Homestead, Inc. to lease ten acres of land for construction of a rehabilitation center for severely injured veterans where families can live together and it provides internship opportunities for nursing and allied health profession students (O’Herrin, 2013). This is an example of ways in which public colleges can partner with the private sector to benefit student veterans (O’Herrin, 2013). Student veterans have also acknowledged feeling more connected to a campus when schools keep in touch with them while they are deployed (Bauman, 2013; Bauman, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011).

**selective identity.** One issue that many universities face is the fact that student veterans often times do not self-identify as being veterans, making them appear almost invisible on campus when receiving counseling, advising, or tutoring services (Griffin &
Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Shackelford, 2009; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Some student veterans opt to conceal their military experience at schools that have more of a challenging climate as opposed to a supportive or ambivalent climate (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). In fact, due to the pride aspect of military influence, some veterans go out of their way so that they are not identified as being student veterans (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Vacchi, 2012). Conversely, some veterans actually feel as though veteran is their primary identity and they are viewed as a high profile group on campus (Francis & Kraus, 2012). Veterans are less likely to hide their military affiliation on a campus with a supportive environment (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). When Vietnam War efforts lost popular support, many Vietnam veterans became targets of protest which led to the feeling of being better off not self-identifying so they could blend in on campus (Bauman, 2013; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Veterans are taught that failure is not an option and no one wants to be the weak link which is why some veterans are afraid to self-identify as someone who would qualify to receive support and reasonable accommodations or to ask for help from professors and campus administrators (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Vacchi, 2012). If students do not self-identify with being veterans, they may feel that there is no shame in asking for help and they can freely speak their minds without being judged (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Vacchi, 2012). This is true especially of women veterans, who make up a rapidly growing segment of this population and have already faced struggles of not always being accepted by fellow
male veterans (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; O’Herrin, 2011). Some veterans perceive a loss of identity when they realize that many of their military skills are seldom used as students (Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). It is believed that women in the military deal with the pressures of attempting to earn acceptance from their male counterparts through acting more feminine by playing up their features through attire and makeup, masculine by taking on the same characteristics of their male counterparts such as smoking and cursing, or both (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Herbert, 1998). It can be difficult to track student veterans when they do not self-identify as veterans when requesting classroom accommodations for disability or seeking other assistance (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Often times, veterans may choose to identify with being wounded because they associate the term disabled as being connotation of not fit or weak (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; O’Herrin, 2011). Furthermore, because many student veterans use their college education to get into fields of security and law enforcement, they recognize that background checks for these careers can be very unforgiving of disability history (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). One way to make veterans feel comfortable to identify as disabled or wounded is through breaking the stigma of mental illness. Schools like Western Kentucky University (WKU) offer veterans a golden retriever service dog program known as CanDoo at the office of Military Student Services (Wilson, 2014). Veteran-friendly policies and practices should be implemented by faculty and staff regardless of whether or not a student self-identifies as being a veteran (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Vacchi, 2012).
Auxiliary Aid. Support is included under the auxiliary aid component of the SVASTM. Support for student veterans is generally viewed in the context of social support from fellow veterans to help navigate the university setting and explains how student veterans are less likely to seek academic support.

Support. One way student veterans feel supported is when they are offered a space to connect with fellow student veterans. Student veterans can feel a broader sense of institutional support and have positive experiences on campus if universities offer a dedicated veterans’ office on campus (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). The Sonny Montgomery Center for America’s Veterans at Mississippi State University, serves as a central location and social space for veteran services that includes professional staff (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). When educational institutions do not offer a space for veterans, they can feel disenfranchised. Because some universities do not have the option to create a student veterans’ center, it is important to hire veterans to serve as administrators and faculty or at least to provide them with a supportive climate (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Wilson, 2014).

Student veterans may benefit from mentorship programs or involvement in student organizations. University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) created a peer mentorship program for student veterans through their Services for Transfer and Re-Entry Students (STARS) Office (O’Herrin, 2011). Another way student veterans feel
supported is when they can connect with fellow student veterans on campus through Student Veterans Organizations. Student Veterans Organizations (SVOs) can bring veterans together with other veterans who understand their experiences in a judgment-free zone to help enhance their sense of belonging on campus and evaluate what works best for them (Ackerman, DiRamo, & Mitchell, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamo, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013). Members of SVOs can have the opportunity to interface with American Legion, Veterans of Foreign War (VFW), and other veteran student groups within the local and statewide community—adding more of a support system for this population (Moon & Schma, 2011). An SVO can provide opportunities for student veterans to feel free of judgment of others and display their military identity in a challenging climate (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). They can use student organizations for networking and peer mentorship in an ambivalent climate while providing campus personnel with ideas about how to be supportive of other student veterans in a supportive climate because in order to make a meaningful and lasting impression on their experiences (Ackerman, DiRamo, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; DiRamo, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; O’Herrin, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Veterans’ spaces on campus can serve more purposes than just social. Instead, they can help veterans with a desire to connect with others like them who may find it appropriate to speak directly, assertively, and sometimes harshly or inappropriate (Francis & Kraus, 2012; O’Herrin, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014), serve as a vehicle for veterans to express a collective voice of advocacy, and learn how to navigate
the system with one another’s support based on common military experience, feelings of patriotism and duty to country, and challenges shared (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). If student veterans do not have an SVO on campus to meet fellow veterans, they may rely on sororities and fraternities, professional organizations, other student organizations, and veteran-based organizations in the community (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011). Student veterans can also feel supported by faculty members who are also veterans (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Conversely, some researchers believe that Greek life and residence life are irrelevant to this population (Francis & Kraus, 2012).

Environment. The SVASTM includes the category of campus culture as part of the environment component. Environment includes the way student veterans feel they are treated by students, faculty, and staff on their campus (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009). Ways in which the environment of a college campus can be military-friendly is through accountability, explaining certain policies, and providing special services to student veterans (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011).

Campus Culture. Offices and organizations on college campuses began to diminish as World War II and Korean War veterans began to graduate which led to struggles for Vietnam War veterans to receive services and affected campus culture.
Campus climate transitioned from controversial to indifference for student veterans after the post-Vietnam Cold War period (Bauman, 2013; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Not knowing where to go for assistance or in order to file general complaints or report upsetting faculty comments because it is not always clear who is in charge on a college campus veterans feel there is no accountability on the part of the university, especially when things happen at glacial speed (Francis & Kraus, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; O’Herrin, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Lack of university outreach and marketing can be a hindrance in educational pursuits of student veterans (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). An ambivalent climate on a college campus provides minimal campus-based support services and little student veteran recognition (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Veterans can feel as though their institution provides them with a supportive climate and respect through observance of particular holidays like Veterans’ Day, Memorial Day, and September 11th and offer special red, white, and blue honor cords for graduation (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). One thing that Griffin & Gilbert (2015) noted was the importance for institutional agents to explain unpopular policies that seem cumbersome to student veterans in order to facilitate better transitions. A simple explanation goes a long way to help veterans feel as though the school is being held accountable. One of the best ways to help student veterans feel connected and succeed is through basic awareness of campus resources (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009;
Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Vacchi, 2012). Reducing the communication gap can help assist student veterans in their transitions phases and make them feel welcomed (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Moon & Schma, 2011; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Vacchi, 2012).

While many student services may exist in silos, student veterans should be able easily navigate campus systems to include registration, financial aid, deployment, and returning to campus through the creation of veterans’ offices on campus (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). Another particularly important way to support student veterans would be through the appointment of an institutional point person to deal the reintegration process (Bauman, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Wilson, 2014). Western Kentucky University (WKU) has designated a Veterans Administration Certifying Official for veterans and dependents on campus (Wilson, 2014). The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) designated a veterans liaison at their school while Fairleigh Dickinson University created an interdepartmental veterans education task force—making these schools more military-friendly (O’Herrin, 2011). Other resources that may facilitate community reintegration and be helpful for student veterans include family care and early integration services along with employment assistance in a central location that is truly collaborative (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014).
Navigating Re-Enrollment.

There are five subcategories that make up navigating re-enrollment: (a) unique experiences, (b) structure and routine, (c) change, (d) remembering and forgetting, and (e) financial considerations (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). The category of navigating re-enrollment stands alone in the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVASTM). Adaptation from military to college life and financial issues comprise the navigating re-enrollment category.

**unique experiences.** Student veterans may have a difficult time connecting to their peers and other non-veteran faculty members because of the unique experiences they encountered while on active duty (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013). In fact, many student veterans take what they learned in the military and attempt to apply it to their academic studies by using their college education to study particular fields that lead to careers in security and law enforcement (Burnett & Segoria, 2009).

**structure and routine.** Student veterans who were used to the rigid structure of the military eventually find themselves learning how to self-direct their re-enrollment and take initiative—an interesting paradox (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Self-direction is somewhat of a foreign concept for lower-ranking enlisted members of the military because they are generally used to being told what to do and when to do it (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). One way to help student veterans with this difficult re-enrollment process is to develop ways to make it seamless through
outreach, websites, and newsletters while trying to help deployed students stay connected to campus (Bauman, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Moon & Schma, 2011).

change. One challenge for student veterans during the transition is that their circles of friends change after returning from serving on active duty (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). In fact, serving in a war zone can bring about many changes in relationships and view of the role military experience plays in college enrollment (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). That is why it is important to understand this transition period through the context of the three different phases of the mobilization process: pre-mobilization, separation, and return (Bauman, 2009). Transitioning from active duty to full-time college student can be a major change for many student veterans. Others who started out as civilian members and then transition to service member to veteran and sometimes disabled can also struggle with having several identities (Francis & Kraus, 2012). Because of the many challenges student veterans face, such as finding adequate funding, when trying to serve in the military and also attend school, some choose to pursue part-time studies or distance learning courses while off duty (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009)

remembering and forgetting. Student veterans may face challenges such as forgetting course content and basic concepts if they have been away from school for an extended period of time (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Because student veterans may struggle with remembering and forgetting academic concepts learned in high school, it may be particularly important to help reacquaint them with academic work through organizational services, academic support services, advising, and
tutoring (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011).

financial considerations. The Post-9/11 GI Bill has helped increase postsecondary enrollment by making it more attainable for those who do not necessarily have the means to attend without funding from the military (Bauman, 2013; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Vacchi, 2012; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013). While many veterans have access to government benefits for tuition and other school expenses, delays in disbursement of said benefits often causes student veterans to use high interest credit cards as a stop-gap or risk being dropped from classes because of strict university payment deadlines and a lack of understanding of university systems to get deferred payment, or payment plans (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). When benefits are delayed or incorrectly processed, veterans struggle with unanticipated financial transitions that can make it difficult to begin their studies (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011). Veterans must use high interest credit cards and find other ways to and pay tuition and other out-of-pocket expenses when their benefits are delayed—causing unneeded stress (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). The National Guard in Kentucky will pay full tuition for the Fall and Spring semesters up to 15 credit hours and Western Kentucky University (WKU) offers eligible veterans a discounted tuition rate (Wilson, 2014). What is most concerning about this population trying to find ways to pay for college is that, on average, report lower levels of family income than most traditional civilian students (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy,
Student veterans generally have less money than non-veterans, which is one of the reasons they choose to join the military for educational benefits that are advertised as part of the military recruitment process (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Wilson, 2014).

Credit Transfer and Military Experience. Seven-year-old test scores that do not appear to be accurate predictors of college success for the average student veteran, can serve as a hindrance to college enrollment (Vacchi, 2012). Many veterans are also nontraditional students, which are at a higher risk for dropping out of college and having lower GPAs (Francis & Kraus, 2012; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). One way to help veterans adjust to the transition from military to college is through offering introductory courses that serve a purpose like a University 101 or freshman seminar (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009) though some researchers believe that orientation programs are irrelevant to this population (Francis & Kraus, 2012). Offering veteran specific classes, like those offered at University of Arizona, Kent State University, Youngstown State University, and the University of Akron, can also be helpful to student veterans entering higher education (O’Herrin, 2011). George Washington University offers a midweek evening short orientation program early in the semester for student veterans (O’Herrin, 2011). Some schools offer Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) or Green to Gold programs that take military experience into account and help enlisted veterans become officers after successful completion of a bachelor’s degree (Wilson, 2014). The University of Indiana was approached by the SVO to approve a two credit course through the School of Education
on the connections between veterans and higher education which was successful as both veterans and nonveterans enrolled (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Western Michigan University created a two-credit transition course and later a one-credit meditation course for veterans that was offered by counseling faculty (Moon & Schma, 2011). Some main concerns for many student veterans is the challenge they face when attempting to get course credit for military experience, the inability for their credits to transfer from other institutions, courses being offered an inconvenient times for working adults, and limited numbers of online course offerings (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011). Unfortunately, there appears to be little consistency in how credit is awarded for military service which is why universities should designate a credit evaluator to assess military transcripts (Moon & Schma, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). Some students may feel as though the military set inappropriate expectations for credit transfer from one institution to another or how much their military experience would be valued and credited towards a college degree beyond health and physical education course credit (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). One problem noted by faculty in the Gilbert & Griffin (2015) study was that when institutions were too generous with granting too many credits for military experience, student veterans fail upper level coursework and creates more challenges in facilitating students’ transitions. In the military, training is very hands-on and application based while in college it is very abstract. The disconnect in the manner of how education occurs in both institutions (military and college) creates issues in adapting to the expected learning method of higher level courses in college. While it is important to let student veterans know their military experience is invaluable and appreciated, the need to teach
them how to think in a more abstract manner versus the application to which they are accustomed can make an argument against giving too much credit for it.

2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Though the concept articles (Francis & Kraus, 2012; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Vacchi, 2012; Wilson, 2014) were in-depth as they explained the challenges faced by veterans and support services put in place for this population, none of them were actual research studies that were able to add to the literature on how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application using a phenomenological approach. The present qualitative study using a phenomenological approach will provide insight from the perspective of only student Army veterans who are/ were enlisted and attend an institution of higher education in the Southeast to earn an undergraduate degree. Using only student Army veterans who are/ were enlisted in this qualitative study using a phenomenological approach provides rationale for the current qualitative study.

Two recent and important quantitative studies (Francois, 2014; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013) have served as important bases of the current study.

Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth (2013) studied 380 people made up of 199 student service members/ veterans and 181 civilians at 20 different educational institutions in the Midwest to understand the development and implications of emotional support from peers through three distinct occasions over the course of one year. Of the veterans who participated, 27% were from the Army, 17% from the Coast Guard, 16% Air Force, 14% Navy, and 14% Marines. Though Whiteman et al. (2013)
noted 23% were National Guard and 5% served in the Reserves, there was no explanation as to whether or not National Guard and Reserve members served in the Army National Guard or Army Reserves. Of the civilians used, 90% were Caucasian and 92% of the veterans who participated were Caucasian—providing little diversity in terms of race/ethnicity. While this article provided much information relevant to the present study, it was mostly concerned with mental health and social support of veterans. Though the present qualitative study is concerned with mental health and social support of veterans, it is specifically interested in how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application using a phenomenological approach. Mental health may serve as one factor. The present study will also only be using student Army veterans in the Southeast who chose to apply to college after serving time on active duty, which provides study rationale.

Francois (2014) used the Education Participation Scale (EPS) to measure motivational orientations of non-traditional adult college students in the metropolitan Tampa-Bay area. Surveys were sent to 144 associate degree students, 55 bachelor’s degree students, 90 master’s degree students, and 101 doctoral degree students with a return rate of 41.53% (162 students). Francois (2014) found that professional advancement, cognitive interest, and educational preparation were dominant motivational orientations of non-traditional adult college students. Though the information was useful for the present study because student Army veterans oftentimes fall into the category of non-traditional student, it did not differentiate between undergraduate and graduate students or community college and four-year educational institutions at institutions in Florida. The present study will be done in the Southeast at various four-year degree
granting educational institutions to include schools in the state of South Carolina with student Army veterans. It will look at how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application using a phenomenological approach. Motivation, as noted by Francois (2014) may serve as one of the positive factors that influence college application for the study population.

One major limitation to the above quantitative studies is that, due to virtue of being quantitative, there is less chance that student Army veterans are able to provide in-depth perspectives of their experiences. Though the above quantitative studies were in-depth as they explained the challenges faced and support services put in place for non-traditional students (Francois, 2014) and veterans (Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013) neither of them looked closely at college application after serving on active duty or specifically at members of the Army. Not addressing college application specifically of Army veterans provides rationale for the current qualitative study.

Two recent and important mixed-methods studies (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Persky & Oliver, 2011) have served as important bases of the current study. Persky & Oliver (2011) used purposive sampling to interview sixty people from five different groups: (1) students who are veterans, (2) former students who are veterans, (3) administrators, (4) faculty members, and (5) staff. Five major themes emerged from the data including: (a) credit streamlining; (b) streamlining of programs; (c) faculty, advisor, and counselor training; (d) difficulties encountered by veterans, and (e) factors that constitute a veteran-friendly campus. Persky & Oliver (2011) noted two theories for their study including Human Capital Theory (HCT) of Education and Rendon’s Theory of
Validation. A major limitation of this study in regards to the current study is that it was done at a community college and not a four-year educational institution. Other limitations that it did not look at include interviewing administrators, faculty, and staff, veterans were not differentiated based on service branch, and it did not explain whether or not participants were enlisted or commissioned. The present qualitative study using a phenomenological approach will provide insight from the perspective of only student Army veterans who are/ were enlisted and attend a 4-year educational institution to earn an undergraduate degree; providing rationale for the present study.

Olsen, Badger & McCuddy (2014) used purposive sampling of ten student veterans between ages 23-47 that consisted of 70% male and 30% female. They explored areas such as: (1) student veterans’ perceptions of the assets and strengths they developed as a result of their military experience, (2) specific challenges they faced as the student veterans transitioned to the student role and throughout their college experience, (3) their perception of why student veterans may choose not to participate in social and academic support programs directed toward them, and (4) ideas about what programs or resources might benefit future student veterans to successfully transition and succeed in college (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). What is unusual about this study, however, is that Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy (2014) used both undergraduate (80%) and graduate (20%) student veterans and of those used 20% were officers and 80% were enlisted. Furthermore, veterans were defined as people who served on active duty status for one year. Many deployments during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) lasted for less than a year. By this definition, people who deployed multiple times for less than a year at a time would not be deemed veterans. Because
many veterans of the above operations initially served shorter deployments than a year, they would not be considered veterans by the standard set forth in the Olsen, Badger, and McCuddy (2014) study, which is problematic. Another thing to note is that, unlike the present study that will use only Army student veterans, they used participants from the Marines, Navy, and Air Force. The present qualitative study using a phenomenological approach will provide insight from the perspective of only student Army veterans who are/ were enlisted and attend an educational institution to earn an undergraduate degree. The present study will also be using a different definition of veteran to be all inclusive of Army veterans who may have deployed multiple times for less than a year at a time to a war zone.

