Soldier to Student: Understanding the Transition Experiences of Veterans From the Military to Community College

Alexander T. Jordan

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SOLDIER TO STUDENT: UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES OF VETERANS FROM THE MILITARY TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

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DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my family. First, to my wife, Amanda, I thank you for moving to South Carolina while I was pursuing my master’s degree and starting a life with me. I thank you for supporting me to pursue another degree and for standing by my side for the majority of the decade that I have been in college from undergraduate to now. Thank you for all the love and encouragement you provided throughout the entire process and I hope to spend the rest of my life repaying the favor.

I also wish to dedicate this work to my mother, Barbara, who has set such an exemplary example for me and my siblings throughout our lives. Thank you for teaching me to work hard to achieve my goals and to struggle through the hard times because they too would pass. I thank you for your unconditional love you have provided me throughout my entire life, but specifically throughout my doctorate. I know it has been hard having me away for so many years in South Carolina, but I promise to move back to Ohio soon.

Lastly, I wish to dedicate my dissertation to my grandmother, Pauline, who I know is in heaven looking down on me. Though you were not physically present throughout this process, never did a day pass that I did not think about you and use all the love you gave me while you were here to motivate me and make you proud by accomplishing what I set out to do. Thank you for always believing in me and I know I will see you again one day.
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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the U.S. military and higher education is one that is unlike any other. As the United States’ economy continues to transition more towards a knowledge-based economy every year, students, especially veterans, are continually faced with the realization that a degree of higher education of some sort is arguably a necessity in order to survive. Data shows that community colleges attract the largest number of veterans compared to other types of institutions including four-year and for-profit colleges and universities (Wheeler, 2012). At 43%, community colleges are the preferred option for veterans across the United States (Wheeler, 2012).

As commonly represented amongst many other researched subgroups, students endure a myriad of different college experiences and circumstances as they transition to the higher education environment, and student veterans are not any different. Student veterans are a diverse subgroup on college campuses who bring with them unique life experiences that are unlike that of any traditional college student. Despite community colleges being the largest server of veterans, there is limited available research on the topic of veterans transitioning. The following qualitative case study, theoretically framed under Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, utilizes semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and social media document analysis to shed light on the transition experiences of veterans as they transition from the military to a community college in the southeastern region of the United States. Four themes emerged from the study including: [1] motivation to enroll
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education have forged connections with a plethora of sectors outside education, but the relationship with the U.S. military is one that is unlike any other. The bond between these two entities dates back to the American Revolution, but more formally began through the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862 when governmental funding was allocated to land-grant institutions that implemented military training as part of their curriculum in an effort to turn the tide of the Civil War (Abrams, 1989; Jones, 2017; Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011;). Collaboration between higher education and the military played a pivotal role in the history of the United States, particularly during the eras of WWI and WWII. Colleges and universities worked alongside the military to enhance military innovation for weaponry and assist in other wartime efforts (Duemer, 2006). The relationship was further enhanced through major legislation such as the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 and subsequent similarly-aimed legislation that sought to provide educational benefits to returning soldiers (Olson, 1973; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

Through trials and tribulations, the link between higher education and the military has stood the test of time and countless veterans have reaped the rewards of subsequently enrolling in college post-military service throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. As the United States’ economy continues to transition more towards a knowledge-based economy every year, students, especially veterans, are continually faced with the realization that a degree of higher education of some sort is arguably a necessity in order
to survive. Veterans are forced to make a decision upon their return regarding whether or not to enroll in higher education or pursue another path. However, the decision is not as cut-and-dry as to attend college or not, but additionally, the type of institution. Data shows that community colleges attract the largest number of veterans compared to other types of institutions including four-year and for-profit colleges and universities (Wheeler, 2012). At 43%, community colleges are the preferred option for veterans across the United States (Wheeler, 2012).

The community college sector is comprised of approximately 41% of students in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), yet community colleges tend to take a back seat to four-year institutions when examining bodies of literature and research in higher education. It is my opinion that not only are community colleges under researched, but they are underappreciated. These institutions were created as an extension of high school (Drury, 2003), but have grown into a societal force whose mission of open-access, catering to a community’s educational needs, and delivering a comprehensive curriculum (Harbour, 2015), is both honorable and frequently glossed over. With enrollments reaching more than 12 million students, equating roughly to almost half of all undergraduates in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018), community colleges are both well-deserving of research attention and a pivotal institution in American society.

As commonly represented amongst many other researched subgroups, students endure a myriad of different college experiences and circumstances as they transition to the higher education environment, and student veterans are not any different. These individuals will face their own set of hurdles and experience higher education in a way
that is both unique and sometimes challenging as compared to the traditional eighteen-year-old college student. The following case study, that utilizes semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and social media document analysis, sheds light on the transition experiences of veterans as they transition from the military to a community college in the southeastern region of the United States. The research questions were constructed in a manner that paid close attention to detail to ensure that the richest data was gathered in hopes of producing a study that would be both impactful and beneficial to the realm of academia.

**Background & Research Context**

Student veterans are a diverse subgroup on college campuses who bring with them unique life experiences that are unlike that of any traditional college student that enrolls in higher education immediately after graduating from high school. These students will have left home, oftentimes have left the country, and will have been exposed to a myriad of situations and traumas that not only impact their outlook on life and education but have an increasingly significant impact on their transition into civilian life and higher education.

After reviewing the limited research on veterans and their transition to higher education, it became abundantly clear that this group of students face a host of different challenges that impact their transition from the military to community college (Rumann, 2010; Wheeler, 2012). A more complete review of the research is provided in Chapter Two, but the limited literature surrounding the topic draws attention to numerous factors that have been identified as inhibitors to a successful transition. I will briefly outline a
choice selection of these factors as a way to establish the purpose and direction of my proposed study:


2. Inability to relate to nonveteran peers (Falkey, 2016; Heineman, 2016; Jones, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010)

3. Navigating institutional and governmental bureaucracy (Jones, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010;)

4. Disabilities such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011; Zinger & Cohen, 2010;)

   Additionally, the literature highlights support mechanisms that student veterans have stated have had a positive impact on their transition from the military to community college. A detailed examination of the factors will be described in Chapter Two. For the purpose of laying the groundwork of my research, a few of these factors are mentioned:

   1. Ability to connect and relate to other veterans (Wheeler, 2012)
   2. The role of family and friends (Jones, 2017)
   3. Supportive faculty (Falkey, 2016; Rumann et al., 2011)

   The previously mentioned inhibitors and support mechanisms have been identified in the extremely limited empirical research on veterans transitioning from the military to community college. There are less than twenty empirical articles that cover veterans and their transition to community college and even fewer that are related to the transition experiences of this subgroup. As such is the case, it is evident that research on
this topic is very much needed to not only confirm previous findings, shed light on new factors, but to encourage policy change as a result of the research findings.