One major limitation to the above mixed-methods studies is that, due to virtue of being mixed methods, there is less chance that an in-depth study could be done regarding student Army veterans’ experiences based on time constraints of the current researcher. Though the above mixed methods studies were in-depth as they explained the challenges faced by veterans, support services put in place for this population (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Persky & Oliver, 2011) and enrollment (Persky & Oliver, 2011), neither looked at college application or specifically at members of the Army. Ignoring college application specifically of Army veterans provides rationale for the current qualitative study.

Some recent and important qualitative studies (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mithcell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; Bauman, 2013; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mithcell, 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014) have served as important bases of the current study.
DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) used grounded theory and a model of adult transitions by Schlossberg to interview 25 students consisting of 19 males and 6 females who served in either Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) or Operation New Dawn (OND). DiRamio et al. (2009) only accounted for 12 students in regards to their service branches by noting 5 were Marines, 4 were Army, and 3 had served in the Air Force. The above study also looked at three geographically diverse universities to include schools in the northern, southern, and western regions of the United States. The current study, however, will only be looking at Army student veterans in the southeastern part of the United States to describe influencing factors on their post-service college application using a phenomenological approach.

In what appeared to be a follow-up to the DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) study, Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) acknowledged that the unique experiences of student veterans may make it difficult for them to connect to their peers and other non-veteran faculty members. They discussed the importance of having veteran-friendly policies and practices in place on campus whether or not students self-identify as veterans to include accountability, explaining certain policies, and providing special services to student veterans. Though the current study uses a phenomenological approach with student Army veterans, it will ideally build upon the belief of Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) that helping veterans during their times of transition from soldier to student can make them feel welcomed.

Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) developed the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM) in order to illustrate the grounded theory that explains student veterans re-enrollment management using Schlossberg’s
transition theory. Participants were chosen from a four-year public, land-grant institution in the Southeast using convenience and snowball sampling. The mean age of participants was 25 and only six of the fifteen veterans used were Army. Of all the studies used by this researcher, the Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) most closely mirrors the present study; however, there are some great differences. The Livingston et al. (2011) study criteria for participation included: must have initiated college careers and had matriculation interrupted by deployment (combat or non-combat in nature), training, or self-induced military absence, and then have re-enrolled and must be either current students or alumni. The present study will look at student Army veterans who have applied to college and are enrolled for the first time after serving on active duty or being deployed in a combat nature (Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom).

The present qualitative study using a phenomenological approach will provide insight from the perspective of only student Army veterans who are/ were enlisted and attend an educational institution in the Southeast to earn an undergraduate degree using purposive and snowball sampling to understand how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application. The current inquiry will only look at Army veterans using a phenomenological approach which provides the rationale for the current study using the SVATSM developed by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011).

As a follow-up to the Bauman (2009) study completed about four years prior, Bauman (2013) used grounded theory and snowball sampling to examine the military mobilization process of 24 undergraduate students at three public four-year degree granting educational institutions in the Northeast. Like the current study being done,
Bauman (2013) looked at all student veterans who were current or former members of the Army. Though this study looked at the particular population of the current study, a limitation is that it was done in the Northeast and it only looked at veterans who chose to return to school. The Bauman (2013) study also looked at Army veterans who were previously enrolled and returned to school after a deployment; ignoring those who applied to and enrolled for the first time after active duty. Using only student Army veterans in the Southeast provides rationale for the current study.

Tomar & Stoffel (2014) used photovoice and principles from interpretive phenomenology and participatory action research to understand the lived experience of two student veterans in order to identify factors that influenced their goal of attaining higher education. The inclusion criteria consisted of three characteristics: (1) current enrollment in higher education, (2) past or current service in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and (3) between the ages of 20 and 29. The study consisted of 2 student veterans from a Midwestern university. The limitations of the current study in light of the proposed study include the fact that there was no differentiation between 2-year and 4-year educational enrollment because no operational definition of “higher education” was given and researchers placed an age limit. Recognizing that people can join the military at age 17 with parental consent, as the female participant in this study did, and others choose not to enroll in college until later in life, as the male participant in this study did, it may be best not to place restrictions on age. Current service in Operation Iraqi Freedom would mean that a veteran was not currently on campus but, instead in the Middle East. Other limitations include the fact that the sample was small using one male and one female—both
Caucasian; lacking diversity. One participant was working on his undergraduate degree while the other participant was in graduate school. Though the article talked about one participant being in the Navy, the other participant was simply explained to have served in the National Guard. The article did not specify if this meant the Army National Guard or the Air National Guard. Furthermore, it was not discussed whether the participant in graduate school was enlisted or a commissioned officer. The present study will not use photovoice, will use a phenomenological approach, and provide insight from the perspective of Army veterans from a 4-year educational institution with no age restrictions. It will look at undergraduate veterans who are enlisted and did not serve as officers.

Griffin & Gilbert (2015) used Schlossberg’s transition theory to examine whether and how institutions can influence veterans’ transitions to higher education. The study consisted of 72 administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals across campuses and 28 student veterans from three research universities, two doctoral/research universities, and two associate degree-granting schools located in the northeast. This study focused on the experiences of institutional agents and how different strategies are perceived as relating to specific aspects of students’ transitions and how structures, programs, and initiatives to support veterans varied across campuses. Engaging in purposive sampling, Griffin & Gilbert (2015) data was collected from students, faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals. The limitations of the current study in light of the proposed study include the fact that associate-degree granting institutions were studied and that information was gathered from people who were not veterans. Of the veterans who were studied, there was no gender, race/ethnicity, branch of service, or
whether enlisted or commissioned listed. Furthermore, of the faculty members interviewed, a great deal of professors used were from the engineering department. The present study will provide insight from the perspective of veterans and not faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals at four-year baccalaureate degree granting institutions. This study will look specifically at branch of service (Army) and for enlisted soldiers as commissioned officers already hold a college degree.

Though the above qualitative studies were in-depth as they explained the challenges faced by veterans, support services put in place for this population (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; Bauman, 2013; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014), enrollment (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008), and re-enrollment (Bauman 2009, 2013; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011) of veterans, only one of them looked specifically at members of the Army (Bauman, 2013). Using only Army veterans provides rationale for the current qualitative study.

2.2 METHODOLOGY

Prior empirically based research studies identified positive and negative factors that influence college enrollment of student Army veterans by employing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches. None, however, looked at how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application using a phenomenological approach. While some focused specifically on serving this population (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009, 2013; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Persky & Oliver, 2011; Tomar &
Stoffel, 2014; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013) others simply looked at lived experiences of veterans (Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). Initial enrollment (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Persky & Oliver, 2011) and re-enrollment (Bauman 2009, 2013; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011) of veterans have been examined while little to no attention has been paid to veterans who initially apply to college after serving on active duty.

Student veterans were difficult to define throughout the research as various studies had different definitions. Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy (2014) studied university students with active duty military experience and in order to participate in the study, respondents had to be full-time university students who had served in any military branch on active duty for at least one year. This definition could be problematic because some veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom served less than a year in a combat zone at the beginning of these operations but, are categorized by their service commitment as veterans.

Tomar & Stoffel (2014) used the definition most commonly associated with veterans’ codes of federal regulation statutes and defined veteran as, “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable” (Veterans’ Benefits, 38 U.S.C. § 101(2); Pensions, Bonuses, and Veterans’ Relief, 38 C.F.R. § 3.1 (d)). Tomar & Stoffel (2014) studied students currently enrolled in higher education who were past or current service members of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), or Operation New Dawn (OND) and were between the ages of 20 and 29. For the purposes of this study, however, student veteran and veteran will be used interchangeably.
One theme captured by almost all of the prior research was the prospect of challenges faced by this population. This study will take a strengths-based approach, using its own definition of veteran, to focus on the experiences of student Army veterans that lead to college application after serving on active duty.

2.3 LIMITATIONS OF PRIOR RESEARCH

This current study will employ a qualitative research methodology as to focus on student Army veterans and their lived experiences contributing to their college application after serving on active duty as active duty soldiers or in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Using the phenomenological approach will allow the researcher to explore students’ personal experiences. It will look specifically at enlisted veterans attending college for their first undergraduate degree at a 4-year academic institution who served in the Army Reserves, Army National Guard, or on active duty status in the Army. In addition, the researcher will be capable of exploring, using a phenomenological approach, student Army veterans in their natural setting which will contribute to the richness of the information to be garnered.

2.4 CONCLUSION

Many veterans do not hold a degree, though the military pushes educational attainment as a recruitment tool—making this an important population to study (United States Census Bureau, 2012; Wilson, 2014). A review of the literature addressed challenges faced by student veterans that may influence college enrollment or retention. Many researchers have addressed retention or support services put in place at the university level for this special population. Fewer studies have examined college
enrollment of student Army veterans and no studies, to this researcher’s knowledge, have considered how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application using a phenomenological approach. More research is needed in this area. This research provides an opportunity to increase understanding of the positive and negative factors that influence college application of student Army veterans. A better understanding of these factors could make a shift from retention to recruitment of veterans to bolster their success.

The following chapter, Chapter 3, will outline the methodology used that is pertinent to the question of how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application. Chapter 4 will outline the qualitative results of this phenomenological study through the use of interviews of student Army veterans regarding their perceived positive and negative experiences that influence college application after serving on active duty. The final and fifth chapter will analyze the results in order to present the conclusions, limitations, and implications for future research studies.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter’s purpose is to provide an overview of the methodology used to understand how student Army veterans describe the influencing factors on their post-service education. The approach used to understand experiences of student Army veterans before, during, and after college application is phenomenological in nature and is discussed in detail. The rationale for choosing this qualitative approach is also explained along with ethical considerations measures, participant selection criteria, interview questions asked, researcher role, implications of study findings, and final thoughts. The intent of the study gained an understanding of what experiences led student Army veterans to apply to college.

Phenomenological methodology was chosen to explore and articulate the experiences of student Army veterans. In research, some questions arise regarding how to determine if research is quantitative or qualitative. Glesne (2006) acknowledged four aspects to be considered when these questions arise: (1) assumptions, (2) research purposes, (3) research approach, and (4) researcher role. Assumptions must be both difficult to measure and complex. Research purposes must look to contextualize and understand the research issue. The research approach may result in theory and/or hypotheses. Finally, understanding of the issues and some personal involvement, such as this researcher’s past involvement in the Army and as an Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, was included for the researcher role (Glesne, 2006). Both Cresswell (1998) and
Glesne (2006) also acknowledged that how and what questions with variables that cannot be easily identified coupled with the researcher wanting to serve as an active learner in the participants’ natural environment determine qualitative research design. Hays & Wood (2011) noted, “Phenomenology is a tradition congruent with counseling” (p.291) as researchers examine client experiences through assessment of detailed information.

Though it is important to understand ways in which universities can retain this population, there is an inherent hurdle in trying to initially get them to apply. The lack of literature that looks at student veterans who chose to apply to college after serving on active duty status provided the rationale for this study (Bauman, 2013). This study sought to understand what makes some veterans choose to apply to college after serving on active duty status. This study addressed gaps in literature using the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVASTM) developed by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) to help explain the transitions veterans go through after serving on active duty status when they re-enter civilian life. The methodologies previous studies have carried out did not appear to be the best fit for this study to examine how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application. This study gives a voice to student Army veterans who chose to apply to college once returning from active duty.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND PURPOSE

This study is phenomenological in nature. The intent of a phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of the participants. “Whereas grounded theory intends to saturate data to generate theory, the sole purpose of phenomenology is to describe the depth and meaning of participants’ lived experiences” (Hays & Wood, 2011, p.291).
The rationale for this study was to examine how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service education. Questions that were carefully designed to answer this specific research question were implemented as part of the study methodology. Four key steps to phenomenological data analysis were identified by Moustakas (1994) which include: (1.) bracketing experiences, (2.) horizontalization, (3.) relation and clustering of invariant meaning units, and (4.) seeking multiple meanings and tensions in the textual description (Hays & Wood, 2011). In order to bracket assumptions, researchers, “seek to understand the phenomenon through the eyes of those who have direct, immediate experience with it” (Hays & Wood, 2011, p.291).

Horizontalization is the process of identifying statements that are relevant to the experience under investigation that are not repetitive or overlapping (Hays & Woods, 2011). The third step of relation and clustering is similar to axial coding used in grounded theory (Hays & Singh, 2011; Hays & Wood, 2011).

The choice to use phenomenology over other qualitative research methods was based on the fact that while there is research to show the challenges veterans face, further elaboration of their experiences are important to understand initial application. Many of these challenges are known but, phenomenological research seeks to describe rather than generate and validate a theory. Phenomenological research also starts from a perspective that is free from preconceptions or hypotheses and emphasizes subjective experiences and interpretations of the world (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). With what is known about career development, it was nearly impossible to walk into this study without preconceptions or bias. Because voices from veterans who chose to apply to college after serving on active duty is important to understand influencing factors on student Army
veteran post-service college application, a single case study would not suffice for this research. Though focus groups may provide this study with much information, it was important to this researcher that individual voices be heard regarding the topic.

A literature review from Chapter 2 was done to examine the patterns, themes, and common categories this population faces (Rubin & Babbie, 2011) using the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVASTM) developed by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011). Acknowledging the need to understand the multiple realities of student Army veterans, phenomenology appeared to be the most appropriate qualitative research method to use.

3.2 ROLE OF RESEARCHER

This researcher served as a key instrument in the research by collecting data through the interview process (Maxwell, 2005). The use of a qualitative methodology in this study allowed the true depth of the challenges veterans face once they return from serving on active duty status and feelings surrounding these transitions into the role of college student to be fully evaluated. By factoring in personal knowledge of the transition process from soldier to civilian and experiences of leaving a war zone and returning to college into the equation, it gave a unique understanding of the participant’s viewpoints. The current researcher’s position as a former student Army veteran who has served in a professoriate role for different classes on campus did not play a role in how the participants viewed the researcher. This study was of particular interest to the researcher due to her experience of getting pulled out of her second semester while at The Pennsylvania State University to deploy with the 203D MI BN, an Army intelligence unit, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and later returning to resume her studies.
Of the many researchers who have been cited in this particular study, few have served in the military—or have not acknowledged their military commitments. This researcher’s past experience as a student Army veteran who returned to college after deploying on active duty status and former status as the military affairs liaison of the graduate student association, thus fully understanding the works of Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming’s (2011) Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM) oddly enough did not present a very real research bias and reactivity in attempting to capture the true experience of those being interviewed. The subjectivity of the researcher is indicated by researcher bias.

Furthermore, this researcher also took into account the survey administration she did for Drasgow Consulting Group, LLC. while at Ft. Jackson with incoming soldiers regarding their resiliency as they transitioned from civilians to soldiers. This researcher’s thoughts, feelings, past experiences of being a full-time undergraduate college student and combat veteran pulled from college to enter the war coupled with current experience as a doctoral candidate and college instructor did not appear to taint the responses of the participants to provide answers that were socially desirable as they were willing to speak about both positive and negative views of their college or university and the Army. The goal of this study is to understand how the values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusions of the study while avoiding negative consequences. Reactivity refers to the inherent influence of the researcher on the setting at the university or of the individual Army veterans being studied. The researcher’s task was to understand her influence and use it productively (Creswell, 1998). The researcher was able to remain objective through constant self-reflection.
As a member of the Student Veterans Association (SVA) on one of the campuses being studied, the role of this researcher was that of observer-as-participant (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). An observer-as-participant identifies as a researcher and may interact with participants in a social process but, does not become a participant (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). The goals of qualitative research are to minimize influence of researcher bias on the outcome of the study and not separate the researcher and research that is being done. While research bias and reactivity were possible, it was minimal during this study. Researchers must work to understand their influence on the research and use it productively (Cresswell, 2007).

3.3 CONTEXT OF STUDY

The current study examined how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service education using a phenomenological approach by looking at current students after serving on active duty. As many veterans have returned from war in the last few years, it is expected that college application will continue to increase. Furthermore, by understanding the reasons veterans choose to apply to college, counselors and student affairs personnel can learn how to help this population make better choices for their future.

The interview protocol which was used concentrated on gaining an understanding of the lived experiences of Army veterans and their decision to apply to college once they have returned from active duty. The interview structure was broken into two sections: main questions with follow-up questions developed when needed. Unique of the following interview questions is that one set was for overall college application and the other set was specific to the school where the student Army veteran attends.
The question guiding this study was: How do Army veterans describe the influencing factors on their post-service college application? The main interview structure is bulleted with follow-up questions bulleted beneath the corresponding question. In addition to the preceding question, a series of sub-questions was developed to more specifically explicate the area under study. These questions include:

Interview Questions

(1.) People have different reasons for choosing to apply to college. Can you tell me about your decision to apply to college?

- I am interested in knowing what influenced you to apply to college?
- What financial factors influenced your decision to apply to college?
- What social factors, if any, influenced your college application decision?
- What personal factors influenced your choice to apply to college?
  - Family (parents, spouse, children, etc.)
  - Friends
  - Supervisors/Mentors and Co-workers
- What career aspirations influenced you?
- What other factors influenced you that I did not mention?

(2.) Some people have difficulty deciding to apply to and attend college, and others decide fairly easily. What kind of decision process did you go through in thinking about whether or not to attend?

(3.) What influenced your decision to apply to this college/university?

(4.) Now that you have made the decision to attend college, how do you feel about it?

- How would you describe your feelings right now?
- What lingering doubts or concerns do you have?

(5.) What is your sense of the campus climate towards veterans specifically?

(6.) What are your expectations about how college will affect you personally?

- What changes in yourself do you hope will result from your college attendance?
- What do you hope to get out of your college experience?

(7.) Is there anything else you would like to share that was not addressed earlier?
Research Question

How do Army veterans describe the influencing factors on their post-service education?

3.4 PARTICIPANTS

In order to understand the experiences of participants in a phenomenological study, researchers must practice theoretical sensitivity. The quality of the researcher has been acknowledged as “having attributes of insight” and “the ability to give meaning to the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.73). Techniques used for developing this sensitivity can help researchers deal with their own biases, prejudices, assumptions, and reactivity. As Glaser (1978) noted the dangers of forcing data in the wrong direction due to being too embedded in concepts, the researcher must begin data collection with few predetermined ideas or hypotheses as possible.

The current study was intended to provide information regarding the lack of research done on college application of student Army veterans. While there is a great deal of research done on retention of this population, how Army veterans describe the influencing factors on their post-service college application is dearth. The experiences by all the interviewed veterans spoke to the point of reference within their worldview. Although it has been noted that the accessibility of educational benefits through the GI Bill has brought many soldiers to college campuses, little has been done to explore the non-financial reasons for this increase in the veteran population.

Through contacting the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (R.O.T.C.) program and advertising through the college communication systems at a public research university and a private liberal arts college located in South Carolina, this researcher was
able to send perspective undergraduate Army student veterans currently enrolled in college information to participate in this study.

I chose the R.O.T.C. program at the public research university because some of the current program participants who are training to become commissioned officers are prior enlisted and served time on active duty. Veterans were then chosen based on involvement in serving on active duty or through Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom. Veterans were only chosen who served in the Army whether full-time active duty, Army National Guard, or Army Reserves. Preference was given to Army student veterans who were enrolled in college in Columbia, SC and have served during wartime efforts before applying to college. Each volunteer received a $5.00 gift card to Starbucks.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) noted the importance of theoretical sensitivity which is developed through personal experience, and familiarity with the literature. It is imperative that a researcher develop theoretical sensitivity because, without it, there is a danger of forcing the data into the wrong direction if the researcher is too embedded in concepts derived from the literature review (Glaser, 1978). My professional experience with Army student veterans stems from my background as a former student Army veteran who was pulled out of college to serve in Operation Iraqi Freedom. I was deployed with the 203D MI BN as an intelligence analyst after completing just one semester at The Pennsylvania State University. When I returned from my involvement in the wartime efforts, I began to notice a trend of many soldiers choosing not to apply to or re-enroll in college but, instead enter the workforce. I found the choice to ignore the military benefits earned to attend school and instead begin working confusing. I spent a significant
amount of time trying to understand the reasons some people choose to further their education while others do not.

3.4.1 Ethical Considerations

Particular considerations were made in this study to minimize participant risk and in order to obtain IRB approval. Before the current study began, an application was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at this researcher’s university. Research was not initiated until the IRB approved the protocol for this research project. The IRB helped serve as a protective measure for the dignity of participants. To ensure confidentiality, an introductory letter and criteria sheet was sent to student veterans via email asking for potential participants as they self-selected based on the criteria that they served either full-time or in the National Guard or Reserves in the Army and deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. Participants were then informed of the confidential nature and informed consent (Appendix A) outlined how their responses would be used to increase knowledge in veterans’ affairs and ways to better serve student Army veterans who choose to apply to college after serving in a war zone or on active duty. The informed consent also provided an email address to reach this researcher and her Dissertation Chair should questions or concerns arise. Of those who responded and met the criteria, no more than 10 participants were asked for interviews where they signed a consent form. Participation was completely voluntary and discontinuation of the interview could happen at any point without negative consequences. Participants were advised that they were free to refuse to answer any interview question at any time; they were then assured that they could also withdraw from participating in the study at any time without fear of negative consequences.
Each volunteer received a $5.00 Starbucks gift card. This researcher assured participants of confidentiality. Excerpts from the interviews are part of the final research report but, under no circumstances will names or identifying characteristics other than gender, ethnicity, service obligation in the Army (full-time/active duty, National Guard, or Reserves) and service campaign which they supported (Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom) be included in the analysis.

The data from interviews were held secure through various means. Before and during interviews, participants were be reminded of confidentiality and directed to try as much as possible not to mention particular names, but to use phrases such as “my Battle Buddy,” or my “Commander”—remaining as inconspicuous as possible. When transcribed, names and identifiable information was omitted. After audio interviews were transcribed and coded, not by participant name but by number, the recordings were saved on a secure flash drive and placed in a secure location/file within the researcher’s home office. These files will be destroyed after a period of several years. Consent forms were uploaded to an Adobe file through the use of a scanner and saved on the same secure flash drive to be housed in the same location as the recordings. The original consent forms were then shredded for security purposes.

There were two major research sites. The first research site was a large (over 32,000 students), four-year public, and sea-grant institution with a strong military connection in the Southeast. Because other universities in Columbia, SC are also within the vicinity of an Army training location, they were also considered for this study. Furthermore, another school within the state of South Carolina was also included. The second research site was a small (less than 2,000 students), four-year private, liberal arts
college with a large percentage of non-traditional students in the Southeast. Located near a United States Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) military installation charged with overseeing of training Army forces, the large public university has a reputation of consistently being ranked a top military-friendly institution—making it an optimal site for data collection and analysis regarding veterans. The second research site a large percentage of non-traditional military personnel due to the veteran tuition discount afforded to students. Information for this study was gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews. Information was gathered from the start of the 2016 semester of the 2015-2016 school year at the aforementioned universities and after proposal defense was successful in December 2015. Choosing to conduct interviews while school was in session was done to ensure that Army veterans who applied and were now enrolled in college after serving on active duty would be on campus and attending classes regularly. Choosing a time when more students were on campus also helped the researcher find other Army veterans through snowball sampling to interview who were acquainted with others in the Army R.O.T.C. program and study participants. Rubin and Rubin (2005) recommended researchers use “main questions” to make sure that the research question would be carefully explored. Questions were developed to better understand how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service education using a phenomenological approach. To facilitate complete engagement in the process, this researcher conducted all interviews on her own. This researcher met with individuals on an individual basis instead of holding a focus group for data collection. Interviews were conducted in person with participants in a place that was most convenient for them to include their on campus, in their offices at work, or wherever they felt comfortable.
Questions were designed to elicit discussion regarding participant experiences, which was informed by the literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.51). Participants were encouraged with follow-up questions and probes to discuss, expand, or clarify their responses. The use of probing questions helped gather additional information about participant experience and not just answer the questions asked (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Participants were asked a series of questions generating discussion. The typical length of each interview was approximately one hour. Each interview was voice recorded using two different recording devices for accuracy. The interviews were audiotaped utilizing two recording devices. This researcher then transcribed each interview.

3.4.2 Sampling of Participants

Initially, this researcher wanted to interview participants in all branches of the military for a heterogeneous sample, also known as a maximum variation sample. After some thought, it was recognized that homogenous sampling would be better to capture the experiences of veterans from one single military branch. Homogeneous sampling is a purposive sampling technique that aims to achieve a homogeneous sample; that is, a sample whose units share the same, or very similar characteristics or traits such as all being Army veterans.

Qualitative studies used in this research that have been done with a military population include Griffin & Gilbert (2015) who studied 28 student veterans in the northeast at three research, two doctoral research, and two associate universities; Tomar & Stoffel (2014) who studied one female and one male student between the ages of 20-29 using photo voice; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) who studied fourteen males and one female consisting of seven reservists, 4 National Guard, and 4 active duty
with a mean age of 25 using grounded theory; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell (2008) who studied nineteen males and 6 females between the ages of 20-34 using grounded theory a non-proportion quota sampling to account for women; Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell (2009) who did a follow-up study to the DiRamio et al. (2008) study also used the same 25 participants; and Bauman (2009, 2013) who used twenty-four participants in the initial study and the same twenty-four in the follow-up study. Of the articles noted in this research study, there was a mean of 14.29 participants used; however, according to qualitative standards, a researcher should have no more than 10 participants in a study (Maxwell, 2005). Aside from the Tomar & Stoffel (2014) article, the majority of qualitative studies used were grounded theory—making their numbers irrelevant to the current phenomenological research. Having taken all of the above into consideration, this study consists of no more than 10 student Army veterans. Using a total of ten participants met the minimum set forth by Morse (1994) and is within the range of other researchers (Creswell, 1998; Hays & Wood, 2011; Morse, 1994) who suggested between 5 and 25 participants.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION

Though Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) used convenience and snowball sampling, noting the elusive nature of this particular population, making it difficult to track them, this study relied mostly on a purposive sample (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998). Like DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell (2008), I employed a purposive sampling strategy to identify my student veteran population using a combination of nonproportional quota and snowball sampling techniques (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). A minimum number of a subgroup population like women student veterans can be sought
using nonproportional quota sampling (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Henry, 1990). Snowball sampling came into play as I looked for my participants to refer me to other student veterans who may or may not self-identify as such (Patton, 2001). The use of snowball sampling was important mostly in part because many student veterans do not self-identify their veteran status (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Shackelford, 2009; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Vacchi, 2012). If student veterans choose not to self-identify, their lack of self-identification can make it difficult to track and reach out to them. DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell (2008) ended their sampling at 25 cases as they were guided by researcher agreement of clear themes and patterns emerging from sufficient data (Creswell, 1997). When I reached my sample size of 10 participants who fit the criteria noting themes and patterns, I ended my sampling. I then used a technique known as relation and clustering (Moustakas, 1994) which clusters data into smaller segments of themes or constructs and works in a similar fashion to axial coding in grounded theory (Hays & Singh, 2011; Hays & Wood, 2011). Although attempts were made to ensure a sample that is demographically representative, the study was bound by the limitations of a sample that included mostly male participants.

The sample for the current study consists of no more than 10 Army veterans who have applied to college after serving on active duty status. All participants have served on active duty at some point in their military careers and are now considered veterans.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

After meeting with study participants, their information was synthesized into various categories and process indices into abstract theories that captured the essential
story. Each interview was coded looking for themes (i.e., “the integration of data, concepts, and categories into a coherent theory”; Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 144). Transcriptions of individual interviews were used in order to bracket experiences and identify statements that were relevant to the experience under investigation that were not repetitive or overlapping (Hays & Woods, 2011; Moustakas, 1994). In the data analysis, the data found, researcher reflections, and participant lived experiences were examined (Glaser, 1978). Informational data was transcribed from the interviews, and then compared and organized on the basis of common answers and factors participants deemed important to college application choice after serving on active duty. Analysis began during the transcription phase of the research and beyond the completion of the transcript of the final interview. The researcher identified specific factors among the participants’ responses during the interviews and follow up member checks in order to develop a system of coding. Coding serves as a process of analysis in the phenomenological theory approach. Initial categories of information about the phenomenon being studied by segmenting information was done through the process of open coding (Creswell, 1998). It involved a series of naming, labeling, sorting, and categorizing data while making comparisons. Charmaz (1983) noted that a goal of open coding is to define carefully conceptual categories while delineating their properties and illustrating their antecedent conditions. Axial coding helps link systematically developed categories with subcategories and makes, “connections between categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.96). The phenomenological approach, unlike grounded theory, does not utilize axial coding. Instead, something similar to axial coding of grounded theory and introduced by Moustakas (1994) is relation and clustering (Hays &
Singh, 2011; Hays & Wood, 2011). Through this process, the researcher labeled influencing factors on the post-service college application of student Army veterans as stated by participants from the interviews, discussions, and follow-up member checks. Additionally, field notes of observations and interactions with participants on campus were analyzed. Data analysis was on-going throughout the research study. Themes certainly emerged as the data was being analyzed.

When discrepancies of data analysis arose, the researcher included discrepant information in the research study, and recommendations for further study were suggested. The researcher sought to examine if there were relationships between the SVATSM model and responses of the participants. It was the intent of the researcher that there would be distinguishing factors discovered for choice to application for student Army veterans and factors that even discouraged veterans who choose to apply to college after active duty service. Trustworthiness was established through in-depth discussions this researcher had in individual interviews (Patton, 2002). Often times, qualitative researchers will routinely employ member checking and external audits in order to ensure validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This researcher worked with other Counselor Education & Supervision Ph.D. colleagues to review the findings and check for biases. External auditing is done, “to examine both the process and product of inquiry, and determine the trustworthiness of the findings” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.128).

These colleagues who were used in order to complete external auditing are doctoral candidates in their final year of study in the Counselor Education & Supervision program at the University of South Carolina. One of these colleagues has served in administrative positions at various college campuses in the south. Another member has
served as a resident assistant at his undergraduate institution. Both colleagues have completed qualitative courses within their program of study to include HPEB 715: Research Seminar in Qualitative Methods. One colleague is currently in the process of completing a qualitative research study with a faculty member in his program while the other is completing a qualitative study for her dissertation to meet the requirements necessary to earn a Ph.D. Because neither of these colleagues has ever served in the military, they were able to review the findings with objectivity. Researcher materials were checked to see if this researcher was leading the participants in their responses. After member checking, it was concluded that researcher responses and additional questions were not leading which would have contributed to bias.

3.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the steps taken and procedures completed in the development of the methodology for this study. In order to understand how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service education, certain research-informed methodological considerations were made. First, this chapter outlined the chosen research design and approach. It described the phenomenological approach and methodology used to identify significant factors that positively and negatively affect college application of student Army veterans. Next, the setting and participant sample were described in detail. Data collection methods are provided in order to outline protocols for future studies. The interviews and observations were transcribed, and common themes were developed. Finally, procedures taken to ensure protection of participant rights are summarized. Chapter 4 will describe the process of obtaining, gathering, and recording data. Chapter 5 will then discuss the implications for this
particular research study. Through the participant interviews and observations, patterns, relationships, and themes will be described and emerge as the findings will support the data collected.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

As noted in Chapter 2, much of the research done on this special population of student veterans places members of all military branches together in one group. While past research has explored the challenges faced by veterans on college campuses in order to increase veteran retention, the purpose of this qualitative study was to conduct phenomenological interviews in order to investigate what experiences, if any, affect post-service college application of student Army veterans. The review of literature presented in Chapter 2 has provided background information relating to common themes associated with how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application based on the Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, and Fleming (2011) Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM). No research, however, has been conducted on the lived experiences of student Army veterans who chose to attend college after serving on Active Duty or in OIF and OEF using a phenomenological approach. Therefore, the examination into the lived experiences will provide significant insight into the post-service college application of this often times marginalized population.

The conceptual framework for this study was based on this researcher’s desire to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of student Army veterans who chose to apply to college once serving on active duty status. Of particular interest to this researcher was student Army veterans who were enlisted at the time they served and later
chose to attend a four-year university in South Carolina as an undergraduate student. The research conducted was organized in a series of individual interviews with ten student Army veterans completing their undergraduate studies at a college or university in Columbia, South Carolina. The data was analyzed using Moustakas’ (1994) four key steps as presented in Chapter 3: (1.) bracketing experiences, (2.) horizontalization, (3.) relation and clustering of invariant units, and (4.) seeking multiple meanings and tensions in the textual description, which mirrors grounded theory’s axial coding (Hays & Wood, 2011). This chapter reports the findings from the research and is divided into three sections: general description of participants; brief narratives of participant interviews; major themes and sub-themes generated from the data. The general description of participants helps readers understand themes relevant to the lived experiences of student Army veterans while providing context. In order to gain personal perspectives throughout the study, brief narratives are included. Finally, major themes and sub-themes add breadth to the experiences of the participants.

4.1 PARTICIPANTS

4.1.1 Group Demographics

To become more familiar with the participants and truly understand their perspectives, demographic information has been provided. The ten participants included two females who identified their ethnic or cultural group as African-American (n=2) and eight males who identified as either African-American (n=4), Caucasian (n=3), and Portuguese and Caucasian (n=1). Though women make up a rapidly growing segment of the veteran population (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; O’Herrin, 2011), this study, like the various studies before (DiRamio,
Ackerman, and Mitchell, 2008; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen, Badger & McCuddy, 2014) had a much smaller representation of women (n=2) than men (n=8). The current study reflects the make-up of more males to females in the military. Seven of the ten participants were originally from states other than South Carolina and represented Kansas (n=2), Maryland (n=2), North Carolina (n=2), and Wisconsin (n=1). Two of the three remaining participants were originally from South Carolina (n=2) while one participant spent a majority of his life living in New Jersey before moving south in his sophomore year of high school. He identified more strongly with being a northern transplant to the Palmetto State.

Of the ten participants, seven (n=7) served on Active Duty, two (n=2) in the SC Army National Guard, and one (n=1) served on Active Duty and is now in the Army Reserves. Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) represented included Infantry (IN; n=2), Corps of Engineers (EN; n=1), Signal Corps (SC; n=1), Military Police (MP; n=2), Medical Service Corps (MS; n=1), and Logistics Corps made up of and represented by Quartermaster Corps (QM; n=1), Transportation Corps (TC; n=1), and Ordnance Corps (OD; n=1). Two (n=2) of the ten participants had more than one MOS. In addition to each participant serving in the Army, three (n=3) served in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), four (n=4) served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), two (n=2) served in both Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF & OEF), and one (n=1) served in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) after having served in Desert Storm.

All ten student veterans served in the Army and are completing college education at a large public research university (n=4) or smaller private liberal arts college (n=6) in Columbia, South Carolina. While all participants were enlisted in the Army, two (n=2)
are currently in the ROTC, specifically the Green to Gold program at their respective university while two (n=2) have submitted packets for Officer Candidate School (OCS). As noted in Chapter 2, veteran participants were more likely to major in fields such as security and law enforcement (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). Four (n=4) of the ten participants are majoring in Social Work, three (n=3) are earning Criminal Justice degrees, two are working towards some form of a Business degree whether it is in Business Management (n=1) or Global Supply Chain and Operations Management (GSCOM) and Finance with a third degree in Public Relations (n=1), and another participant is majoring in Information Systems (n=1). Of interest, while the MOS of all participants may not initially align with their current college major, seven (n=7) of the ten participants believed that the skills they acquired while in their military occupations dictated their undergraduate degree choice. Furthermore, involvement in the military initiated the search for employment in the government sector after graduation for eight (n=8) participants. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity and location of the participants. The following is information concerning the actual participants.