In addition to identifying inhibitors and support mechanisms, it is of the utmost importance to draw attention to services that student veterans would like to see implemented on community college campuses as well as services and initiatives currently in place to better serve this population. Examples include:

1. Credit streamlining (Persky & Oliver, 2010)
2. Sensitivity training for faculty, staff, and students (Heineman, 2016; Persky & Oliver, 2010)
5. Veteran-specific college orientation (Heineman, 2016; Wheeler, 2012)
6. Provide counseling services for veterans (Miles, 2014)

The recommendations stated would not only better support veterans on community college campuses but show that the administration is truly invested in veterans. Being the largest server of veterans, community colleges are in a position to provide support services to veterans in an effort to assist in a successful transition. The research conducted through this dissertation will be a building block in a hopefully growing and deserving area of research.

**Rationale for Study**

Interest in veterans and their attendance in higher education is slowly growing. There has been an increase in empirical articles published covering the topic, but the
amount of research is still not adequate. As described in Chapter Two, veterans experience a wide-range of issues and face obstacles as they transition from the military to community college. The topic has caught the attention of those in mainstream media as well. An article in *The Atlantic* sheds light on veterans: Marcus (2017) states, “…extra challenges confronting student-veterans, who are usually older than traditional-aged students and more likely to be juggling college with families, jobs, and service-related disabilities, and who often face significantly more red tape” (para. 4). Navigating governmental and institutional bureaucracy to be able to use G.I. benefits is a common issue expressed in the literature that inhibits a successful transition (Jones, 2017; Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011).

However, some of the attention gained from the media is not always for the most positive reasons. According to a recent report that analyzed compiled federal data, an average of 15% of full-time students who received G.I. Bill benefits graduated from a community college in 2014 (Marcus, 2017). In addition, the proportion of full-time and part-time student veterans who enroll in community college and also return for a second year is decreasing while the general student population proportion is slowly increasing (Marcus, 2017). These statistics are just a few that should put community colleges on high alert and take steps to find ways to properly support veterans during their transition.

Unfortunately, after the passage of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill which saw an increase to educational benefits for veterans for the first time in decades (Caspers & Ackerman, 2012), some institutions began to see dollar signs in uniforms. According to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) (2012), “Servicemembers, veterans, spouses, and family members have become highly attractive prospects to for-
profit colleges, and many schools have put significant resources into recruiting and enrolling students eligible for these benefits” (p. 6). For-profit institutions also tend to spend more financial resources on recruiting students and marketing than on instruction (HELP, 2012). These institutions effectively recruit veterans, take their G.I. benefits, and do not provide a quality education (Wong, 2015). This does a great disservice to veterans who pursue higher education in hopes of bettering themselves and learning skills to be marketable in the job field.

On the other hand, as community colleges are non-profit organizations, the mission and vision of these institutions are arguably more aligned with the goals of veterans seeking higher education. According to Rumann et al., (2011), “Community colleges are well positioned to recruit and attract student veterans. Community colleges are also geared toward serving a nontraditional student population, which may make them an attractive alternative to student veterans who are trying to transition back into the civilian world following military service” (p. 56).

My interest in the topic of veterans began when I saw the abuse and neglect that was exposed at the Veteran’s Administration and their hospitals. Something within myself compelled me to reach out and assist this population in any way that I could after they had risked their lives for their country. Due to the lack of research and empirical studies on this student population coupled with the high enrollment at community colleges and lower-than-average graduation rates, I decided that the best way in which I could assist this population is by shifting the focus and conversation to a topic and subgroup of which little is known in an effort to create change. Moreover, the lack of empirical research on student veterans transitioning to higher education (Miles, 2014)
coupled with the fact that 43% of student veterans enroll in community college upon their return (Wheeler, 2012) has compelled me to dig deeper to understand this unique group of students as they transition from the military to community colleges.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant population of veterans marching to college campuses upon their return from military service, this group of students have not garnered the same attention as other populations and remain largely shrouded in mystery in the world of academia. A handful of studies have been conducted in the later 2000s through present-day that illustrate the experiences of veterans as they transition from soldier to student (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Vacchi, 2012). There is just one problem with these studies; they focus on four-year institutions. At 43%, community colleges overwhelmingly attract the largest number of veterans to enroll in college post-military service (Wheeler, 2012). However, there is an even smaller pool of empirical research that focuses on veterans at community colleges (Miles, 2014). Student veterans fly largely under the radar in regard to academic research, yet their personal sacrifice and valor make them more than deserving to warrant research. The large gap in research is extensively discussed in Chapter Two. To properly support this subgroup transitioning to community college from the military, more research is desperately needed to show that community colleges and the realm of academia care about this population of students.

Researcher Perspective

The qualitative researcher’s perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others—to indwell—
and at the same time to be aware of how one’s own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand. (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 123)

A researcher’s background—personal, professional, and academic—as well as positionality can have an impact on every step of the research process. As a qualitative researcher, my understandings of the world, how knowledge is created, and my personal perspective will play a role in my research; therefore, it is important to disclose them. I am not an insider or member of the group that I am studying. Gair (2012) stated, “The notion of insider/outsider status is understood to mean the degree to which a researcher is located either within or outside a group being researched, because of her or his common lived experience or status as a member of that group” (p. 137). By all definitions, I am an outsider.