4.1.2 Individual Demographics

**Participant One (P1)**

Participant 1 is a 31-year-old Caucasian male currently serving on Active Duty in the Army. Originally from Kansas, he attended college elsewhere before deciding to attend his current institution. He is a senior majoring in Criminal Justice at a large public university in Columbia, SC. He is in the Green to Gold program to become an officer in the Army. He hopes to attend graduate school for Hospital Administration and find a job
working in the government. He served as an Infantryman (11B) and deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

**Participant Two (P2)**

Participant 2 is a 30-year-old Caucasian male currently serving on Active Duty in the Army. Originally Maryland, he attended college elsewhere before deciding to attend his current institution. He is a first-generation junior majoring in Criminal Justice at a large public university in Columbia, SC. He is in the Green to Gold program to become an officer in the Army. He hopes to attend graduate school for his Master’s in Business Administration (MBA) and find a job working in the government. He served as Military Police (31B) and deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

**Participant Three (P3)**

Participant 3 is a 25-year-old African-American male currently serving in the Army Reserves after serving on Active Duty. A South Carolina native, he is a junior triple-majoring in Global Supply Chain and Operations Management (GSCOM), Finance, and Public Relations at a large public university in Columbia, SC. He is submitting a packet for Officer Candidate School (OCS) to become an officer in the Army. He hopes to attend graduate school for a Master’s in International Luxury Brand Merchandise Management and work in the fashion industry for designer labels. He served as Military Police (31B) and deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

**Participant Four (P4)**

Participant 4 is a 24-year-old Caucasian-Portuguese male currently serving in the South Carolina Army National Guard. Originally from New Jersey, he is viewed as an in-state student due to completing his last few years of high school in South Carolina.
He is a senior majoring in Criminal Justice at a large public university in Columbia, SC. He is submitting a packet for Officer Candidate School (OCS) to become an officer in the Army. He hopes to attend graduate school for his Master’s in Criminal Justice with a concentration in Counterterrorism and find a job working for a government agency such as the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) or a police department. He served as Carpentry and Masonry Specialist (12W) and deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

**Participant Five (P5)**

Participant 5 is a 48-year-old African-American female who served on Active Duty in the Army. She is originally from North Carolina. She is a senior majoring in Social Work at a small liberal arts college in Columbia, SC. She hopes to attend graduate school for a Master’s in Social Work (MSW). She served as a Motor Transport Operator (88M) and deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

**Participant Six (P6)**

Participant 6 is a 46-year-old African-American female who served on Active Duty in the Army. She is originally from Wisconsin. She is a senior majoring in Social Work at a small liberal arts college in Columbia, SC. She hopes to attend graduate school for a Master’s in Social Work (MSW) and find a job working for non-profit organizations such as the Red Cross or government agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). She served in both Transportation as a Transportation Management Coordinator (88N) and Logistics as an Automated Logistical Specialist (92A) and deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).
**Participant Seven (P7)**

Participant 7 is a 30-year-old African-American male who served on Active Duty in the Army. He is originally from Kansas. He is a junior majoring in Social Work at a small liberal arts college in Columbia, SC. He hopes to work for government agencies such as Veterans Affairs (VA). He served as a Wheeled Vehicle Mechanic (91B) and deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

**Participant Eight (P8)**

Participant 8 is a 41-year-old African-American male who served on Active Duty in the Army. Originally from Maryland, he attended college elsewhere before deciding to attend his current institution. He is a junior majoring in Information Systems at a small liberal arts college in Columbia, SC. He hopes to attend graduate school for a Master’s in Information Systems Management and find a job working in either the corporate industry or a government agency. He served as a Systems Operation Specialist (25B) and deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

**Participant Nine (P9)**

Participant 9 is a 45-year-old Caucasian male who retired after serving on Active Duty in the Army. Originally from North Carolina, he attended college elsewhere before deciding to attend his current institution. He is a first-generation senior majoring in Social Work at a small liberal arts college in Columbia, SC. He hopes to attend graduate school for a Master’s in Social Work (MSW) and find a job working for a government agency. He served as a (Combat Medic) Healthcare Specialist (68W) and an
Occupational Therapy Specialist (68L) and deployed in support of Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

**Participant Ten (P10)**

Participant 10 is a 30-year-old African-American male who currently serves in the South Carolina Army National Guard. A South Carolina native, he attended college elsewhere before transferring to his current institution. He is a senior majoring in Business Management at a small liberal arts college in Columbia, SC. He hopes to attend graduate school. He serves as an Infantryman (11B) and deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

4.2 QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Participants for this research study identified as student Army veterans who served on Active Duty status (n=7), in the South Carolina Army National Guard (n=2), and on Active Duty status and later the Army Reserves (n=1). Wars/ Campaigns represented in this study include Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF; n=6), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF; n=6), and Desert Storm (n=1) with some participants serving in more than one. They are currently working towards earning an undergraduate degree at a large public university (n=4) or a small liberal arts college (n=6) located in Columbia, South Carolina.

Ten student Army veterans, throughout the state of South Carolina, were interviewed individually concerning their experiences of college application after serving on active duty status. The data collected was analyzed and systematically searched for common themes and sub-themes. There were six overarching themes generated from the information gathered. Those five major themes included: (a.) Self-Improvement; (b.) Necessity; (c.) Family; (d.) Financial Considerations; (e.) School Choice; and (f.)
Military Involvement. It is also important to recognize that the first two themes had a strong bearing on why participants felt the need to attend college while the both family and financial held relevance for college attendance and military service.

A review of ten individual phenomenological interviews with a researcher-generated interview protocol produced five major themes and some sub-themes. Results of the interviews showed consistency through the interviews. The themes address the research question proposed in the current study, “How do Army veterans describe the influencing factors on their post-service college application?” The demographic characteristics of the ten participants are summarized in the Table 4.1.

4.3 SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW ANALYSES

The research completed in the study consisted of ten individual interviews with ten student Army veterans currently enrolled in undergraduate studies at respective colleges or universities in the state of South Carolina. Various themes related to post-service college application of student Army veterans emerged as a result of the semi-structured interview conducted and analyzed using Moustakas’ (1994) four key steps: (1.) bracketing experiences, (2.) horizontalization, (3.) relation and clustering of invariant units, and (4.) seeking multiple meanings and tensions in the textual description (Hays & Wood, 2011).

Themes

Themes related to military experience and post-service college application surfaced as a result of the ten individual interviews with student Army veterans currently completing undergraduate studies at colleges or universities in the state of South Carolina. These themes describe the lived experiences of student Army veterans.
Table 4.1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Category</th>
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<td>Signal Corps (SC)</td>
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<td>Military Police (MP)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical Service Corps (MS)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>War/ Campaign</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Desert Storm &amp; OIF</td>
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</table>

Self-Improvement

The theme self-improvement through college application prominently emerged throughout all of the interviews with sub-themes related. The sub-themes in this category were leadership/mentorship opportunities, lead by example, learning & growing, and
status. Each participant had a reason for wanting to earn a college degree for self-improvement purposes to include: leadership/mentorship opportunities, learning and growing, and attaining a particular status.

*I've always felt like personal growth was important and with college, it's all about free thinking. Any time you can learn, you can improve yourself. Self-improvement is important.*

**Leadership/ Mentorship Opportunities.** Each participant unanimously decided that earning a college degree, regardless of program, was a way to improve themselves in regards to being better leaders/mentors. The belief that a college education led to self-improvement was especially true of participants who had hoped to either re-enter the military or work with marginalized populations such as at-risk youth. Participants One and Two talked about the age gap between their generation and that of their fellow colleagues in the Army’s Green to Gold program. Most participants simply wanted to serve as role models.

*I think this is a really good chance for me to connect with a generation that’s a little bit behind me and find out what makes them operate. I hope this will give me insight into how they think…so, that I can develop myself as a leader to meet their needs.*

*I'm hoping that I'm going to be able to influence once I go back out to the regular Army. I've got this older more mature leadership style.*

*I'm trying to pursue the officer corps because I'm trying to take care of people and not just take care of myself.*

The idea that giving back through mentorship was mentioned by a few participants. Participant Two also talked about wanting to use his college degree and military experience to get a job where he could work with at-risk youth. He shared, “I’d like to maybe get into the juvenile delinquency hoping to mentor.”
Each participant related their military experience to leadership opportunities that have made them better. Participant Three discussed how the military helped him serve in leadership roles that would now be supplemented with a college degree.

I’ve always been the type of person to take the lead on things but, just honing those leadership skills and learning actually how to lead, how you have to be a follower before you can lead.

Eight participants viewed college as a means of providing them with the tools for leadership positions.

I’ve always been the type of person to take the lead on things but, just honing those leadership skills and learning actually how to lead, how you have to be a follower before you can lead. It's not always about leading. Even when you're not in those leadership positions, supporting the leader who is there even at times when you disagree with them because they're in charge for a reason.

Participant Six stated, “I expect for this well-spend money to do me good. My expectations are to get in a high leadership position.”

**Lead by Example.** An idea generally instilled early in the military is that in order to be leader, one must lead by example. That theme was prominent in terms of six participants not expecting to complete college if they themselves were not willing to do it.

It's just like being a good leader in the Army enlisted; you can't ask your soldier to do something you haven't done yourself. Now, I can put myself in those shoes. I know what it's like to study. I know what it's like to stay up late and work up early to write this thing that I don't have a clue what I'm writing about.

It's almost like you need to walk the walk if you're gonna’ talk the talk, so to speak. In order to kind of give guidance, you have to be somewhat educated on providing that knowledge.

**Children.** Leading by example was not just of importance within a chosen career. Some participants explained wanting to serve as role models to their children regarding furthering their education beyond high school. Children influenced college application.
I can’t ask my kids to do it. I couldn’t ask my grandkids to do it. I couldn’t look left or right and ask a friend to do it.

My kids also had something to do with me wanting to go to college because I want them to take their education further. I always tell them to do better than what I’ve done. In order for me to push them to the next level, I have to do well. I have to lead by example.

After serving in a war zone, Participant Nine recognized the rigors of school could not compare to what he saw while in combat.

If I can do classes online in a combat zone, you can go sit your but in a classroom. I wanted to show my kids that if I expected them to do something, I would also do it myself. It’s like in the military where you shouldn’t expect something of your soldiers you wouldn’t do yourself.

**Learning & Growing.** Learning and growing served as another sub-theme for self-improvement. Five participants appreciated the opportunity to learn new things through classes and meeting people with differing opinions. Seven participants mentioned their ability to grow with the help of their college experience.

**Multiculturalism.** Participant Three explained that a college degree led to opportunities abroad. While in the military and through his program, he realized the only way he could be successful in his chosen field was to have a global worldview.

Today's economy is being more globalized. So, if you don't have a global mindset, especially in today's society to be successful in the business world, especially if I plan on working for a big corporation, I need a more global mindset.

When asked what he hoped to gain from his experience in college, he replied, “I guess just like a better understanding of people. I would say a better understanding of people and a better understanding of the business world and how the world works.” Participant Four talked about his excitement for attending college to meet others not like him.
You just definitely think about the people you're going to meet from all over the world and different backgrounds. I mean, obviously a degree but, just that you met a bunch of different people and that you learned things you wouldn't have learned if you stayed in the same area. Educated isn't just having a piece of paper that says you are educated. Educated means you know how to talk to people. You talk to people from different backgrounds and know how to deal with other people.

**Betterment of Self.** To many of the participants, expanding their minds and seeing things from a different perspective was benefit of getting a college education.

*It helps you grow. It opens your mind to broaden your horizons and perspective. It kind of broadens your horizons a little bit because when you're getting a degree in something, you're still having to take different classes in other things. It makes you a better person as well.*

Some participants just wanted to learn more about themselves and their surroundings. They saw college as a means of helping them become better people.

*I always liked to learn so, that's one of my biggest reasons for going back to school. It wouldn't be because I need to start another career. For one, I think it will make a better me. I think learning, adapting, changing—all those things like meeting new people and being exposed to new things, it makes you a better person. The more experiences you have, the more you gain wisdom.*

Some participants talked about experiential learning that helped them grow.

Participant Six, in particular, explained why she chose to attend school and a particular assignment that opened her eyes.

*As far as choosing to go to school, I really did it to better myself...I want a different way of viewing everything. I want to be more open-minded. Like, just going to my little one meeting. I went to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting and, once again TV, my perspective was one way before I came and left with another...I'm learning new things and applying them. I've even looked at my kids differently. I mean, I'm just changing how I view things and I'm willing to accept change.*

**Tools for Success.** An on-going theme throughout was the recognition of college being a tool for success.
I think education is the most powerful weapon or tool you can have in life,” while Participant Ten shared, “I really just wanted to make myself better. Education is the best way to make yourself successful. Education is key. Understanding that I need more than just a high school diploma. I need to further my education.

Participant Seven noted that learning from others served as a tool for success. He valued what was being taught in the classroom and he saw his professors as having all the answers.

*I'm hoping it helps me become an all-around better person--just learning and listening and finding out new things about life. I just want to make myself more intelligent. My main thing is trying to pick my teachers' brains because they're the ones with the knowledge. I just want to better myself.*

**Status.** With self-improvement comes status. Four participants shared that a college degree would help improve their status. They believed that having a college degree would help them earn the respect of family, friends, and peers alike. When asked about influencing social factors leading to college application.

*You’re at a different perception to the outside world. If I was to go to meet somebody and introduce myself at a social function, you know, it’s people take a different look at you.*

Participant Two talked about seeing letters behind the name of people he viewed as important. He stated, “Education level, titles, and rank in the military dictate how people will see us.” While Participant Six shared she was not coerced into attending college by family members, she realized that their educational attainment affected her.

*As far as them saying I needed to go--they didn't do that. They didn’t tell me I needed to go but, I wanted to be part of that crowd too.*

Participant Nine talked about the importance of being on par with those around him when it comes to a certain level of education.

*I would be with my wife and all of her friends or colleagues from work because she works in a school setting. I felt like it kind of gave me admission to the group*
maybe a little bit—especially once I graduated maybe a little bit. It was like I do belong here. So, it was kind of like a sense of belonging.

Finally, a theme heard throughout the interviews and while this researcher was growing up, was that not having a college degree would equate to menial labor and minimum wage pay. Lack of education leading to low status was especially prominent with Participant Ten.

I didn’t want to go the route of just flipping burgers. I know I was destined to more than that.

Implications for School Counselors and Career Counselors will further be discussed in Chapter 5 regarding Participant Ten’s statement.

Necessity

Another prominent and on-going theme throughout the study was the necessity of having a college education. Each participant talked about the reason for choosing to attend college relating to a need. All ten participants saw a college degree to be detrimental to success whether it was to further their education and attend graduate school, have better career prospects, or earn a promotion or advancement. To six participants, a college degree represented achievement with disappointing alternatives.

You can’t do anything now without an Associate’s degree or a Bachelor’s degree—that’s kind of like a diploma.

Everyone’s got one.

You can’t do much of anything without a college degree.

A degree nowadays is extremely common. So, it shows you that a degree is not the comfortable edge you can have in a civilian workforce any more. So much of life revolves around education, these days. The military is great, sounds really good and looks good on paper but, when you can back that up with education.
Participant Ten talked about trying to figure out if having a college degree would be beneficial.

*It's really hard to just go out and get a job without a diploma. I pretty much did a pros and cons on it. I made a pros and cons list of having a diploma versus having a degree. A degree stuck out way more than a diploma as far as being beneficial for the financial part.*

The idea that no jobs were scarce without having a college education was weaved throughout the interviews.

*No matter what full-time job you find, you pretty much have to have a four-year degree versus twenty or thirty years ago. I think that nowadays, you at least have to have a four-year degree or at least a 2-year degree in some aspects. I think nowadays, you definitely need a four-year degree no matter what it's in. You need to put the time in and go to school or maybe you'll get lucky and find a really good job without one but, that would be hard.*

**Furthering Education/ Graduate School.** Nine of the ten participants discussed furthering their education by attending graduate school. Each participant who had hoped to attend graduate school talked about the necessity of holding an undergraduate degree first.

*My Master's degree is going to be a goal, whether I do it for the military or not, I mean other than finishing my Bachelor's, I don't know why would you stop there, I guess?*

The aspiration to attend graduate school after completion of an undergraduate degree was an interesting dynamic considering some of the participants did not necessarily think they would ever attend college. Now, many of them wanted to go on and get Master’s degrees. The desire to earn a graduate degree was most often the case for students in the social work field because they wanted to earn their Master in Social Work (MSW).
Career Prospects. Eight of the ten participants talked about wanting to possibly find employment through a government agency. It was stated in various interviews the importance of holding a college degree to work within the government.

If I had to choose now, I would attempt to go to a three letter agency like the CIA, FBI, DEA, or maybe the Marshalls. I think the degree helps a lot. On the FBI’s application, it specifically states that you need that. Even the New York City Police, you’ve got to have 90 credit hours now to even put in an application and that’s even with a Military Police background.

Participant Three talked about wanting to eventually become a Politician.

I don't think there's a Politician or anyone in Congress right now who doesn't have a college education. Or, to some extent, even if it's only an Associate's degree, have some form of specialized training from a higher education level.

He also explained that prior to running for office; he would like to work in the fashion industry. When asked about career prospects in the fashion industry, he shared the importance of earning a college degree for advancement in particular areas of fashion.

I wouldn't say you need to have a college degree but, it depends on what you want to do. If you want to be a Sales Agent or a Salesperson, you don't need a college degree. If you want to be a top Executive like I aspire to be, you do need at least a Bachelor's and sometimes you even need a Master's.

Participant Eight who is earning a degree in the field he works talked about the Information Technology (IT) field and need for a college degree.

A lot of corporations or a lot of companies now are looking for a four-year degree. I've been successfully working in the IT field but, as I've seen, different avenues or different IT jobs are kind of catered more to a person that has a degree. You know, if you're talking completely about obtaining a job with no degree, you almost in a sense can't get your foot through the door without a degree. Is it impossible? No, it's not impossible but, it's hard. Like I said, you're just closing more doors or not giving yourself more options by not obtaining a degree.

Promotion/Advancement. Six participants talked about the need to have some college credits in order to be promoted in the military for higher ranking enlisted or
officer positions. Others noted advancements and pay increases in particular jobs or fields for the college-educated.

_Civilian Careers._ Participant One stated, “If you want to do something bigger than what you're doing now, you have to have a degree as a first step.” Participant Eight talked about the role of having education beyond an Associate’s degree.

*My decision to apply to college was that in order to advance a lot of corporations are looking for an extended education. I have an Associate’s degree but, I have goals to not become a little bit in a managerial sense as far as maybe a director one day.*

He further added that education leads to better opportunities in both the civilian world and military.

*In order to move on or progress, you're definitely going to need a higher level of education... You need that in the corporate world to advance and somewhat in the military too.*

_Military Careers._ There was much importance placed on education beyond a certain rank. The military has changed the stance on educational attainment for promotion. Some participants provided details of education within the military.

*When I first joined, education was not pushed. It was a lot more red tape. You had to be this stellar soldier and get approved for your commander to go to a class on campus for an hour once a week or twice a week. Basically, now as you go through rank, one of the basic requirements as part of your structure, which has always been there but, now it's more emphasized in the military as you have to have it...If you plan to have some sort of longevity in the military, you have to have some form of higher education. Education wasn't always pushed but, now it's pretty much needed. You really do need it with the way the military is changing.*

Even if you are enlisted to advance or even if you're an officer, you still need a degree. *On the enlisted side, if you try to become a higher enlisted, like First Sergeant or Sergeant Major, they encourage you. When I mean encourage, they kind of push you to get your degree.*
Six participants gave insight into the advancement opportunities for both enlisted and officers. It was explained that in order to move up the ranks as an enlisted member of the Army or an Officer, college education is important. It should be noted that E in reference to E-6 and E-8 stands for enlisted with numbers behind it indicating level of leadership within the ranks. Regarding the enlisted ranks:

You can still join the military with a GED but, if you want to become a First Sergeant, you have to have at least an Associate's degree.

To be competitive for First Sergeant or Sergeant Major, you've got to hold a Bachelor's degree. I think that says a lot.

Though you don't always need college, at a certain point, you have to have some college. When you're between an E-6 and E-8, you have to have some college.

It was further noted that programs within the Army have changed regarding the requirements to become an officer. Not only is college imperative for moving up in the military but, certain degrees hold more weight when Army soldiers want to attend particular schools. Regarding the officer ranks:

To become a Major you have to have a Master's. In the Army, if you want to hit a general officer then you have to go to the equivalent of a doctoral program that's basically a dual Master's.

They even changed OCS. The OCS program or Green to Gold program, if you had some college credits, you could enter the program but, finish your degree within a certain time. They don't do that anymore. If you go OCS, you have to have a degree already and it has to be a STEM major and you have to have a certain GPA to even apply.

From hearing the experiences of the various participants, it was clear that much emphasis is placed on education in the military.

Military Not Enough. Something noted by five participants was that everything they have done in the military was not enough. Though many of them had served
honorably in their chosen military occupations and rose through the ranks, educational attainment appeared far more important to them.

At the end of the day, I have a piece of paper and an education that nobody can take away from me. Ten years or twenty years from now, I'll hang up my uniform and it's just going to be a uniform. Thirty, forty, fifty years down the road, I'm always going to have a degree.

Participant Two viewed having a college degree as being relatable to others over serving in a combat zone. He felt as though being in the Army was not enough to relate to people because a small percentage of people actually join the military. To him, the most common way to relate to others was by having a college education. It was also a guarantee that he would still have career prospects should he become injured while on duty.

I'm always going to be able to say that I have military experience but, that's just going to be war stories. Some people aren't going to be able to relate to it but, education, you can always relate to. No one is going to care that you are some sort of awesome Airborne Ranger that has fifteen deployments. The first thing going on your resume is your degree and what qualifications you serve to the employer. What if you get your leg blown off? It's going to end for you, man. You got your ranger tab. What's it doing for you? Because, it's not paying bills.

Family

Aside from self-improvement and necessity, another influencing factor for many things was family. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that the role of family was big when it came to joining the military and attending school. For seven participants, it was a matter of following in the footsteps of those before them. Others wanted to make their parents proud.

Seeing successes of their family members made some participants want to attend college while Participant Three saw the struggles of his family members with little or no education.
Another thing that really influenced me, and I already know we touched on family but, there's like a lot of people in my family who didn't go to college. So, my mom always said she believes every generation should get better.

There's a lot of people within my family living from paycheck to paycheck. Kind of seeing this, once I got older and saw this, I realized I didn't want to live like this. I wanted to live comfortably and not have to worry about where my next meal's coming from or if I'm going to get my WIC this week.

For participants who came from poorer backgrounds and parents with no education, it was important to earn a degree. They watched their parents struggle to raise them and it pushed them to want to earn a college degree for themselves but, mostly their family members. It was their way of thanking parents who raised them.

My mom had to quit school in 9th grade to help my grandma work and everything. To me, it felt more that I was doing it more for my mom and my family rather than myself because we don't have a lot of college graduates...So, that was the biggest thing for me with going to school because my mom never really had the opportunity...I know she always promoted education. I think it's a little bit more for her than me to get a degree.

My mom didn't go to college. She got pregnant with my sister and started working. I told my mom I was going to go to college because she had to stop going to cosmetology school just because I wanted to play recreational football and all that stuff. I told her that I promised I would make it up to her.

Family Footsteps. Each participant had a reason for choosing college or joining the military that related to family. Seven participants had family members who attended school while others did not. That helped participants decide whether or not they wanted to attend college. Other participants noted the influence of family members on their choice to join the military. Whether school or military, family members before them dictated what they chose to do with themselves.

School. Participants with family members who attended college felt they had something to prove. They did not want to be the only one in the family to have no education. For some people, it was almost a competition with siblings to have as much
education. For others, having an educated spouse made them decide a college education was important.

I never thought I'd actually go back to college. College wasn't really something I was planning to do. Once I was done with high school, I was done with school. I thought I'd go to the military so, that I wouldn't have to go to college and get an education. I can just go through the military and live life. Marriage and kids changed that experience.

My mom, my sister, and just seeing people get their degrees while I was in the military. My mom and sisters have their degrees. I don't want to be the last man standing without one. So it was kind of a little pressure to go to college.

My younger brother, after I went into the Army or whatever, he ended up going to college and doing very well. He received a Bachelor's degree. I was thinking the whole time, "Gosh man, I kind of want to do that. That was also a push for me as well because me and him were always competitive in everything we did our entire life.

My brother was the first to get his degree and my mom never got the opportunity so, I wanted to follow in his footsteps.

My father has two degrees. My mom has one. My wife already has a degree.

When my grandfather died, my uncle kind of took over the role when I was about 12 I've kind of just like been trying to chase his coattails since I was a little kid. He's opened up and run his own business. So, it's kind of like I want that for my life, at least the degree part. I always thought it was really cool to walk into his office and see the degree plaque up. He went to the University of Maryland. I can follow into my uncle's footsteps.

I really didn't go to college until I got to Columbia, South Carolina. It's funny because, when I met my wife, she had a Master's degree already and I had nothing. I had my military experience and my military school and I had nothing. Real quickly we got really serious and I felt we were unevenly yoked. She had so much more education and I didn't. I needed to kind of even it out a little bit.

My wife was the one that kind of the biggest push for this.
My wife was more the influence. She honestly pushed me because I was burned out. I didn't want to go to school. I didn't really want to do a lot. She was kind of like; I guess education's been her thing now forever.

My father-in-law attended the same school I'm at now. He went through the same program that I'm in. He told me it was nationally accredited.

Military. As noted earlier, every participant served or currently serves in the United States Army. For some people, joining the military can be a very emotional decision. It was discussed time and time again that family influenced the choice to join the military. The following statements by participants offer a real look into the legacy of a military career for each.

I was led to the Army because my uncle was in the military.

I joined the Army to better my life. My dad was in the Army and so was his father. My uncle was too.

My family was--I come from a military background. Both parents were prior service and both of them now are retired.

Two of my siblings went in the military. One went to the Air Force, my sister and my older brother went into the Army.

Family Pride. The theme of a need to make family members proud emerged as a prominent theme throughout many of the interviews. The need presented itself particularly with participants who were either married with children or first-generation college students. The need to make family members proud can be seen in several comments made by participants. While Participant Two explained he wanted to make his mother proud, others talked about making their children proud.

Then, as far as that goes, of course, even at 30-years-old, still trying to make my mom proud.
Now that I’ve got two kids, I think that I didn’t want them to be in the same boat that I was. You know that question where teachers ask them, "Raise your hand. How many of your parents went to college?” You know, I didn’t want my kids to be that based off of the decision that I chose along with the job opportunities when you get out.

My kids were asking me...I was filling something out one day and my son was asking me if I had my college degree. I think he might have asked me what school did I graduate from. I was like, "Not one yet but, give me a minute." So, just from that, I made the decision and because of going, he encourages me.

Another thing that influenced me was my kids. I wanted to show my son....Even when I went back to my last deployment to Iraq; I was doing some school online. I wanted to show him he was eventually going to go to college.

I think some of the things that push me as far as education is that I want to be a positive influence. I have two little girls that I have to be an influence for.

I think I can do more to set good examples for my kids. I want to be a positive example and role model for them.

Financial Considerations

School. For seven of the participants, attending college meant they would be more financially stable after graduation. Participant One specifically noted that financial considerations were focused more on retirement aspects rather than initial pay increase.

A couple participants preparing to finish their degrees that would lead to a commission in the Army talked about the difference in pay for enlisted and officers. They discussed their choice to attend college for a commission through Green to Gold.

Officers obviously make more money. With my experience, I would make more than normal officers would coming in. It’s kind of one of those, you can stay here and make minimum wage or you can take the different route and make more. This will pay me a lot more so, why wouldn’t I do that? The benefits are the same across the board as far as the training and the insurance but, this was obviously going to pay a lot more.
It puts me in a better financial state. Not that money brings happiness but, money does make the world go round.

Participant Four talked about the stark contrast between being a police officer with and without a college degree. He discussed in detail the pay differential should he choose to continue his education and complete his degree. He further explained that pay increases with higher levels of education and a certain skill set.

Around the area, without a college degree, you can make $30,000. depending on whatever department you go to. If you have a four-year degree that jumps you up to about $35,000. It can also bump you up a little in rank. It definitely helps. You don't need a college degree to become a cop but, it's useful especially moving up and going into certain fields. If I wanted to join the NYPD, I would definitely need a college degree. It's easier to get a job with SLED than with the NYPD. I might go to Charlotte because the financials are there. They start you off at maybe $42,000. With a college degree, they bump you up another 5%. If you speak Spanish and pass that test, that's another 5% increase. I could make, hopefully, between $48,000 and $50,000. out of college and that's before going and getting a graduate degree.

Military. Many people join the military for financial reasons. A common theme regarding financial benefits in the military related to not knowing how else to afford attending college without joining the Army. To some, joining the military meant they would have the ability to attend college. Others felt earning educational benefits through the Army gave them a sense of freedom from having to ask family members to pay for their education. Six participants indicated that they did not come from families with much education or money. Joining the military was the only way of obtaining a college degree.

My parents didn't have the money to send me to college so; I decided to join the military.

Pretty much, my initial thought in going into the military was that I knew I wasn't going to have funding for school unless I joined the military.

I grew up in a single-parent home where money was tight with tight finances.
I joined the Army to further my education and get a better job.

I actually did military to further my education but, as well to kind of pay for some of the loans that were incurred while I was in college.

I did a semester and I got approached by a recruiter there. He came to me, showed me a couple of numbers of what I could make if I joined the military. I was looking for help for the financial part of college. I didn't want my mom to help me or my dad. I just wanted to do it by myself. So, I saw an opportunity to do that so that's why I joined. I didn't come from a very rich family. We did okay but, I didn't want anybody to help with my college. The Army provided the financial part of it. That's one of the reasons I joined to help with the financial part of it. I'm using the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and the CAP (college assistance program) that the South Carolina National Guard provides to help pay for books.

School Choice

The school choice theme emerged from responses to questions centered on school choice and campus climate towards veterans. Once again, every participant unanimously declared they were happy with their choice to further their education and that their college or university was military friendly. Participant Seven, however, explained that sometimes he gets frustrated with the coursework when he is confused but, is overall happy he chose to attend college. All ten participants explained how environment, program/school prestige, administrative policies, previous college attendance, and prior dealings with other schools led them to their current institutions. For Participant Five, her surroundings dictated her choice to attend college and choose a specific major.

I saw poverty, drug abuse, and sexual abuse. In the military, working with soldiers, I saw a lot of the family struggles and histories of how their environment affects their behavior. It was quite a bit of a large range of things but, not one in particular. These factors didn't just dictate my college choice but, also my field of study in social work. For one, my mother. She was a social worker. She died doing something that she always wanted to do, which was helping people. She was one of the major influences for me wanting to go into social work but, she was more interested in working with the elderly. That was one of the factors, probably one of the bigger factors.
Environment. Environment played a role in how veterans felt on campus. As noted earlier, all veterans felt they attended a campus where they were treated with respect. All ten participants noted the various policies put in place to make them feel welcomed. Participants talked about the overall feel of the state of South Carolina, the college or university where they attended along with how they were treated by faculty and students.

I think South Carolina is considered the number one military-friendly state in the nation. It's one of the most patriotic states. You have Ft. Jackson, Charleston Air Force Base, and the Marine Corps down in Beaufort. You have Sumter where you have Shaw Air Force Base. You have the training center for the Reserve and Guard and everything. I believe that contributes to veteran-friendliness.

They're very much geared towards veterans. I think a lot of the people that's going there are veterans.

Faculty. Participant Two shared how he viewed faculty members based on age and experience. Participant Four noted that professors were willing to work with veterans if given prior notice. The recent flooding in South Carolina was discussed in relation to faculty members accepting the role of student soldiers. One thing was clear. Faculty members at the schools of all ten participants were supportive of their veteran students.

Dependent on who it is, I've had certain younger professors, the ones that are doctoral candidates, when they're teaching, I think that some of them give off that vibe of like, "We're going to talk about the military really quick and then we're off to this." Some of them just don't even touch the surface. Others, like my older professor will kind of dabble into it but, you can tell that some people don't want to float that line.

They especially understand if you're on the Reserves side when you explain you won't be there because you have duty this week. They say it's no problem. They'll say, "Yeah. That's fine. That's no problem. Thanks for letting me know." They work with you for everything. If you have to be activated out of nowhere...I was activated during the flood, they had no problem with that.
The faculty is great with veterans.

Students. Many participants believed that students on their campus were respectful of their service. Three participants in particular discussed their interactions with fellow students. Though they all agreed other students treated them with respect for their service to this country, one participant was asked inappropriate questions while two other participants were treated as though they were annoying for bringing up their Army involvement.

I have gotten some questions about whether I've killed anyone. Looking back, can I be mad at it? No, because I don't know what I would have asked, what 18-year-old me would have asked.

The only thing I kind of find challenging with some of the classes with some of my peers if they haven't really been around veterans or understand a lot of veterans, I found that sometimes they don't want to hear about veterans. A lot of people don't. They think you'll talk about your war stories or your Army time and it kind of hinders you because that's what your experience is based on.

The military is its own culture and people get kind of sick of hearing about it. I have felt other students make gestures so; I don't really like to talk about military in class. It's disappointing because it's a big part of my life and I don't like to feel like no one making me downplay this. I'd rather not share it with you if you are going to make me feel like it's downplayed. So, I just won't share it. I've mainly experienced this with civilians.

Sometimes people get annoyed with veterans. I think that they're, I don't know if this is fair to say but, jealous. Sometimes I feel that...I think that they wish they had the benefits that we have and so because they don't, they don't want to hear about it.

Prestige. For four participants, they chose their school based on college prestige. It was important to attend a college that had a particular standing in the community or on a national scale. For two of the four participants, particular program prestige made all the difference. Overall, the feeling of pride in college or school prestige was felt most by the students who attended the larger public university.
**College/ School Prestige.**

It's kind of a prestigious college as far as the history, traditions and stuff.

Well, when I was looking at business schools, I was looking at Texas A&M. They have a really amazing business school down there. I was looking at, of course here, for Darla Moore (Business School) and I was looking at USC as well, out in California because they too have really good programs but, being here from the state of South Carolina, I decided to come here.

I think I meet these people here because we have the #1 International Business program. We have a pretty decent Engineering school. For the degrees we have, it's just something that attracts a lot of international students.

**Program Prestige.**

They also have the #1 International Business program. So, they're world-renowned. So, that was kind of like a no-brainer. It was like, "Hey, I have a world-renowned school here in my own backyard. Why not take it?"

For Criminal Justice, they have a top 25-program in the nation that most people don't know about. It's pretty good. I'm close by here and it's a top 25 program in Criminal Justice.

**Accreditation.** While some participants were concerned about prestige of their college/ university, school, or program, others worried about accreditation. The desire to attend a school with accredited programs was most prominent among the four students in the social work program. All four social work students felt the need to attend a school that was accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE).

I find the fast-track to be easier than more traditional schools. And it's accredited school. It's an accredited social work program.

I did look at accreditation when I first came and asked her about that too. She told me that we are accredited for CSWE. I was like, that will work because I don't know if I'll stay in South Carolina. If I get up and move, I want my degree to move with me.

I wanted to pick a school that was in good standing and an accredited school. I didn't want to go to an easy school where they just push you by. I wanted to make sure I could learn something.
Administrative Policies. For some participants, administrative policies of their respective schools played a major role in whether or not they would choose to attend. As noted in prior chapters, many student Army veterans look for schools with credit transfer policies that benefit them. Others attempt to find schools that have a course schedule and course rotation that can be easily navigated while working full-time. Tuition costs can also have a bearing on whether or not someone chooses to attend a college or university while time to graduation also plays a part.

Credit Transfer. For some participants, it was important to be able to transfer credits from previous universities attended. Others wanted credit earned from serving in the military.

Academic Credits. Some participants chose to transfer credits solely from other universities or colleges they had attended in the past. They hoped that whatever credits they earned at other institutions would be used towards their current degree.

You know we actually looked into the colleges that were even closer to that but, with my degree credits I had it was more of who was going to take more of my college credits and was going to be easier for me academically to finish out. So that's why we chose this place.

I think the main factor for choosing this one was what they were going to except from my transcripts from my prior school. Because, like I said, you have to have so many credits accrued even to apply for the [Green to Gold] program and part of the program's requirements to get accepted into it is that you have to have a basic detail outline of two years that you're going to be there.

Other than that, USC told me to stop taking classes with Limestone and they told me that they would accept almost everything from them as long as my grades were good enough with them. So, my transition here was take a couple of mandatory classes through specifically the University of South Carolina and take five classes that were directed towards my major.

Once I transferred, I transferred some of my Savannah Technical College credits over here; they took not a whole lot but, enough that it encouraged me to pursue my degree with Limestone College.
They also took an awful lot of my credits. I started as a senior here. I just had to get the core courses for social work and critical thinking classes but, they took an awful lot.

Military Credits. Others never attended college until now. Prior to that, they had military credit they hoped would be used towards their current college degree.

I also wanted to know that they would be able to accept the military credits and Post 9/11 G.I. Bill.

I had credits to transfer in from the military. That was a big thing because I didn't want to take what I did in the military and just let it go to waste. So, I felt like what I did in the military could definitely count towards the civilian world.

They're really good about giving me credit for my military service. A lot of my classmates that factors into them choosing Limestone--if their military credits transfer.

They did take military credit through ATRRS (Army Training Requirements and Resources System). Maybe that's one of the aspects of them being military friendly as far as taking so many military trainings from. It's just a form of prior military training that basically works like a transcript--a military transcript. They took a lot of my military credits.

Academic & Military. Three participants had both college or university academic credits and military experience to apply towards their college degree. The ability to use military experience for academic credit also had a bearing on whether or not they would choose to attend their particular college to earn a degree.

They did take some of my military but, because I had so much other education, they took a lot of that. I'm pretty sure they would have taken more military but, I had so much other stuff that crossed over and transferred.

Some institutions don't take a lot of credits when you transfer but, they were the ones that took most of my military credits and all of that. Even with going to basic training and AIT, that counts as credits. They count as some electives or most of the electives, I think. They counted at least 15 to 20 credits just military. They also counted a lot of my other college experience credits too.

I have prior credits from a couple schools like really old and some military credits. I went to a technical college in Maryland. Then I did an online class. That was it and my military credits. At Limestone, they gave me a lot of
credits and I had a few that didn't count but, it was fine. I was fine with that because they were totally electives so, it was okay.

**Course Rotation.** For all six participants at the local private liberal arts college, course rotation was very important regarding decision to attend that school. All of the participants that noted the importance of course rotation were working full-time and had families.

*We may have a few younger people but, and their only requirement of two classes are considered full-time versus if you go to a regular college where fifteen credit hours a semester is considered full-time.*

*Eight-week courses just worked well for me. You know, sixteen weeks is condensed and it's easier for my schedule. I liked the eight weeks and that they took my credits.*

*Classes are eight weeks. I like that. They pretty much work with your time.*

**Course Schedule.** For other participants, course schedule played an important role in determination of where to attend college. Participant Two explained that being expected to take particular classes to finish a minor was not a problem with his schedule. Others talked about appreciating what days and times classes were offered.

*They expected me to take Carolina Core credits. I had to take Library Science, the SAEL which is a social advocacy class, so those are two that I've taken. I've got to take a Geography class and that's to meet the Military Science minor.*

*They were a non-traditional school. Most of the people that are there are probably working, they're older people. It's also not during the day. A lot of my classes are at night.*

*They work with soldiers and tailor their program for non-traditional. They help them if they are active duty to get off work and still go to college at night.*

*We had to also discuss schedules with a newborn on the way of how that was going to work. Attending Limestone was a big help because I only have class on Tuesdays and Thursdays at night.*
I needed a program that I wanted and the schedule as far as I'm concerned. I'm going to be honest with you; it was mainly the program that I wanted.

The times that classes were offered work well for me... Normally, five or five thirty is when most people get off so, it works better for me and it's a bit easier.