A brief synopsis of my ontological and epistemological beliefs will be provided as a precursor to the in-depth discussion in Chapter Three: Methodology. My research will be approached most closely from a constructivist theoretical paradigm that follows the relativist ontological approach. It is my belief that within the context of the social world and when researching social phenomena, “reality” is an individual’s experiences. Additionally, qualitative researchers aim to seek out “truths” of the world. Therefore, it is important that I disclose my belief of what I see as a “truth” per my relativist ontological perspective. Within the context of the social world, my definition of the term “truth” is housed within the individual. By this I mean that based off an individual’s interpretation of reality, they themselves will create a personal definition of a “truth”. The idea of “reality” and “truth” are both left to interpretation.
Prasad (2005) states, “All interpretive traditions emerge from a scholarly position that takes human interpretation as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world” (p. 13). Remaining consistent with my ontological beliefs, my epistemological perspective would most closely be classified as transactional or subjective where there are multiple “realities” which vary by individual and their interpretation of events and experiences (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Following this framework, I view knowledge as an individual’s experiences and ultimately their interpretation of said experiences.

Ghaffar-Kucher (2014) stated, “…both one’s own position and how on is positioned – are essential to understanding its effects on one’s research” (p. 10). Every researcher will have a different background and outlook that influences how their research is conducted. Positionality does not impact the value of the scholarly work, but it is important that it is recognized.

**Research Questions**

When conducting qualitative research, especially following the case study methodology, boundaries must be set. One key way in bounding a research study is through the formulation of the research questions which will assist in keeping focus on what the research is trying to understand (Hays, 2004). The reader will observe that my research questions follow from the following a) the background for my problem, b) the research context, c) my perspective on the problem, and d) the rationale for my study. Accordingly, I collected, analyzed, and interpreted data that responds to the following research questions:
1. How do student veterans describe their transition experience from the military to community college?

2. How do student veterans perceive their transition?
   a. Institutional aspects?
      i. Bureaucratically
      ii. Leadership/Resources/Support
      iii. Classroom/Curriculum
      iv. Co-curricular/extra-curricular
   b. Personal aspects
      i. Emotionally
      ii. Logistically

**Methodology**

In order to answer the research questions posed above, I require a methodology and methods that are likely to yield meaningful answers. My research focused on gaining an understanding on the transition experiences of student veterans from the military to community colleges. Qualitative research is a productive methodological approach to implement when little is known about a phenomenon such as the topic of this dissertation. In addition, qualitative research methods are appropriate when the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning individuals have created through experiences and the manner in which they make sense of the world (Merriam, 2011). Glesne (2016) provided concise reasoning to apply qualitative inquiry which also serves as one of the principal reasons it was chosen for this study, “Through inquiry, you seek, interpret, and share others’ perspectives, as well as your own, on some aspect of the social condition,
contributing to the multiplicity of voices and visions, and to the plurality of knowing” (p. 26). For these reasons as well as the onto-epistemological beliefs undergirding qualitative research and the aim of my research questions being to understand the experiences of a group of individuals, a qualitative research study was chosen.

After deciding on a qualitative study, the next decision was the appropriate qualitative methodology. Ultimately, I decided to conduct a case study. Berg (2004) states, “Case study methods involve systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or a group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions” (p. 251). There were many characteristics of a case study that I believe would mesh with my dissertation research perfectly. First, case studies incorporate a variety of data-gathering measures including direct observations, interviews, document review, artifact examination and participant-observations, just to name a few (Glesne, 2016). By having multiple data-gathering methods to choose from, I have different avenues in which to gather my data and different methods can provide different types of data. Secondly, the case study approach also allows for “capturing various nuances, patterns, and more latent elements that other research approaches might overlook” (Berg, 2004, p. 251). For the purpose of my study in understanding the transition experiences of student veterans, I was intent on looking at more than numbers or statistics. My goal was to conduct an up-close, comprehensive study, that examines this particular group and understand the experiences and/or issues they may face, and a case study assisted me in accomplishing this task.

The benefits of case studies are immense. Case studies often provide fresh insights into a subgroup, which in turn can lead to future studies and more attention
drawn to a particular topic (Berg, 2004). In addition, if case studies are structured correctly and thoroughly explained to the reader, subsequent research and replication of the study may verify the objectivity of the case study protocol and results. Lastly, “the fact that few human behaviors are unique, idiosyncratic, and spontaneous” (Berg, 2004, p. 259), properly constructed case studies and their respective findings can be used to identify themes which can be used to develop a deeper understanding of the sample and perhaps similar samples. It is important to note that generalizability is not the purpose of case study but seeking out the uniqueness of each case is the overall goal (Hays, 2004). Schram (2006) provided a summative thought that perfectly captured the essence of case study that illustrates its applicability to this research, “Whether you consider case study as a way of conceptualizing human social behavior or merely as a way of encapsulating it, its strategic value lies in its ability to draw attention to what can be learned from the single case” (p. 107).

**Participants and Study Site**

One key aspect of my study that led to rich data and will hopefully have a potential impact in the field was the selection of the participants. My hope was to gather around 8-15 research participants which was achieved through the recruiting of 15 student veterans who provided thick and rich descriptions of their experiences transitioning. By gathering 8-15 research participants, the goal was to reach the point of saturation and redundancy in the raw data, which I believe was also achieved. Purposive/purposeful sampling was implemented, and a set criterion was utilized in choosing participants. Snowball sampling was used in order to identify other research participants, but these individuals must also have needed to meet the criterion as well. An
in-depth explanation of the sampling methods, the criterion for participant selection, and demographics of the 15 research participants is provided in Chapter 3.

Hays (2004) stated, “The researcher’s purpose in case study research is not to study everything going on in the site, but to focus on specific issues, problems, or programs (p. 225). This case study focused on the southeastern region of the United States due to both the significant population of veterans residing in the area as well as the close proximity to military bases that, together, provided an ideal setting to conduct a study revolving around student veterans. For purposes of anonymity, the community college where the study was conducted will be referred to as Southern Plains Community College (SPCC).