The hours are from like 6 to 9:15pm. It's 6-7:30 and 7:45 to 9:15. It's more convenient for the students, for the working adult students. So, that's another plus with it.

**Tuition.** For three participants, tuition rates served as a deciding factor as to which school they would attend. In-state tuition rates and tuition discounts were just some of the reasons some students chose to attend college within their state and near their homes.

*I have the in-state tuition which is awesome.*

*Here at Limestone, you get half off your tuition. You get 50% off just for being a veteran or for being in the military. We don't pay the full amount like everybody else pays. We pay half. So, that was important. That's one of the reasons I chose Limestone College.*

*You get half off tuition for military.*

Graduation Requirements. One reason some participants chose their particular schools was based on a degree plan. Many students wanted to graduate in a timely fashion. The ability to graduate on time was made possible for some because of the generous administrative transfer policies of some institutions. Others acknowledged that time to graduation was imperative to meet requirements of the Army for a future career as an officer.

*It was more of a, here's my transcripts, what do I have to take to graduate? A lot of them were going to make me take ridiculous amounts of hours where I would have to take more than what two years would allow me because Carolina was pretty cut and smooth. Here, this is what you need. Then you can get in and get out.*
The program Limestone College had was so much better because it didn't require me to be in class for four years.

This was just kind of one of those things where it was between here and Clemson but, it came down to the curriculum. So they had different requirements for something like that. Basically, the math. I added it up and to come here instead, it's financially fiscal. I think that was the biggest thing that was the hardest part was that the Army only gives me twenty four months. I have twenty-four months to do academic plus meet all of the R.O.T.C. requirements.

**Location.** As seen above, many participants chose to attend particular colleges based on academic policies related to credit transfer, course rotation, class schedule, and tuition. For others, location and proximity to family, home, and work served as deciding factors. Their schools were convenient due to being in or around the city and downtown Columbia, South Carolina.

*USC is so convenient because it's in the city but, it's not within the city.*

*The classes and location is closer to me. I wouldn't have to go downtown and fight the traffic at USC.*

**Family Proximity.** Some participants did not want to uproot their families in order to attend college. Others viewed moving as an unneeded stress to place upon everyone. For in-state residents like Participant Three, being near family after serving on Active Duty was important.

*I chose USC because I was fifteen minutes down the road and I didn't have to uproot my family. I bought a house here. We didn't have to do the whole rigmarole of vehicles and figuring out different schools.*

*My wife's family is from here so, staying local was an influencing factor. The fact that I didn't have to move and put that undue stress on my family was an influencing factor.*

*The decision to come here to South Carolina was an easy one because my brother. My youngest brother, he is playing college ball.... I wasn't able to see him play any high school ball because he got hurt his freshman year. I came to the University of South Carolina and I told my younger brother that I would go to*
every game that I possibly could just so I could see him play and I held that promise up.

University of South Carolina was close to home. I also have family nearby. I wanted to be some place close to my mom and my little brother too. They're in Lexington about 15 minutes down the road.

Home / Work Proximity. Some participants wanted to attend a college or university that was near their homes and work. It was noted that both schools are within driving distance for soldiers at Ft. Jackson. Many believed that having schools placed near military installations made them accessible to members of the Army.

Quite a bit of veterans go there and a lot of active duty and reservists are going there too. I think it’s because of the school's location. It's centered in Columbia. It's not too far from the base.

I also liked the traffic that I won't have to deal with because this is closer to my home. It works with the proximity to my house.

Current School vs. Other Schools. Bureaucracy has been known to hold students back from choosing to apply and later attend particular colleges. A common theme throughout five participant interviews was noted from student Army veterans at both the large public institution and small private liberal arts college. The poor treatment of student Army veterans at other schools leading them to their current academic institutions was the reason for the current school versus other schools. It was explained that many different students looked to attend college elsewhere but, when they continued to encounter roadblocks, they chose another school. The current school versus other school theme may be particularly of interest to Student Affairs Professionals as it relates to recruitment and retention of student Army veterans.

They would send me all paperwork and I kind of had to go through and check and check and check. Once I'd do that, I would go through their entire course catalog and find out what was applying. I'd fill out these sheets and send it back to them. We did that with ten or twelve different schools. It was really time
consuming to get to a point where we just started basically...It got such a pain talking to Middle Tennessee because it was like talking to a fence post. So we actually just stopped talking to them. They weren't even an option any more.

I was actually trying to go to Benedict and they kept giving me the runaround. I would submit paperwork and they'd say I needed something else. They said they were going to count my credits and they took it away. Then they'd tell me to go speak to another person and that person didn't exist. So, it was like I kept getting the runaround just to enroll. I didn't even get past enrolling.

A couple of schools were off my radar though like the University of Phoenix. There was a lot of smooth talkers there. I would ask if they were accredited and they was never direct with their answers.

When I was having a hard time when I was trying to get enrolled and everything in Midland's Tech, just to talk to somebody there was a big hassle. No one was ever available. No would ever call me back. When I would go to sit down and talk with a counselor, there's twenty-five people sitting there waiting to talk and then the counselor was overworked but, didn't seem very invested. They took their time. When I would get in there and ask veteran-related questions, they would tell me they couldn't answer that and to go talk to somebody else downstairs. I wondered if I was the only veteran that ever walked through the door. They had a veteran representative but, it was way in the basement when I went down there and the person was never there. It was just a headache. It was a lot of red tape.

**Concerns.** Though every student Army veteran shared pleasure in the choice to attend college, some offered concerns they had. A common theme among these participants was the concern for the job market. Would a college degree be enough to help them find a job? What would happen to them once they graduated? Participant Five explained that while she enjoyed college, she worried about her degree and career choice. Would she be happy? Two of the youngest participants, Participants One and Two, echoed concerns about attending college at a later age. Both made a reference to a popular Adam Sandler film when discussing how they felt sitting in a class with younger classmates. Overall, while all ten participants were happy with their decisions to apply and attend college, not addressing their overall concerns would be unconscionable.
I guess the number one thing is the job market. I mean, as we both know, the job market’s not doing very well right now. The stock market, it's positive one day and negative another day.

Job security is definitely something I do think about often because in the military you do have job security. On the first and fifteenth, you're guaranteed that paycheck whereas out here in the business world, if I'm working for Merrill Lynch and they drop down like three points, because I was the last hired, I'm the one on the chopping block. I'm out.

I'm a little panicky thinking about what I'm going to do after I graduate. I don't want to get caught into a job where like you're stuck and can't go any further type of thing. I know you can bounce from job to job but, I don't want to bounce from a lot of jobs.

Like I said, my biggest thing for me is will I really enjoy social worker.

I feel like Billy Madison being thirty-something years old and hanging out with eighteen-year-olds in class. I'm as old as some of my teachers. It's funny because my first stint in college, I was obviously a young kid fresh out of high school.

I feel like the Billy Madison in my class. I understand now what it's like to be the old guy but, I've got a different approach to school now and different study habits. I take it more serious.

**Military Involvement**

Though this study looks to understand the influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans, it would be amiss to ignore the relevance military service has played in the vital role to transition from soldier to student. Every participant began the interview by providing a background of military involvement and reasons for joining. These reasons included wanting to be a soldier, financial gains, and travel/ cultural experiences. Many of them also mentioned family as being an influencing factor, though that was mentioned earlier under the main theme of family. Through abstract thinking, many of these participants were able to connect their military experiences to their programs of study and future career. The ability to connect military
experience to programs and college application holds implications for both School and Career Counselors who may work with this often times marginalized population.

**Reasons for Joining.** Though some participants talked about family and money for college dictating the choice to join the military, there were some who felt that it was a calling. Some student Army veterans explained that they always wanted to serve in the military. It was important to them. For Participant Five, it was due to few options for people who did not choose to go directly into college. For Participant Eight, it was the need to serve his country.

*My overall goal was to be a soldier. When I entered the military originally, you didn't have a lot of the options that soldiers have today or every specialty since 9/11.*

*I always wanted to do the military. I just wanted to serve my country.*

**MOS Dictates Career.** At first glance, it would not appear the military occupation specialty (MOS) of each student Army veteran may have dictated career choice; however, seven of the ten participants believed their military service determined future careers. For example, Participant Three, who served as Military Police (MP; 31B) is now preparing for a career in business with special attention to high-end fashion. Participant Six, who served in the Logistics Corps, is completing her degree in social work.

*I think I'm going towards macro social work like community. I like to look at the big picture to make a social change. I did a lot of macro in the military as well as senior leadership. I ended up leaving the Army as Sergeant First Class.*

*That essentially made me want to come to college. I was looking at transportation how you can do so many things and I think with social work, it's a lot of different things that you can do in social work. It's not the same thing day in and day out. I mean, I could have gone for a transportation management degree at American University out of Washington, D.C.*
I would like to work for FEMA, Red Cross, and with disasters. The military made me want to go into those agencies.

I look back on my life and I have everything I've been doing is in a service capacity. So, what better way to serve people than to be a social worker? I looked at my military background and how it aligned with my civilian interests.

4.4 CONCLUSION

As I conceived this research study, I hoped to understand student Army veteran experiences of post-service college application. I wanted to know why soldiers chose to attend college. The goal was to further research done on this very population by gaining a true appreciation for their experiences in educational settings. By recognizing the strengths of this population and valuing what they add to an atmosphere of higher learning, I can provide insight for fellow researchers and those charged with serving our men and women in uniform.

The exposure of the truths of these ten student Army veterans will begin a dialogue which needs to happen among and between Campus Professionals, Military Personnel such as U.S. Army Career Counselors and Army Soldiers, and Counselors to include Counselor Educators, School Counselors, Career Counselors, and Mental Health Counselors. There may also be other stakeholders who would benefit from reading the current inquiry. The hope is that the willingness of these ten student Army veterans to open up their lives and experiences will give voice to others who often times feel marginalized.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present inquiry is to investigate the influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans. Furthermore, the aim of this study is to help us better understand the lived experiences of non-traditional students like student Army veterans and determine if any themes emerged to shed light on reasons they may choose to apply to college after serving in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom. Themes generated through participant interviews will help build a knowledge base for School Counselors, Career Counselors, Counselor Educators, and Student Affairs Professionals alike.

In the past decade, different models and theories have been developed that speak directly to transitions people face (Schlossberg, 1984, 1989, 2011) to include student retention and departure (Tinto, 1987). Most recently, some studies have used either strictly Schlossberg’s transition model (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011) or a combination of Schlossberg’s transition model and Tinto’s theory of student departure model to understand the experiences of veterans.

The current inquiry looked to the Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM) to understand the experiences of student Army veterans who have served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and later returned to attend
college. This study looks at the motivating or influencing factors veterans report that direct them to apply before enrollment. As the first study of its kind, this inquiry interviewed participants of their experiences when initially applying to the colleges or universities where they are currently enrolled. Once the ten student Army veterans provided the researcher with their experiences, it was clear that while participants were different in many aspects, some similarities were present.

The final chapter is divided into seven sections. Section one summarizes the major findings of the present study. The second section looks at the credibility and accuracy of the study using the criteria which were presented in Chapter 3. Section three includes a discussion of the significant findings of the study. The fourth section provides implications of the present phenomenological inquiry for School Counselors, Career Counselors, Counselor Educators, Student Affairs Professionals, and Military Personnel. Section five will offer the reflections of the current researcher throughout the process. The sixth section will discuss future research. The seventh and final section complete Chapter 5 by providing a conclusion of the present inquiry and findings.

The data gathered from this study aligns with the idea that a college education is imperative for success. These narratives indicate an awareness of the needs and supports that can be put in place for such a specialized non-traditional population in the field of education. It is important for services and campus professionals to understand the unique needs, issues, and concerns of student veterans by being prepared to assist them when they come to campus (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). The message is clear. Institutions must work to create and promote
opportunities for continued success of student veterans’ transition success (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). It was apparent, however, that while all participants have taken a different path to get to where they are and dealt with particular struggles, they were happy with their choices to apply to and attend college.

5.1 SUMMARY

The ability to gain an understanding of lived experiences of student Army veterans in regards to post-service college application is critical to understanding how to best support the needs of this particular population. It was discovered through this study that lived experiences of student Army veterans play a significant role in the application and representation of these veterans in higher education. In analyzing the themes which emerged from the data throughout this study, it became apparent that certain influencing factors determined college application choice for participants at a large research public university and a small liberal arts college in South Carolina.

The research question being addressed in this study was, “How do Army veterans describe the influencing factors on their post-service college application?” The themes cultivated from the interviews and the questions contained within the interview protocol (see Appendix C) are all centered on influencing factors which affect post-service college application of student Army veterans. Though the data meant to assist in gaining an understanding of lived experiences of student Army veterans, the following themes emerged as prominent throughout all ten individual participant interviews conducted as a part of this qualitative phenomenological approach. The following six themes emerged as consistent throughout the study: (a.) Self-Improvement; (b.) Necessity; (c.) Family;
(d.) Financial Considerations; (e.) School Choice; and (f.) Military Involvement. These six emergent themes will be discussed and connected to Chapter 2 literature theme by theme with subheadings. As stated in Chapter 4, the interviews revealed that both self-improvement and necessity are relevant to college application of student Army veterans while family and finances held relevance for both college application and military service.

This study illustrated the thoughts of Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) that cite Transition Theory as being useful in studies involving student veterans to provide a better understanding of their experiences. In interviewing all ten student Army veteran participants individually, sentiments based on the three major components of the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM) emerged (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Those three major components included cornerstones, auxiliary aid, and environment which included categories comprised of military influence, support, campus culture, and navigating re-enrollment. These three major components will be discussed in regards to the six emergent themes from the present inquiry.

The results of the interviews conducted indicated the participants’ thoughts mirrored views reflected in the literature with particular attention paid to the Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM). All ten participants indicated the need to earn a college degree which influenced their college application. At the conclusion of the interviews, the researcher realized that there was a clear message being sent to each participant. That message was that college education was necessary to be successful and improve oneself.
The use of the SVATSM to anchor the phenomenological interviews allowed participants to describe their process of college application while producing meaningful and comprehensive information surrounding the lived experiences of student Army veterans.

5.2 CREDIBILITY OF STUDY

The findings presented in Chapter 4, were generated from using the Moustakas’ (1994) four key steps to include (1.) bracketing experiences, (2.) horizontalization, (3.) relation and clustering of invariant units, and (4.) seeking multiple meanings and tensions in the textual description, which mirrors grounded theory’s axial coding (Hays & Wood, 2011). Themes were generated from the data collected and derived from the interviews conducted. This researcher bracketed her experiences by refraining from adding judgment (Hays & Wood, 2011). Instead, it was important to understand the perspectives of all participants to move back and forth through the data collected (Moustakas, 1994; Hays & Wood, 2011). Then, horizontalization occurred by identifying all non-repetitive and non-overlapping statement relevant to the experiences of these student Army veterans under investigation (Hays & Wood, 2011). Finding meaning and depth of experiences was based on relation and clustering of invariant units. Clustering of invariant units helped the researcher develop themes. Finally, much like axial coding found in grounded theory (Hays & Wood, 2011), this researcher was able to seek multiple meanings and tensions in the textual description. The credibility of the study was judged by the data collected and the analysis which resulted. To ensure support the objectivity and accuracy of this researcher’s interpretations and themes, member checking and external auditing were performed.
As a means of member checking, this researcher used probing questions for clarification during the interview process. After each interview was completed, this researcher then spoke with the participant to clarify any confusion and confirm the accuracy of statements and thoughts. Transcripts of interviews along with how participant information and reports aligned with each of the six themes that emerged were later sent to every participant. This researcher asked for participants to review the information received to determine if it appeared correct. Three participants responded by saying that everything was correct. Participant One added that his financial considerations were focused more on retirement aspects rather than a higher percentage of take home pay. The other seven participants have yet to respond.

As a means of external auditing done in peer review, all ten transcripts along with a themes chart and participant responses for each of the six themes that emerged were sent to the two Counselor Education & Supervision Ph.D. colleagues who were mentioned earlier in this study. External auditing is done, “to examine both the process and product of inquiry, and determine the trustworthiness of the findings” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.128). Providing transcripts with themed charts was done so they could review the results and check for biases. Both Ph.D. colleagues responded by explaining that they felt the researcher did not appear biased with questions asked and that questions asked were not leading.

The themes which emerged as a result of the data collection and analysis processes have contributed to the understanding of the experiences of student Army. Participant responses to questions asked that were described in Chapter 4 will
assist readers in the understanding of influencing factors on college application for this particular population.

5.3 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain a clear understanding of how lived experiences of student Army veterans might affect the decision to apply to college after serving on active duty status. The interviews were done aimed to explore how student Army veterans describe what influencing factors determined their choice to apply to college after serving in the military.

As a result of the current inquiry, it was found that the themes of self-improvement, necessity, family, financial considerations, school choice, and military involvement emerged as common threads throughout all ten interviews with these student Army veterans. Given the commonality throughout the ten interviews, it is thought that the lived experiences of student Army veterans did, in fact, affect post-service college application. In a review of literature in Chapter 2, there is no precedence in prior research to what the findings of the themes self-improvement and necessity can be connected. A vast majority of the research dealt with students already enrolled in college or re-enrolling after deployment. Furthermore, military involvement in the current inquiry was more important to how some of the participants chose their college majors more than whether or not to attend college. The information will be discussed below. The study also revealed consistent themes throughout the lived experiences of Army veterans who applied to either a large public research university or a small private liberal arts college located in Columbia, South Carolina. Issues surrounding the six emergent themes are important in understanding this particular population from the perspective of
counselors, student affairs professionals, and even other military personnel. It is of interest to note that the results of this study support what has been reported in the literature review of Chapter 2 regarding student veterans. Most importantly, implications from the study specifically relate to the roles played by counselors and student affairs professionals in supporting student veterans.

Themes which emerged during the present qualitative inquiry will be discussed in length as the researcher weaves the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM) created by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, and Fleming (2011) throughout. As previously stated in Chapter 1, literature using qualitative means to truly understand the experiences of student Army veterans regarding college enrollment and re-enrollment after serving on active duty is sparse. Furthermore, literature addressing student Army veterans regarding college application after serving on active duty is non-existent. It is interesting to note, the uniqueness of this study is that no studies have been done, to this researcher’s knowledge, which have looked specifically at student Army veterans and post-service college application. Instead, studies done on student veterans look to enrollment or re-enrollment of veterans in all branches of the military to include enlisted and commissioned officers. Even more profound are the implications from the study that are specifically related to working with student Army veterans. These profound implications are presented as emergent themes in Chapter 4’s findings.

**Self-Improvement.** There was no precedence in prior research to connect the theme of self-improvement. Due to the uniqueness of the present inquiry that looked at post-service college application of student Army veterans, the self-improvement theme stands alone but, still has bearing as an influencing factor. Under the sub-heading of
learning and growing, however, the theme of self-improvement was able to align loosely with connection to campus from the SVATSM for four participants. Participant Three believed his self-improvement came in the form of making connections through his business fraternity. He talked extensively about opportunities he had because of the connections he made in his business fraternity and student government. Participant Four’s self-improvement was based on meeting new people in class and through campus activities. Though he did not live on campus, Participant Four’s part-time job in one of the campus gyms gave him the ability to meet different people. He also considered his involvement in intramural sports to help him make friends. The overarching emergent theme of self-improvement provides this study with an influencing factor to consider when studying college application of student Army veterans. Just as these veterans may join the military for the experiences they can gain, they may look to earning a college education as a means of overall improvement of their situations.