The most significant factor in choosing a research site for this case study was being able to truly encapsulate and develop a deeper understanding of the veteran experience as they transition from the military to community college. In addition, the chosen site had to have a veteran enrollment population that was substantial enough to recruit at least 8-15 research participants. By having a large enough population of veterans at a community college in which to recruit at least 8-15 participants, vital and necessary information regarding a student population that is largely shrouded in mystery can be gathered and light can be shed on a group of students that are deserving of additional research. Given that Southern Plains Community College enrolled more than 1,000 student veterans and was in close proximity to major military bases in the region, SPCC made for an ideal location in which to conduct this case study. Additional information regarding SPCC will be provided in Chapter 3.
Definitions of Terms

Student veteran: To fully understand the population that this dissertation will attempt to understand, it is of utmost importance to have a comprehensive definition of who is included in this study. After reviewing empirical studies that focus on adult learners, the parameters of the term “student veteran” that Vacchi (2012) established in his study regarding veterans arriving on college campuses will be incorporated into this study. Vacchi (2012) states, “A student veteran is any student who is a current or former member of the active duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use” (p. 17). It is the belief of the author that Vachhi’s definition fully embodies the population that this study is attempting to study and is not limiting or exclusive.

Nontraditional students: According to Rumann & Hamrick (2010), veterans are one of the groups of adult students that have not been sufficiently addressed in studies and literature. Among the various boxes that student veterans have been placed into, oftentimes, student veterans have been labeled as “nontraditional students”. So, the question must be asked, what characteristics define a “nontraditional student”? According to Falkey (2016), many definitions exist from various sources, but “the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) defines nontraditional students as those students who meet one or more of the following criteria: college entry was delayed after high school by one or more years, single parents, do not have a high school diploma, students attending college part time, or 25 years of age or older” (p. 29). The Post-9/11 GI Bill, which provides generous educational benefits for veterans, has caused a large influx in student veterans attending institutions of higher education (Falkey, 2016).
Transition: Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) define transition as “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33). It is vital that transition is defined at the beginning of this study as it can have varying meanings. A proper definition of transition in the context of this research will effectively guide the study and allow the reader to develop a deeper understanding of what is meant and experienced by student veterans.

Conclusion

This study seeks to explore the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college, the factors that aided or inhibited their transition, and the services that veterans view would be beneficial in assisting the transition. The findings of this study aim to shed light on the aforementioned transition experience in hopes of providing empirical evidence for community colleges to establish or enhance services aimed at supporting veterans.

I will now outline the steps taken and the intricate processes that will be thoroughly discussed in this study. My dissertation is organized in the following manner:

Chapter Two: Literature Review begins with a detailed history of the relationship between the military and higher education from the American Revolution to present-day. Next, a concise background of community colleges in the United States is provided which illustrates the history of the institutions from their inception and details how they became the societal forces they are today. Due to the lack of empirical research on the topic, the chapter then moves to the transition experiences of veterans to four-year institutions before providing a contemporary student veteran profile and then the literature surrounding the transition experiences of veterans to community colleges. Next,
recommendations made by scholars about how veterans can be better supported at community colleges is provided as well as actual support programs in practice are highlighted. The chapter concludes with a brief mention of the theory that guided this research and closes with a succinct literature review table that organizes the limited empirical literature into an easy-to-read and understandable format.

Chapter Three: Methodology presents the methodological framework: qualitative case study, theoretical underpinnings, and chosen methods for this study including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and social media analysis. Next, a brief yet thorough depiction of Southern Plains Community College (SPCC) precedes the description of the research participants and offers context for where the case study was conducted. A description of the 15 research participants is provided as well as a table that breaks down demographic information that includes the participant’s age, race, gender, branch of the military, etc. My paradigmatic, ontological, and epistemological beliefs are disclosed in this chapter along with the “blueprint” for the manner in which the case study was conducted. The chapter concludes with mentioning concerns related to validity and addressing research ethics.

Chapter Four: Findings begins by restating the research questions to clearly show how the subsequent findings relate to and provide evidence towards satisfying the research inquiry. The chapter then shifts to a thick and rich description of the themes with complimenting evidence offered for each claim through the various data collection methods. Lastly, my personal interpretation regarding the most significant findings of the study is provided.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications, will begin by clearly showcasing how the findings of this study connect and satisfy the two research questions. This final chapter will then move on to address the implications the findings of study have on both research and practice and provide recommendations. Chapter Five will conclude with relevance to the literature, final thoughts, and a brief summary of the study.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Beginning post World War II in 1945 under the umbrella of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, or “the greatest experiment in democratic education the world has ever seen” (Olson, 1973, p. 606), veterans began to arrive on college campuses in droves as a result of the educational benefits included in the legislation. The trend has continued under the most recent veteran-focused legislation, the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, with veterans returning from the Middle-East and enrolling in higher education, oftentimes at community colleges. Despite more than seventy years passing since the first wave of veterans arrived on college campuses, institutions of higher education have struggled to develop an understanding of the student veteran population and are still shrouded in mystery (Hammond, 2016). With some reports citing the dropout rate at 88% for student veterans within their first year of college (Briggs, 2012; Wood, 2012), it is imperative that more attention be paid to this population. The lack of empirical research on student veterans transitioning to higher education (Miles, 2014) coupled with the fact that 43% of student veterans enroll in community college upon their return (Wheeler, 2012) has compelled me to dig deeper to understand this unique group of students as they transition from the military to community colleges.

In this chapter, I review important literature relevant to my proposed inquiry. In Chapter One, I explained and justified the need to conduct a qualitative study that would examine the transition experiences of individuals from the military to community
colleges. Yin (2018) stated, “Novices may think that the purpose of a literature review is to determine the answers about what is known on a topic; in contrast, experienced investigators review previous research to develop sharper and more insightful questions about the topic” (p. 13). Thus, I identified two multi-layered research questions. These questions are best answered using a qualitative methodology and specifically, an interpretive case study. These research questions attempt to shed light on an area of which little is known, but more data is desperately needed. In this chapter, I diligently review the limited scholarly research, but first provide a history of the relationship between the military and higher education to provide needed context for my research topic. By saturating the literature surrounding the transition experiences of veterans from the military to higher education, I effectively provide justification and evidence for my research questions and display the relevancy and necessity of the enquiry.

My literature review is organized in a manner that will provide context, highlight the lack of scholarship on this topic, as well as attempt to deepen the understanding of this population in hopes of encouraging future research. In “The History of the Military and Higher Education in the United States” I provide a chronological narrative regarding the relationship of the two entities that extends from the American Revolution to present-day. Much of the scholarship on this topic is historical in nature or serves as the preamble for research closely related to the topic of veterans transitioning from the military to community college. The wide-ranging body of literature delves into the political, economic, and cultural forces at work that both helped and hindered the relationship between the military and higher education. I conclude this section with a synthesis that sheds light on the complex history the two entities share and clearly illustrate the large
governmental influence exerted and how it has impacted educational opportunities for veterans throughout the course of history of the United States.

In the next section, “Community Colleges” I briefly note the history of community colleges, their intended purpose, and why they were an attraction to veterans since World War II. From their early off-shoots as extensions of high school to presently numbering over 1,100 institutions and serving 43% of veterans (Wheeler, 2012), a detailed, yet brief, historical perspective will be described in an effort to provide context for the research topic. The societal forces at work in the early to mid-1900s will be highlighted in addition to illustrating the steady growth of community colleges from their humble beginnings to being powerhouses within the higher education system. The section concludes with a comparison between a community college and private college in South Carolina further enhancing the argument that one explanation community colleges are the institution of choice by student veterans is due to affordability. There is considerably less research on the history of community colleges as compared to available literature on the origin of four-year institutions. In effect, I rely heavily on a few pieces of key literature including work by community college experts Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014).

In “Transitioning to College”, I begin by offering a brief history of research surrounding student veterans transitioning to higher education in general and not specifically focused on community colleges. The justification for this is due to the extent of the research on this topic focuses exclusively on four-year institutions dating back to post-WWII. After reviewing the current existing literature focused on veterans transitioning to community colleges, zero articles were located describing the transition experiences of this population prior to the year 2000. The current literature also led me to
draw parallels between the transition experiences of student veterans to four-year institutions and community colleges. For the aforementioned reasons, the historical context of student veterans transitioning to higher education is discussed briefly. In the subheading “Veterans Transitioning to Four-Year Institutions”, the landmark studies that focused on student veterans transitioning to four-year institutions are discussed. I believe it is of the utmost importance to note these studies as they laid the groundwork for this area of research and spawned research into the transition experiences of veterans to community college.

“Transitioning to College” continues with a profile of the current student veteran and includes characteristics such as race, age, and gender composition of the population. I view this section as pivotal for the entire study as it is just as important to know who is being studied as what is being studied. In the subheading, “Contemporary Transition Experience to Community College”, the groundwork of my research is laid and the literature surrounding the topic of student veterans transitioning to community colleges is saturated. The difficulties and issues this group faces are discussed thoroughly. The lack of scholarly research and need for additional research on this population is emphasized throughout the section.

The next section, “Impact of Disabilities During Transition”, is a portion of research that is worth mentioning due to roughly 40% of veterans returning from the Middle East are afflicted with some sort of disability, whether it be visible or nonvisible (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011). Veterans will experience a range of injuries while serving overseas and colleges and universities must be prepared to accommodate. This section will highlight the most common disabilities today’s veterans experience including post-
traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) and discuss their symptoms and the role they play in the transition of student veterans to higher education.

The content of my literature review continues with “Veteran Support Services in Practice”. As it is important to understand the transition experiences of student veterans to community college, it is also as important to address recommendations based off of scholarly research that colleges and universities should take into consideration to better serve and support student veterans on campus. That being said, the point of this research is not to point fingers at institutions and make the blanket statement that all community colleges are failing student veterans. The emphasis of this research is quite the opposite, and best practices already in place at community colleges across the country are discussed in this section as a way to highlight what is effective and to share the wealth of knowledge across all community colleges.

The next section “Theory” provides the theoretical and philosophical framework that guides my research. While attempting to understand the experiences of veterans from the military to community college, a transition theory that applied to nontraditional students was required in order to effectively guide my research and Schlossberg’s Transition Theory was deemed appropriate due to its applicability to nontraditional students, aligning with my onto-epistemological beliefs, and serving as a framework to guide my study.

Finally, in my synthesis, I provide a literature review table that focuses on the limited available literature surrounding student veterans transitioning to community colleges. I then briefly restate and emphasize the conclusions drawn from each of the
aforementioned sections and provide justification on how each of these portions of the literature review help to lay the groundwork for answering the research questions.

In concluding, I acknowledge that I have saturated the literature surrounding student veterans transitioning to community colleges. It is often advised to not overdevelop a literature review in fear of a researcher narrowing his/her viewpoint and coloring his/her judgment when conducting interviews with participants. However, due to the lack of scholarly research, I believe that delving deep into the literature and developing a thorough and detailed literature review will provide me with the knowledge that is required to accurately and effectively conduct research on the topic. The conclusion reinforces the points made throughout the literature review related to the reasons community colleges are chosen by 43% of veterans (Wheeler, 2012), the transition difficulties this population may face, and how higher education institutions can better support student veterans.

**Military and Higher Education History in the U.S.**

To fully understand the connection and transition experiences of student veterans and the system of higher education, specifically community colleges, it is of utmost importance to first comprehend the background and history of the complex relationship that the two parties have shared since the early years of the United States. This section will be subdivided into different portions based upon time period starting at the American Revolution and continuing through the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The history and evolution of the military-higher education relationship will be examined through scholarly work and historical experts as the foundation of this study.
American Revolution Era

The connection between the military and higher education can be traced back to the late 1700s at the onset of the American Revolution. There was great distrust displayed by the colonists towards the idea of a permanent army with full-time soldiers due to the deployment of British troops to the colonies coupled with the burden of quartering the soldiers against their will (Duemer, 2006; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). The original colonists were apprehensive to support a traditional military out of fear of once again being placed in a similar situation of oppression as they faced from the British. The colonial occupation by Britain gave life to the idea of a “citizen soldier” and more faith was placed in civilian-led militias and leaders such as George Washington (Rogers, 1974). However, the lack of formal military training and Continental Army’s skills and tactics paled in comparison to British forces (Rogers, 1974). The Continental Army lacked formal training, not only in regard to drills, but also military education and the theory of war.

It was during the time of the American Revolution when the idea of military education would be formally discussed (Reeves, 1914). Having seen the capabilities of British forces that were professionally trained, and despite their mistrust in a formal military, influential legislators and figures in American history saw the writing on the wall and advocated for a system that contradicted their personal beliefs. In 1775, John Adams drafted a letter to Henry Knox, military officer of the Continental Army, inquiring on an array of topics including military science (Adams in Ryerson, 1977). Knox responded to Adams and advocated for “the establishment of an academy to instruct young men in the art of war” (Duemer, 2006, p. 8). Citing the deficiencies of the
Continental army as compared to Britain, Knox once again wrote to Adams and stated, “Military academies must be instituted at any expense. We are fighting against a people well acquainted with the theory and practice of war, brave by discipline and habit” (Adams in Ryerson, 1977, p. 40).