**Leadership/ Mentorship Opportunities.** Participants unanimously decided that earning a college degree, regardless of program, was a way to improve themselves in regards to being better leaders/ mentors. They related their military experience to leadership opportunities that have made them better. The desire to be leaders and mentors is important to note because soldiers in the Army are taught to live by the Seven Army Values which spell out an acronym for leadership: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless-service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. It would make sense for student Army veterans to want to continue living by these values through earning a college education.

**Lead by Example.** Another idea generally instilled early in the military is that in order to be leader, one must lead by example. For many of these student Army veterans,
expecting family members and subordinates to do something meant that they must also be able to complete a task. The theme of leading by example also aligns with the Army Value of duty. Six of the ten interview participants recognized their duty to complete a college degree before pushing others to do the same.

**Learning & Growing.** Learning and growing served as another sub-theme for self-improvement. The learning and growing sub-theme loosely relates to invisibility under the subcategory of connection to campus for the Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM). Because many student veterans do not live on campus, they are less likely to get involved in on-campus activities (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). Participants One, Two, Three, and Four talked about not living on campus but, still feeling connected to the university through clubs and student organizations. Participants Five, Six, Seven, and Nine, felt as though their internship experiences helped them make connections in the larger community and within their social work program. Many participants appreciated the opportunity to learn new things through classes and meeting people with differing opinions while seven of the ten participants mentioned their ability to grow with the help of their college experience.

**Necessity.** Like the theme self-improvement, there was no precedence in prior research to connect the theme of necessity. Due to the uniqueness of the present inquiry that looked at post-service college application of student Army veterans, the necessity theme stands alone but, still has bearing as an influencing factor. Necessity was never truly discussed as reasons for enrolling in college throughout the literature review. The reason necessity was never discussed may be because prior research talked about the
process or re-enrollment or integrating into an institution of higher education. The discovery of necessity as an emergent theme used only when discussing college application provides more significance for the current inquiry. It would appear that necessity was never addressed, and it was first introduced using a phenomenological approach. All ten participants felt that having a college degree was a necessity. Participant Five relayed a story that drives home the theme of college degree necessity. She explained that a classmate had recently been diagnosed with cancer. After this cancer diagnosis, Participant Five’s classmate decided that 54-years-old, she enrolled in college because receiving a college education was a necessity for her to feel as though she lived her life to the fullest.

**Furthering Education/ Graduate School.** Nine of the ten participants discussed furthering their education by attending graduate school. Each participant who had hoped to attend graduate school was aware of the need to first acquire an undergraduate degree. The desire to earn a graduate degree after completion of undergraduate studies was an interesting dynamic because some of the participants did not think they would ever want to attend college. Now, many of them wanted to go on and get Master’s degrees.

**Career Prospects.** Some veterans perceive a loss of identity when they realize that many of their military skills are seldom used as students (Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). Serving in a war zone can bring about many changes in relationships and view of the role military experience plays in college enrollment (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Though every participant interviewed had served time in a war zone which provided them with different skills, they all believed that their military service was just not enough. The belief that military service was not
enough to be successful in today’s economy was the case most especially for Participant Two. He stated, “At the end of the day, I have a piece of paper and an education that nobody can take away from me. Ten years or twenty years from now, I'll hang up my uniform and it's just going to be a uniform. Thirty, forty, fifty years down the road, I'm always going to have a degree.” He further explained, “No one is going to care that you are some sort of awesome Airborne Ranger that has fifteen deployments.” Both Participants One and Two believed that the military was not enough to be successful. To all ten participants, earning a college degree in the current economy was imperative.

Family. While family may have played a role in the re-enrollment process of student veterans in previous studies, there was nowhere within the SVATSM to inject it appropriately. At first glance, it would seem family could be introduced under the heading of military influence. Introducing family under military influence would not work. The heading military influence talked about how military affected other aspects of a student veteran’s life—not the other way around. It would have been a dishonest attempt to include family under such a heading realizing that, in the present inquiry, it dictates military involvement and school choice. Military influence did not dictate family. Once again, it would appear that family as an influencing factor was introduced using a phenomenological approach. In the present inquiry, family played a vital role in whether or not a participant would join the military and attend college. Student veterans, on average, report lower levels of family income than most traditional civilian students (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). Participant Three explained that when he saw people living paycheck to paycheck in his family, it prompted him to want to live a successful life where he did not worry how he would
afford his next meal or rent. Participant Four believed that his college application was a little bit more for his mother than himself because she was forced to quit high school in the ninth grade. Participant Ten wanted to show his mother appreciation for the many sacrifices she had made while he was growing up through his college application. He believed that earning a college degree would be one way to show gratitude.

**Family Footsteps.** Following in family footsteps also dominated the family theme for both school and military. In the present inquiry, family footsteps was comprised of parents, siblings, spouses, children, and other extended members.

**School.** Participant Four noted that, while his mother never earned her college degree because she had to quit high school in the ninth grade to care for an elderly relative, his brother was the first in the family to get one. Recognizing his mother was unable to attend college and then watching his brother do it made him want to also attend school. Participant Seven explained that his father has two college degrees while both his mother and wife held one. He further discussed the fact that his wife was taking classes at the same college he attended to finish her Bachelor’s degree. Participant Seven’s father-in-law, who also attended the same school and earned a degree in social work, influenced his school choice and major focus. Participant Six decided she wanted to have some level of education to be like her sister and mother while Participant Nine realized his wife’s academic ambitions made him want to feel like her equal.

Participant Eight talked about needing to also live up to his wife’s legacy as she was finishing a master’s degree and searching for potential doctoral programs.

**Military.** For most of the participants interviewed, joining the military was a way to follow in the footsteps of loved ones. Participant Five wanted to make her uncle
proud. Like him, she chose to join the military. Participant Seven’s father, paternal grandfather, and uncle were all in the Army. It was a way to carry on the family legacy. Participant Eight comes from a family where both his mother and father served in the military and are now retired. Participant Nine had a brother and sister both join the military as well. While he spoke highly of his siblings, he laughed that his brother was one of his biggest competitors. He shared that they were always there to push one another in a positive way.

**Family Pride.** Family pride dictated why most of the participants chose to apply to college. Participant Two stated, “Even at 30-years-old, still trying to make my mom proud.” Participants One and Nine shared that their wives influenced them to earn a college degree. Making their children proud was an influencing factor for Participants Two, Six, and Nine. Participant Two related a situation in which he believed children may feel embarrassed if they were unable to participate. He stated, “You know that question where teachers ask them, *Raise your hand. How many of your parents went to college?* You know, I didn't want my kids to be that based off of the decision that I chose.” Participant Nine believed it was important to show his son that earning a college degree can be difficult but, attainable. He hoped to prove to his son that college education is attainable by letting him know he took some online classes while deployed to a war zone. Participant Two also noted that, in regards to extended family, seeing his uncle’s University of Maryland diploma hanging in his office made him want to, “chase his coattails.”

During the present inquiry, one participant explained that it was a major transition for his family when his wife gave birth to a child with special needs. Having a child with
special needs dictated where he chose to live and attend school. He looked for schools with a particular program of study based on their proximity to the Shriners Hospital. Other participants also explained that they encountered unanticipated transitions when they were diagnosed with a physical disability or a mental health disability such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). One participant, who is still in the military, talked about plans changing after hurting himself during training. Getting injured while on duty led him to no longer pursue Special Forces. Three other participants explained that serving in a war zone caused them to be diagnosed with PTSD. They received medical discharges, which they never expected, and had to also change their plans. Finally, non-events are transitions that are expected but, do not occur such as failure to be promoted in the military. Non-event transitions can come in the form of personal non-events that may be related to individual aspirations. An example of a non-event transition may be not getting accepted to a graduate program. None of the ten participants experienced any non-event transitions to the knowledge of this researcher. Then, there is a ripple non-event which can be felt due to a nonevent of someone else. Being affected through a non-ripple event due to someone else’s non-event is often the case for military families. If the service member does not receive the promotion or new assignment, it can dictate whether or not the family will relocate.

**Financial Considerations.** Financial Considerations fall under the auxiliary aid component of the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM) developed by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011). For seven of the participants, attending college meant they would be more financially stable after graduation. Participant One specifically noted that financial considerations were focused
more on retirement aspects rather than an initial pay increase. Student veterans generally have less money than non-veterans, which is one of the reasons they choose to join the military for educational benefits that are advertised as part of the military recruitment process (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Wilson, 2014). Participant Seven joined the Army to further his education and get a better job while Participant Eight saw joining the military as a means of helping pay for some of the loans that were incurred during his stint in college. What is most concerning about this population trying to find ways to pay for college is that, on average, report lower levels of family income than most traditional civilian students (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). Participant Five’s childhood included growing up in a single-parent household where, “money was tight with tight finances.” Participant Ten stated, “I didn’t come from a very rich family. We did okay but, I didn’t want anybody to help with my college.” He was now able to pay for his classes using the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and the College Assistance Program (CAP) offered through the South Carolina Army National Guard.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill has helped increase postsecondary enrollment by making it more attainable for those who do not necessarily have the means to attend without funding from the military (Bauman, 2013; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Vacchi, 2012; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013). Financial Considerations serves as both a sub-category for the SVATSM’s navigating re-enrollment and as a major emerging theme for the present inquiry. Six of the ten participants acknowledged money as a reason for their military involvement. Participant Three specifically joined the military because his parents did not have the money to send
him to college. Participant Four recognized he would not have funding for college without joining the Army. Participant Seven joined the Army to further his education and get a better job while Participant Eight saw joining the military as a means of helping pay for some of the loans that were incurred during his stint in college. Without funding from the military, many of the participants who were interviewed may not have applied to college and later enroll.

**School Choice.** It is important to recognize that the military can influence many things in that person’s life to include where they live, work, seek medical attention, and attend school (Francis & Kraus, 2012). While most participants ended up at their schools based upon their military duty assignment or the duty assignment of a spouse currently serving at Ft. Jackson, Participant One explained that having a child with special healthcare needs led him to consider school choice based on what schools offered an R.O.T.C. Green to Gold program and were near Shriners Hospitals. All ten participants noted the various policies put in place to make them feel welcomed. Participants talked about the overall feel of the state of South Carolina, the college or university where they attended along with how they were treated by faculty and students.

**Environment.** Environment serves as one of the three major components of the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM) developed by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011). The SVASTM includes the category of campus culture as part of the environment component. Environment includes the way student veterans feel they are treated by students, faculty, and staff on their campus (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009). Environment played a role in how veterans felt on campus. As noted
earlier, some student veterans may struggle connecting with traditional college-aged students which can serve as a significant barrier to social connections (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Bauman, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; O’Herrin, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013). Both Participants One and Two used the same fictional character from a popular movie to describe their feelings of discomfort among their classmates. Understanding that the local public research university would attract many younger students, Participant Five expressed appreciation for attending a school that has many non-traditional aged students. For Participants Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, and Ten, the age of fellow classmates and the ability to be among peers closer to their age served as another reason for school choice.

Educational experiences can be influenced by the attitudes of nonveteran people to include students and professors (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013). If student veterans feel as though they will be criticized by students and professors for their views or military service, they are less likely to ask for help (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2008; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013). Once again, the idea of the SVATSM pride that falls under military influence in the model aligns with the emerged theme of school choice. Participant Four discussed the fact that South Carolina as a state is considered very veteran-friendly. He believed that South Carolina was military-friendly because local military installations such as Ft.
Jackson, Charleston Air Force Base, Shaw Air Force Base, centers for both Reserve and Guard training, and a unit for the Marine Corps in Beaufort were all within South Carolina. He further explained that when South Carolina recently had destructive flooding that took the lives of many people, his professors were understanding when he was activated by the South Carolina Army National Guard to help with clean-up efforts. Attending the same university as Participant Four, Participant Two discussed the way in which professors have treated military personnel. He noted that some of his younger professors along with some older ones are concerned about offending people so, they may gloss over class discussions related to war time efforts of the United States. Participant Two laughed about the fact that such important topics are brushed aside for fear of upsetting veterans in class or starting a debate among students. Participant Five simply stated that the non-veteran faculty members are great at her institution. While faculty members have done a good job of making veterans feel welcome at Participant Five’s college, she did disclose that she tries not to discuss her military experiences in depth. When asked to further clarify, she explained that when she talks about her military experiences too often, she has seen non-veteran classmates make faces or roll their eyes. The uncomfortable reactions of her classmates has prompted her to keep some of her thoughts and feelings to herself in class. Participant Six shared that she feels comfortable enough expressing that she is a veteran but, does not like to discuss her military benefits around students who are non-veterans. She felt as though her earned military benefits made them jealous.

In regards to social struggles, both Participants One and Two discussed feeling like a popular character from an Adam Sandler movie known as Billy Madison. They
explained that, while they were in their early 30’s, sitting in a classroom with students fresh out of high school made them sometimes feel uncomfortable. Feelings of being too old to fit with classmates aligns with the idea of maturity presented in the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVATSM) created by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, and Fleming (2011). These veterans felt as though it was oftentimes difficult to connect with traditional-aged college students due to having little in common with them and feeling as though there were significant barriers to social connection (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Bauman, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; O’Herrin, 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013).

Though Participants Five, Six, and Seven did not feel invisible on campus or that their classmates were disrespectful of their service, they explained that it was important not to always discuss their military service in class. Participant Five discussed the looks of annoyance she receives when relating something in class back to an experience she had in the military. Though none of them chose to hide their military affiliation, it was noted that talking about it in length could lead to students rolling their eyes or making faces. Inappropriate classmate reactions to personal stories about the Army led Participants Five and Seven to sparingly discuss their time in the military. Overall, it is important to share that all veterans felt they attended a campus where they were treated with respect.

**Administrative Policies.** Many universities try to offer college credit for their experiences (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Vacchi, 2012; Wilson, 2014). Academic credit for
military experiences aligned with the school choice theme which emerged in the present inquiry. Participants Seven, Eight, Nine, and Ten, were pleased that their colleges or universities offered them the chance to earn credit from their military experiences. Participant Ten explained that his school took up to twenty credits of his military experience. Because he joined the military to help pay for college, receiving credit for military experience which saved him money was especially important. By using military experience as credit, he was able to save a substantial amount of money. Participant Seven did not want what he did in the military to be wasted. Furthermore, he shared that most of his classmates who are also veterans choose his school due to the veteran-friendly policy of accepting military experience for college credits.

Student veterans concerns could be easily rectified if a colleges and universities provide a point person to help coordinate service (Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Wilson, 2014). At the large public research university, Participants One, Two, Three, and Four felt the point person charged with helping them in the veterans’ affairs office was of little use. Instead, Participants One and Two expressed gratitude to a person outside of the veterans’ affairs office for helping them navigate the system. Participants at the small private liberal arts college could not identify one person who was solely responsible to serve as a point person. Instead, they received guidance from someone at the school with another title. It was unanimous, however, that all ten participants felt as though they were helped in some regard with their school’s navigation. Four of the ten participants attended the large public research institution. They felt as though they were able to receive answers to their questions in a timely
fashion. Both Participants One and Two referred to a particular administrative staff member on their campus as a “rock star” for helping them with course schedules. Participants Five through Ten attended the local private liberal arts college. They all felt as though their school had helped them navigate the system to pay for their college using the Post 9/11 GI Bill. There was also a general consensus that scheduling classes was hassle-free due to support of a particular helpful administrator. Participants One, Six, Seven, and Nine discussed their discontent with what they felt was a runaround from other universities or colleges. The schools they considered prior to attending their current institutions did not provide them with supports to enroll. Lack of support from other institutions, they all explained, led them to look elsewhere to further their education.

**Campus Culture.** The SVASTM includes the category of campus culture as part of the environment component. Veterans can feel as though their institution provides them with a supportive climate and respect through observance of particular holidays like Veterans’ Day, Memorial Day, and September 11th and offer special red, white, and blue honor cords for graduation (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Participants One, Two, Three, and Four all expressed gratitude for the campus Veterans’ Day Breakfast. Providing celebratory events for student veterans on campus, they believed, related to the military-friendliness of the university. Recognizing that the university they chose to attend held events such as veteran-friendly events helped them with their school choice as well. These four participants each discussed involvement in the campus Student Veterans’ Association (SVA) which offers red, white, and blue honor cords for graduation. Participants One and Four were
especially excited by the prospect of wearing honor cords for graduation as they are both seniors preparing to graduate. Unfortunately, though Participants Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, and Ten believed their college was military friendly, they were unable to think of any events sponsored by the school in observance of holidays such as Veterans’ Day, Memorial Day, or September 11th.

While many student services may exist in silos, student veterans should be able easily navigate campus systems to include registration, financial aid, deployment, and returning to campus through the creation of veterans’ offices on campus (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Bauman, 2009; Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). The theme of school choice was especially important when discussing navigation of the system. Four of the ten participants shared their attempts to attend other schools prior to coming to their current institutions. These participants explained that they felt as though they were not being treated as a priority leaving them to flounder with their application, registration, and financial aid packets.

Prior research has shown that important way to support student veterans would be through the appointment of an institutional point person to deal with the reintegration process (Bauman, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; O’Herrin, 2011; Wilson, 2014). These veterans were placed in a situation where they were once soldiers and now students. Four of the ten participants discussed feeling as though they continued to be shoved aside at other universities or colleges before choosing where they now attend. Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, and Fleming (2011) noted the difficulty of transitioning from veteran to student due to leaving an environment that operated within
rigid structures and protocols in the military to loose structure on college campuses.

Student veterans who were once in an environment of rigid structure were now being sent the message they must learn to self-direct and take initiative (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). For lower-ranking enlisted members, such as some of the participants interviewed, self-direction was difficult because they were generally used to being told what to do (Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011). Participant Nine spoke about trying to get help with registration at his local technological college. He expressed frustration in being told to go from office to office on campus. When he would appear at the proper office, the point person for veterans’ affairs was never there. Conversely, all four participants at the large research public university talked about their displeasure with the point person. They explained that the person was often aloof, and they felt his older age hindered him from providing them with the best and most up-to-date services. It is clear that lack of veteran services affected college application to and enrollment at certain colleges throughout South Carolina.