On October 9, 1776, the Continental Congress passed legislation calling for a “continental laboratory and military academy” (Duemer, 2006). However, the “military academies” established were a far cry from what many would imagine. All of the components one would imagine of a traditional academy such as physical buildings complete with trained instructors were not a result of the legislation (Tillman, 1904). Officers were trained and educated while still serving in the field on subjects such as mathematics (Tillman, 1904). These newly established academies would remain in operation until the conclusion of the Revolutionary War in 1783 (Duemer, 2006).

At the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, the army inspector general, Baron Frederick William von Steuben, drafted a letter to General George Washington and stressed the need for an actual military academy whose curriculum included “natural philosophy, experimental philosophy, civil and international law, history, geography, mathematics, civil architecture, artillery, and engineering” (Ueberhorst, 1989, p. 49-50). Washington would go onto advocate for the establishment of such an academy to Congress for years during his presidency and thereafter, but it was not until the country was on the verge of war with France in the late 1790s that Congress finally acted upon the calls for a military academy (Washington, 1944). As a result, “On July 16, 1798, Congress authorized President Adams to appoint four teachers of the arts and sciences to the Corps of Artillerists to teach officers cadets at the fortifications in West Point, New
York on the Hudson River (Duemer, 2006, p. 10). A few years later in 1802, the authorization for the first military academy in the country that would come to specialize in the training of military personnel was signed into law by Congress which established West Point (Gales, 1851). The drastic effects of the legislation were seen shortly thereafter. The importance of a well-trained and educated military was on full display during the Mexican War where American troops, led by trained officers, won victories and captured artillery from Mexico, which ultimately paid for the war (Shunk, 1904).

**Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 – Great Depression Era**

Scholars argue that the true beginning of the relationship between the military and higher education can be traced back to the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 (Abrams, 1989; Jones, 2017; Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011). This piece of legislation was signed into law with an intended purpose of promoting agriculture and the mechanical arts as well as the training of military personnel due to the recent outbreak of the Civil War just one year prior (Abrams, 1989). However, the original Morrill Act in 1857 lacked the provision for military training (Thelin, 2011). It would not be until 1862 after Confederate troops defeated Union forces at nearly every single battle and skirmish, Congressman Morrill would alter his legislation to include military training in an attempt to change the tide of battle in favor of the North (Thelin, 2011). Morrill believed that more lives could have been spared during the Civil War if troops were properly trained in the art of war (Lee, 1963). This shift exhibited by Morrill illustrated the battle of opinions that had been raging since the American Revolution regarding the establishment of a professional army that is properly educated and trained versus the concept of a citizen-soldier system.
The Morrill Act authorized the incorporation of military training into the curriculum of institutions that were born and financed out of the sale of federal land as part of the larger agenda of stimulating a post-secessionist economy (Jones, 2017; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). The first provision of the act signed in 1862 “created an endowment in public lands for the support of higher education” (Lee, 1963, p. 26) while the second provision outlined the areas of study that were to be implemented at the institution including military tactics. However, due to the wording of the legislation that left most of the power in the hands of the states in regards to implementation of the decree coupled with the country’s long-held custom of not having a professional military, “the act, in any event, did not appear to aim at producing officers but only at the presumed benefits of exposing young men to the experience of issuing commands and practicing obedience (Abrams, 1989, p. 18).

The National Defense Act of 1916 was signed into law some 50 years later after the Morrill Act which allowed for the establishment of a Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) program at colleges and universities including military schools such as the Citadel (Abrams, 1989). During this time, other institutions of higher education besides land-grant institutions, created their own form of federally-funded ROTC referred to as Student Army Training Corps (SATC) (Neiberg, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). However, it would not be until the National Defense Act of 1920 that the ROTC program would be more firmly established (Hammond, 2017).

It was also at this time that the role of institutions of higher education came into question (Hammond, 2017). Some argued that universities were meant to serve specific public priorities as seen through the establishment of land-grant institutions who focused
heavily on specific disciplines such as agriculture, engineering and military education (Jones, 2017). On the other hand, others stated that colleges and universities were meant to serve as separate entities that encouraged academic freedom (Jones, 2017). The idea of military training at institutions of higher education came under fire due to the belief by many academics that the training at universities dampened creativity and “coerced conformity” (Abrams, 1989, p. 19). Opinion regarding the once admired characteristics that military training emphasized such as character building and patriotism now shifted to leaving much to be desired.

The walking back of support for military education at select institutions of higher education continued throughout the early part of the 20th century when state governments began to question the role and legal obligation imposed by the Morrill Act (Duemer, 2006). Three states, including Wisconsin, retracted the requirement for all able-bodies males to participate in military training at participating institutions after the War Department falsely claimed that the Morrill Act required such activity (Abrams, 1989). The Justice Department would later declare that by simply offering military training programs at institutions, not requiring, the Morrill Act was being followed (Abrams, 1989).

The lack of support for military training as seen in the aforementioned examples were the exception, not the rule. There continued to be widespread support for military training at institutions of higher education across the majority of states including the ROTC program (Abrams, 1989). An example indicative of such support cites, “In 1934, the U.S. Supreme Court in Hamilton v. California upheld the constitutionality of compulsory ROTC” (Abrams, 1989, p. 20). This ruling was the precursor to protests seen
on campuses in objection to the influence of the military on university grounds. It would not be until 1940 when the draft was implemented by Congress on the eve of World War II that the Army suspended the ROTC program. At this time, Officers’ Candidacy Schools were also established and the relationship between higher education and the military would face a dramatic shift (Abrams, 1989).

**World War II and the First G.I. Bill**

There was great patriotism and support exhibited during WWII, even from the academic community (Abrams, 1989). The collaboration between institutions of higher education and military was unlike anything seen before in the love-hate relationship exhibited for years prior (Abrams, 1989). During WWII, university research departments were contracted to develop weapons for the military, which was a sharp contrast from WWI where the majority of government funds for military advancement were granted to civilian researchers (Duemer, 2006). The legacy of the Morrill Act was still alive and well and the results of the legislation, passed nearly 80 years prior, was evident in which more than one half of all military officers during WWII were trained through R.O.T.C. programs at land-grant institutions (Lee, 1963).

Created in an attempt to avoid mass unemployment after the war, and in fear of totalitarianism that spread across Europe due to unemployment plaguing soldiers after WWI, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, or better known as the G.I. Bill, was signed into law by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the final stages of World War II (Kiester, 1994; Olson, 1973; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). With the large numbers of veterans returning home from overseas, the government attempted to provide motivation for veterans to attend institutions of higher education as not to flood the job market as
unskilled laborers (Shaw, 1947). National Commander Warren H. Atherton advocated strongly in favor of benefits for returning veterans and stated that veterans “will be a potent force for good or evil in the years to come. They can make our country or break it. They can restore our democracy or scrap it” (Olson, 1973, p. 598). The G.I. Bill provided a range of benefits for returning veterans in the form of tuition benefits and reimbursement for living expenses, among other non-higher education related perks (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). The G.I. Bill caused higher education attendance to increase drastically following the conclusion of WWII with veterans making up 49% of total enrollment at higher education institutions across the country by 1947 (Jones, 2017). Post-World War II growth in higher education enrollment is attributed to veterans enrolling in college (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011).

The government did not expect the high enrollments that were seen post-WWII (Olson, 1973) with “one in every eight returning soldiers attended college under the G.I. Bill” (Hammond, 2017, p. 12). When the G.I. Bill of 1944 officially ended, 37% of all veterans had utilized benefits and 2,232,000 attended college (Olson, 1973). Administrators feared that veterans would enroll in college academically unprepared as compared to their non-veteran peers and as a result would lower academic standards (Olson, 1974). These fears would later be debunked, as discussed later, as student veterans surprised colleges and universities with their maturity, motivation, greater sense of purpose and wider experience (Olson, 1973). Multiple studies conducted after WWII found that veterans earned higher grades than their nonveteran peers and “earned higher grades relative to their ability” (Olson, 1973, p. 605).
In an attempt to make up for lost time, administrators at institutions of higher education predicted accurately that veterans would enroll in substantial course loads which in turn would place a burden on both faculty and the system of higher education in general (McDonagh, 1947). Colleges and universities responded “through increasing class sizes, offering accelerated program completion schedules, allowing more flexible admission practices, hiring additional faculty members, offering academic credit for military experience, and accommodating family housing needs” (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, p. 26). Student veterans also played a pivotal role in the core curriculum of colleges of the age (Clark, 1998). Clark (1998) argues, “In many ways the impact of the successful college veteran drastically altered the traditional perceptions of the nature of the college experience, guiding the curriculum even more than in prewar years towards more practical and vocational applications” (p. 177). Vocational opportunities would be something student veterans would be academically drawn to for years to come, and in there lies one of the reasons they would choose community college over four-year institutions in later years.

There has been much debate on the true effect the G.I. Bill had on higher education (Clark, 1998; Olson, 1973). Olson (1973) states, “The impact of the G.I. Bill’s college provisions, therefore, is interpreted best as dramatically helping the veterans and only marginally altering the contours of higher education” (p. 610). Olson (1973) argues that after the influx of veterans left colleges in the late 1940s, early 1950s, colleges resumed their original pre-war practices and did away with their accommodations for veterans. On the other hand, this piece of legislations “has been described as one of the most far-reaching events in the history of American higher education, given its influence
on physical infrastructure, expanded admissions practices, and government investment in entitlement programs” (Hammond, 2017, p. 12). The G.I. Bill not only allowed individuals who would never have attended college to attend college, but forever altered institutions of higher education and impacted “an entire generation of men and women who remain the most educated and financially successful generation in American history” (Jones, 2017, p. 108).

The increased access is evident and indisputable when analyzing the massive growth and student composition at institutions by veterans. The G.I. Bill served as a pivotal moment in the history of higher education which shifted the composition of enrollees from a group of elites to a new era which increased access for new populations (Bennett, 1996). And contrary to popular belief by higher education administrators of the time, student veterans arrived on campus with more motivation, a greater level of maturity and more goal-oriented as compared to their non-veteran peers (Kinzer, 1946) and proved to be some of the “best students of their generation” (Guinier, 2015, p. 24). Today, historians are not shocked that the veterans who survived the Great Depression and WWII were actually the most serious and motivated students in higher education (Olson, 1973).

**Korean War Era**

The veterans of the Korean War were a small smaller population on campuses and did not have as significant an influence as those veterans of WWII (Olson, 1973; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Veterans during the Korean War era also experienced a period of governmental support, albeit different from the G.I. Bill of 1944, as seen through the passing of The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1952, more commonly known as the
Korean War G.I. Bill (Olson, 1974). The “program gave veterans 10 years from their date of discharge to utilize these benefits, but still covered the cost of tuition at most colleges and universities” (Jones, 2017, p. 108). Certain aspects of the Korean War G.I. Bill were comparable to that of the original G.I. Bill, but definite changes were implemented. The fear of high unemployment rates and social unrest, that were pivotal factors for the passing of the legislation in 1944, were no longer present during the Korean War era (Bennett, 1996). Therefore, the original G.I. Bill and its expansive benefits ended in 1956.

Congress called for a review of veteran benefits in the mid-1950s and the committee reported that the original G.I. bill did not motivate veterans to attend higher education due to genuine interest in receiving education but suggested that veterans were attending to collect subsistence payments (Olson, 1974). There was also a belief that the original G.I. Bill had been too generous since it more than covered the cost of attending college and also offered monthly stipends (Olson, 1974). This report shifted the support of veteran benefits in an adverse manner and created a rippling effect throughout higher education.