Military Involvement. Military influence and invisibility comprise the cornerstones component of the SVASTM. Military influence can affect how student veterans view themselves in comparison to their non-military peers on college campuses. While military influence affected college enrollment for the study done by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, and Fleming (2011), the present inquiry found the theme of military involvement to emerge in regards to reasons people chose to join. Though this study looks to understand the influencing factors on post-service college application of student Army veterans, it is important to recognize the relevance military service has played in the vital role of transitioning from soldier to student. Every participant began the
interview by providing a background of military involvement and reasons for joining. These reasons included wanting to be a soldier, financial gains, and travel/cultural experiences. Some participants talked about never contemplating attending college while others joined to earn the educational benefits. Joining the military specifically for educational benefits aligns with the research that explained student veterans are more likely than their non-military peers to come from lower income families. The belief that they earned their college degree through military service instead of having parents pay for college may provide a glimpse into the thoughts, feelings, and actions of student Army veterans and why some of them feel as though they are more mature and focused than non-veteran students. Of interest, Participants Five and Six felt as though their prior military experience dictated the choice to attend college and choose a particular major in the helping profession. While this study was not done to determine if military experience affects college major choice, it is something for colleges and universities to consider when trying to recruit Army veterans to apply to their school.

5.4 IMPLICATIONS

This study has helped generate knowledge in areas ignored by earlier researchers. Understanding the experiences of Army veterans who have served on active duty status and chose to apply to college may affect change on the college and university level and therefore, affect recruitment of this unique population. Though it may serve as a lofty goal, it is hoped this current inquiry may also affect change within the United States Army in regards to both recruitment and retention. Furthermore, the implications of this qualitative study using a phenomenological approach have the potential to affect those in
the counseling field in a variety of ways, specifically in practice and training. In this section, the implications for the groups as mentioned above are discussed.

Implications from this study address the lived experiences of student Army veterans by asking the following questions: (1.) People have different reasons for choosing to apply to college. Can you tell me about your decision to apply to college?, (2.) Some people have difficulty deciding to apply to and attend college, and others decide fairly easily. What kind of decision process did you go through in thinking about whether or not to attend?, (3.) What influenced your decision to apply to this college/university?, (4.) Now that you have made the decision to attend college, how do you feel about it?, (5.) What is your sense of the campus climate towards veterans specifically?, (6.) What are your expectations about how college will affect you personally?, and (7.) Is there anything else you would like to share that was not addressed earlier?

In answering these questions, the participants provided ample insight into how experiences may influence student Army veterans regarding post-service college application.

**Student Affairs Professionals.** It is important for services and campus professionals to understand the unique needs, issues, and concerns of student veterans by being prepared to assist them when they come to campus (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; Vacchi, 2012). Understanding the process of how experiences of student Army veterans influence post-service college application may affect recruitment, and eventually retention, of this population.
**Academic Policies and Procedures.** Because a majority of the participants talked about the importance of flexible scheduling, course rotation, and credit transfer, student affairs professionals and campus administration can look to policies that are beneficial to student veterans. Campuses can also consider offering more online classes and classes at times that are convenient for students who work full-time because some military benefits make it difficult to attend college full-time (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; O’Herrin, 2011). A university that has the ability to offer online and evening classes aligns the ability to be more veteran-friendly. Having better credit transfer policies to help veterans make the most of their military experience can help with appealing to this population. When student Army veterans can use military credits from their training, it makes them feel as though their service provided them with skills valued at the collegiate level.

**Financial Literacy.** Many of the participants discussed their financial educational benefits to include the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and tuition assistance programs. Participants Four, Six, Eight, and Nine expressed annoyance with some of the issues that stemmed from trying to process financial aid paperwork. When benefits are delayed, it can cause undue stress to veterans. One way to mitigate undue stress related to delayed benefits is by offering scholarships tailored to veterans. Schools should also not allow benefits to be subtracted from the amount of aid received, refund students their tuition and registration fees when called upon to active duty, and help them navigate other tuition assistance programs (Bauman, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). By helping them with their finances, schools can make student Army veterans feel like more than just a number.
Acknowledging Veterans. Though only four of the ten participants, which happened to attend the large public research university, mentioned it, holding, at least, one event on campus each year to recognize veterans can make an impact on how they feel. Acknowledging special holidays such as Veteran’s Day can make all the difference. Some schools offer red, white, and blue honor cords at little or no cost for veterans graduating. Offering honor cords can make veterans feel as though their service to this country is appreciated.

Educating Campus Professionals. Professors can refrain from making derogatory statements about the military or military action in other countries if it does not relate to the content of the class. One way to educate faculty and staff on campus about the needs of veterans is to provide them with training. Some colleges offer veteran-specific training like Green Zone training. It would behoove faculty and staff at each college and university to take a Green Zone training. Also, hiring more veterans to work on campus can also be beneficial in the recruitment and eventual retention of student Army veterans. Colleges and universities should look to not only recruit and retain student veterans but, also faculty and staff who have served in the military as well. These are things that can be done to help student veterans feel as though their administration cares about them and respects their military commitments.

Military Personnel. When discussing reasons for choosing to attend college after serving on active duty status, some participants noted having a supportive person within their command who pushed them to do it. Participants One talked about an officer in his unit who explained the idea of the Green to Gold program. Having someone explain the program and many benefits associated with it prompted him to look into R.O.T.C.
programs throughout the nation with a Green to Gold program. In turn, Participant One was able to help guide his friend, Participant Two, throughout the program application. Participants Three and Ten discussed having senior enlisted leadership push them to take a few classes that would lead to a degree. One thing all participants who had someone in leadership above them noted the same thing about those mentors—they also had some level of college education. These leaders knew about programs offered by the Army and how to use certain benefits to acquire a degree. The current inquiry may also help with social policy change for Army discharge services. It is my belief that the information provided in the current inquiry regarding programs in the military is necessary for every person in the Army.

**U.S. Army Career Counselors.** Currently, the United States Army employs career counselors. The information from the current study can help Career Counselors within the U.S. Army by letting them see the lack of communication between the military and universities or colleges. These Career Counselors can use the information to try and make a change within the Army and on college campuses by finding a way to connect military occupational specialties (MOS) to general education courses. For example, participants at the large public research university explained that physical education requirements were met with attending basic training. These were credits that easily transferred to their current institution. Participant Two served as a Military Police (MP; 31B) in the Army and also majored in Criminal Justice at his current academic institution. It would make sense for his real world experience working in Military Police during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) to count towards a degree in Criminal Justice. Career Counselors within the Army can help universities and colleges understand the
training that goes along with each MOS when helping veterans provide military transcripts. Unlike Military Police (MP; 31B) and Criminal Justice or Engineer (EN; 12W) and Engineer, some Army veterans come to college with an MOS that does not easily translate into a particular major such as Healthcare Specialist (Combat Medic; 68W) or Infantry (IN; 11B).

U.S. Army Career Counselors can provide soldiers with a list of MOSs that easily translate into a specific major. For an MOS that may not easily be translated into a major, these Career Counselors can work with the United States Army to attach a generic general education requirement to courses taken within each MOS. For example, many of the courses taken to become a combat medic mirror general education science requirements. They also mirror majors within the healthcare field. Another thing U.S. Army Career Counselors can do is to help soldiers understand how their particular skill sets, MOS, and military transcripts can benefit them in the classroom or workplace. While it would be nice to see the United States Army begin to provide soldiers with an Associate’s degree for training received while at basic training, advanced individual training (AIT), and throughout their military career, that is an enormous goal too large for this study to reach.

Army Soldiers. By participating in this research, the participants may help others considering college application with their decision. It can help them see the struggles encountered by participants so; they know what to anticipate. The hope is that this study also helps Army soldiers consider how to use their time wisely while in the military. If a person is in the military but, contemplating eventually applying to college, being aware of the benefits and programs can be useful. Army soldiers can choose an MOS wisely
that may provide an easier translation from military career to college major, as well. Because this study brought to light the various policies associated with different universities to include military and prior college credit transfer along with discounted tuition for being a veteran, Army soldiers who read this study will know that every school has pre-existing policies which can benefit them. The current inquiry may also help them in deciding where to apply. It is the goal that Army soldiers who read this current phenomenological inquiry will serve as advocates for their own welfare and provide mentoring to others who apply to college after them.

**Counselor Educators.** Counselor Educators can use the information gathered in this inquiry to help them tailor a curriculum which includes **F.11.b. Student Diversity** of the *ACA Code of Ethics*, which recognizes that they must actively recruit and retain diverse students while demonstrating a commitment to multicultural/diversity competence. Though the present inquiry looked at undergraduate students, it is important to recognize the prior research noted it was important to hire veterans to serve as administrators and faculty or at least to provide them with a supportive climate (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Francis & Kraus, 2012; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009; Wilson, 2014). For universities to hire diverse veteran faculty members, veterans must have the education and experience for the position. Counselor Education programs can actively recruit Army veterans for their doctoral programs. They can also recruit student Army veteran graduate students who want to earn a Master’s or Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) degree in counseling.
They can also use the following information to abide by **F.11.C. Multicultural/Diversity Competence** of the *ACA Code of Ethics* to actively infuse multicultural/diversity competence in their training and supervision practices.

Though veteran status is not an acknowledged or protected class within the *ACA Code of Ethics* regarding multicultural/diversity competence, Counselor Education faculty can include this population in their curriculum. Veterans should be viewed in the same ways as other marginalized populations when teaching students and preparing future counselors. Some campuses offer training specifically to work with veterans such as Green Zone. Offering the Green Zone training to students in Counselor Education programs or providing them with extra credit for taking the free training could boost interest in working with veterans.

**School Counselors.** With proper training, School Counselors provide the best services possible to students in a K-12 setting. Currently, many secondary education School Counselors are charged with preparing high school students for college or the workforce. An alarming statement made by one participant regarding the unappealing alternative of working in fast-food without a college education brought to light a very real belief held by many. It was assumed that without a college degree, career prospects were glum at best. School Counselors can combat the belief that not having a college education equates to low-paying jobs by advocating for vocational education and educating students on the many high-paying careers where a college degree is not needed. Though college education is imperative for some careers, it should not be viewed as the only way to be successful.
Due to the Army’s split training option (STO), soldiers can attend basic training during the summer between their junior and senior years of high school and their advanced individual training (AIT) once they graduate. It would benefit School Counselors to be aware of the different educational benefits and programs, such as STO, to help them work with students who want to join the military. While helping students prepare for life after high school, School Counselors can meet with students who have already joined the military through STO or will join after high school. Even if a student has not expressed interest in applying to college during or after joining the Army, School Counselors can provide resources about how particular military occupational specialties align with college majors and careers. The current inquiry serves as a reminder to School Counselors that, while some participants never anticipated attending college, the necessity of a college degree made them decide to use their Army benefits to earn one.

**Career Counselors.** With proper training, Career Counselors provide the best possible services to clients who want to find a career that they view as rewarding. Much like School Counselors, Career Counselors can help erase the stigma that not holding a college degree equates to unappealing career choices. Furthermore, Career Counselors should also be educated on the educational benefits and programs offered by the United States Army to help clients understand how their military skills translate into a satisfying career. Another thing Career Counselors can do is to advocate for veterans by seeking out military-friendly companies which may employ them.

**Mental Health Counselors.** With proper training, Mental Health Counselors provide the best services to clients who are in need of support. Mental Health Counselors should also abide by **F.11.C. Multicultural/Diversity Competence** of the ACA Code of
Ethics to actively infuse multicultural/ diversity competence in their training and supervision practices. It is imperative that they receive continuing education units (CEUs) for working with veterans. They should attend trainings about veterans and their unique needs. Some Mental Health Counselors will work at agencies that may encounter veterans while others will work on college campuses where they are sure to meet at least one student veteran. That is why mental health services at universities should also take the lead to coordinate services among campus services to hire staff members who are trained specifically to deal with veterans (Elliot, Gonzalez, and Larsen, 2011; Ford, Northrup, & Wiley, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Overall, all counselors should know how to work with veterans. Receiving training on veterans’ issues and recruiting veterans to work in mental health settings can prove to be invaluable for Mental Health Counselors.

5.5 REFLECTIONS OF RESEARCHER

At the beginning of the present inquiry, the role of this researcher as an Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veteran and current doctoral candidate teaching undergraduate students was indicated. In my work with veteran populations through campus organizations and former military affiliation, I acknowledged a certain amount of bias that could have become present throughout this study. It was important for my participants to understand that my role was that of a researcher trying to understand their particular experiences without providing any personal opinions before and throughout the individual interviews. This study has helped me gain a deeper appreciation for using a phenomenological approach when doing qualitative research as it allowed the participants to tell their stories. I walked into interviews thinking I knew many of the policies
regarding the two schools where participants studied and the Army. I left realizing that my participants taught me a great deal. It is my hope that the stories of these ten participants will help members of the Army begin to think about how they will navigate the college application process, should they decide to apply. It is also my hope that campus administrators will use the information gathered to inform their practices in providing support while counselors and counselor educators alike will abide by the ACA Code of Ethics when dealing with this special population. My final hope is that this study has helped provide a voice to the men and women who put on the uniform and serve this country.

5.6 FUTURE RESEARCH

Results of this study have produced substantial evidence that the lived experiences of post-service Army veterans can influence college application. There was one limitation of the current research study as it was conducted. The limitation was only being able to secure two female student Army veterans. While interviewing fewer female veterans appears to have been the norm in prior research and is indicative of the smaller percentage of women in the military, having more female representation would have served the purpose of speaking to their unique experiences.

After presentation of the six emergent themes in this current inquiry, further exploration and conceptualization of these themes through additional quantitative and qualitative methodology, particularly grounded theory, would be advantageous. Furthermore, future research should consider each of the military service branches to include the Air Force, Coast Guard, Marines, and Navy. Future research could include commissioned officers in the various military branches. Experiences could
be differentiated by viewing separate war campaigns with a study done specifically on veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). It may also be beneficial to consider separating experiences of women and men. The revisiting of the premise of experiences having an influence on decisions made to apply to college would be paramount for expounding on this study. Research studies should also attempt to replicate this study on student Army veterans in other parts of South Carolina and throughout the country. As noted earlier, of the ten participants in this study, only two were native (born and raised) to South Carolina. One participant grew up in the northeast but, moved to South Carolina in high school. Would the responses have been different if all ten participants were South Carolina natives? Would they be different if the schools where they attended were in other states? The views may be different based on where participants grew up and where they are currently living as they attend college. Research studies also using other contexts (i.e. academic standing and location within the state) can be viewed as another potential study. Identifying both the similarities and differences among and between the contexts would be paramount to gaining a real understanding of the influence experiences can have on college application of post-service student veterans. Collecting data from multiple participants would allow a view from multiple perspectives. These findings may have implications for counselors, student affairs professionals, and military personnel as well as professional organizations charged with understanding veterans affairs. With the meager amount of literature on the influencing factors of post-service college application of student veterans, another study on veterans is necessary. A study linking post-service veterans to college application
resources could prove pivotal in the quest to increase the representation of veterans on college campuses and support them in their transition from soldier to student.

5.7 CONCLUSION

The findings of this qualitative study to gain an understanding of how Army veterans describe the influencing factors on their post-service college application provides a framework from which to view the struggles faced by this marginalized population. The individual phenomenological interviews with the ten student Army veterans revealed two emergent themes never discussed in prior research. These veterans acknowledged the reasons for college application. The thematic analysis conducted as part of the data analysis showed that these two new emergent themes serving as a cause for college application included self-improvement and necessity. All ten participants explained, while their paths may have been different to get them to their current academic institutions, they all felt pleased with their choice to apply and later enroll. Participants unanimously agreed that earning a college degree was necessary for success as it was cited as the primary motivator for college application.

Further research is needed to continue the quest for knowledge concerning the college application experiences of post-service student veterans. By looking at each branch of the military, it may provide a better understanding of how to help all student veterans beyond Army. While this study looked at undergraduate students who were enlisted in the military, future research can be done with graduate students who were commissioned officers. The knowledge gleaned from the current phenomenological inquiry is a beginning in gaining a better understanding of the recruitment issues surrounding post-service student Army veterans.
REFERENCES


Consent Form for Qualitative Research Study

Hello, my name is Aubrey Lynne Sejuit, LMSW, MEd, CASAC. I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Studies Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Counselor Education & Supervision, and I would like to invite you to participate. This study is sponsored by the University of South Carolina. I am studying how student Army veterans describe influencing factors on their post-service college application using a phenomenological approach. There is little or no risk from being part of this study. When I write about or tell people about what I have learned in this study I will never give your name or any identifying information about you so that everyone’s responses are completely confidential.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research project is to explore post-service college application of student Army veterans. In particular, I will discuss how student Army veterans make meaning of their experiences of seeking college education through college application while transitioning from soldier to student.

**Duration of Participation:** The face-to-face interview will last about 1 hour at a time in a place convenient to you.

**Agreement to Participate:** You can decide to stop talking to me at any time and may refuse to answer any of the questions. There is no penalty for ending the study or for not answering questions. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Potential Risks:** The risks of participation in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life. Because issues faced by veterans are sometimes troublesome, you may find some of the questions uncomfortable to answer.

**Confidentiality:** You will never be personally identified in any presentation of this data. I will not store your responses with personal identifiers as a precaution to make sure your information remains confidential. Any and all handwritten notes will be shredded once they are used to complete this study.

**Statement of Consent**

*I have read the information above and have received answers to any questions I asked. I agree to participate in the study.*

Signed: __________________________________ Date ________________

**Permission to tape record interview:**

*Please sign below if you are willing to have these interviews recorded.*

Signed: __________________________________ Date: ________________
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH
APPROVAL LETTER for EXEMPT REVIEW

This is to certify that the research proposal: Pro00051511

Entitled: A Phenomenological Examination of How Student Army Veterans Describe Influencing Factors on Their Post-Service Education

Submitted by:
   Principal Investigator:  Aubrey Sejuit
   College/Department:  Education
   Educational Studies / Counselor Education
   Wardlaw
   Columbia, SC 29208

was reviewed in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2), the referenced study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on 12/21/2015. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, the Principal Investigator must inform the Office of Research Compliance of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three (3) years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). If you have questions, contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson
IRB Manager
APPENDIX C-INTERVIEW FORMAT

Interview Questions

(1.) People have different reasons for choosing to apply to college. Can you tell me about your decision to apply to college?
   • I am interested in knowing what influenced you to apply to college?
   • What financial factors influenced your decision to apply to college?
   • What social factors, if any, influenced your college application decision?
   • What personal factors influenced your choice to apply to college?
     - Family (parents, spouse, children, etc.)
     - Friends
     - Supervisors/ Mentors and Co-workers
   • What career aspirations influenced you?
   • What other factors influenced you that I did not mention?

(2.) Some people have difficulty deciding to apply to and attend college, and others decide fairly easily. What kind of decision process did you go through in thinking about whether or not to attend?

(3.) What influenced your decision to apply to this college/university?

(4.) Now that you have made the decision to attend college, how do you feel about it?
   • How would you describe your feelings right now?
   • What lingering doubts or concerns do you have?

(5.) What is your sense of the campus climate towards veterans specifically?

(6.) What are your expectations about how college will affect you personally?
   • What changes in yourself do you hope will result from your college attendance?
   • What do you hope to get out of your college experience?

(7.) Is there anything else you would like to share that was not addressed earlier?

Research Questions

How do Army veterans describe the influencing factors on their post-service college application?