This period saw a shift from its predecessors regarding student veterans’ institution of choice as well as their presence on campus. The group of students preferred vocational training over a bachelor’s degree as well as community colleges over 4-year institutions and were much smaller in number as compared to post-WWII veterans (Caspers & Ackerman, 2012). Veterans represented only 15% of all students enrolled in college in 1958 as compared to the 49% they once accounted for post-WWII (Jones, 2017).
**Vietnam War Era**

The student veterans and their experience during the Vietnam War era were a far cry from those of the post-WWII period. The Veterans’ Readjustment Act, or more commonly known as the Vietnam G.I. Bill, was passed by Congress in 1966 (Steele, Salcedo, and Coley, 2010). This piece of legislation contained additional provisions and benefits to attend college were decreased as compared to the Korean G.I. Bill (Olson, 1974). After the ending of the original G.I. Bill in 1956, funds for veterans were not available from the years of 1955 to 1965 (Hammond, 2017). However, after the passing of the new legislation in 1966, G.I. Bill benefits were granted to veterans retroactively for that period (MacLean, 2005). As compared to their World War II and Korean War counterparts, veterans of the Vietnam War era obtained more education, but lagged behind non-veterans (Teachman & Call, 1996).

Anti-war and anti-military activism was prevalent on campuses during this era which made veterans feel unwanted at colleges and universities (Horan, 1990). Veterans would oftentimes deny their status as a veteran due to commonly being targeted, particularly on college campuses (DeBenedetti & Chatfield, 1990). Not surprisingly, veterans of the Vietnam War accounted for less than 10% of enrolled students in 1973 (Jones, 2017). However, this figure is often debated due to the difficulty of accurately tracking student veterans since many were reluctant to disclose their status out of fear. Horan (1990) echoes those concerns and argues that the negative campus environment was not taken into consideration as one explanation for the low enrollments for this group.
It was also at this time that the United States Military moved to an all-volunteer force from conscription (Griffith, 1997; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). From 1917 until the early 1970s, the draft was utilized to ensure an adequate military (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). The draft was discontinued in 1972 which had a profound impact on not only the military, but also higher education (Asch, Kilburn, & Klerman, 1999). Competition increased greatly between the two entities as they both vied to recruit college-aged individuals (Asch, et al., 1999).

**Veterans Educational Assistance Program of 1977 – Montgomery G.I. Bill of 1985**

Veterans benefits continued to decline with the passage of the Veterans’ Educational Assistance Program (VEAP) in 1977 (Gilroy, Phillips, & Blair, 1990). The reduction in benefits coupled with increasing tuition costs resulted in decreased access for veterans (Hammond, 2017). In an attempt to combat the dwindling benefits, the U.S. Army implemented the Army College Fund, which increased benefits to select veterans who met a list of criteria (Cohen, Warner, & Segal, 1995).

In 1985, the Montgomery G.I. Bill was passed which extended educational benefits to those in the National Guard and reserves for the first time in an attempt to aid veterans with their transition from combat to civilian life (Asch, Fair, and Kilburn, 2000). However, benefit levels were not consistent across the board and fluctuated based on deployment location as well as length of service (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). Another aspect that sets the Montgomery G.I. Bill apart from its predecessors is the use of the legislation as a recruiting tool after the military had transitioned to an all-volunteer force after the Vietnam War (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). The concept of attracting and retaining a standing army that was both ready and trained was an area of
concern after the phasing out of the draft. Between 1980 and 2005, higher education saw the largest decrease of student veterans on campus (Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

21st Century

After over twenty years without any revisions to veterans’ benefits, Congress passed the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) in 2005 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). This update to the current Montgomery G.I. Bill of 1984 guaranteed similar benefits of active-duty service members to Reservists who were active duty after September 11, 2001 (Steele, Salcedo & Coley, 2010). Despite the attempt of the benefits included in the Montgomery G.I. Bill and REAP to cover the cost of higher education for student veterans, the benefits were not sufficient in covering the costs at many institutions of higher education (Yeung, Pint, & Williams, 2009). Tuition coupled with living expenses typically exceeded the allotted benefits at public and almost all private institutions (Yeung et al., 2009).

After a period of little reform to veterans’ benefits following the implementation of the Montgomery G.I. Bill in 1985 and a variety of military involvements around the world, Congress enacted the Post-9/11 G.I Bill in 2009. This was the most significant reform of veteran’s benefits since the creation of the original G.I. Bill in 1944 since it actually increased benefits for veterans, instead of decreasing, as much of the previous legislation had done (Caspers & Ackerman, 2012). The legislation offered educational benefits including paying tuition and fees to veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom as well as providing monthly stipends for living and annual book allowances (Steele et al., 2010). For example, the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill has expanded to provide tuition benefits up to the highest tuition at state’s public institutions of higher
education (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012a). In addition, supplements such as the Yellow Ribbon program allow veterans to have increased flexibility in choosing an institution to attend through the federal government matching the amount institutions will provide toward tuition not covered by the G.I. Bill (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012a). A veteran’s benefits received through the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill are, however, correlated to their length of service (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012a). For example, individuals who served an aggregate period of active duty after September 10, 2001 of at least 36 months or at least 30 continuous days and discharged due to service-connected disability will receive 100% of their maximum benefits (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012a). Those who serve less than 36 months, but more than 30 will receive 90%; more than 24 months but less than 30 will receive 80%; more than 18 months but less than 24 will receive 70%; more than 12 months but less than 18 will receive 60%; more than 6 months but less than 12 will receive 50; and more than 90 days but less than 6 months will receive 40% of their maximum benefits (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012a).

Despite the years of reducing veteran benefits as seen from the Korean War Era through the early 1980s, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act passed in 2008 signaled a changing of course in regard to America’s commitment to veterans (Serow, 2004). Hammond (2017) states, “A year after the Post-9/11 Bill was enacted on August 1, 2009, more than 500,000 current and former service members had applied for benefits, and just over 300,000 had used their benefits to enroll in higher education (p. 16). When compared to past pieces of legislation aimed at veterans’ benefits, the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill is the most generous (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b; Vacchi,
As of 2015, the program has helped over 773,000 veterans and their families in excess of over $20 billion in benefits at both the undergraduate and graduate level as well as at four-year institutions and community colleges (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012b). Table 2.1 provides a historical context and illustrates how educational benefits for student veterans have increased and decreased over the past seventy years.

Table 2.1

*Characteristics of Educational Benefits Programs for Student Veterans from 1944-2004*

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<td><strong>Year enacted</strong></td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest standard benefit amount</strong></td>
<td>$500 per year maximum; $75 monthly</td>
<td>$110 per month maximum</td>
<td>$376 per month</td>
<td>$300 per month</td>
<td>$1,259 per month (2017 dollars)</td>
<td>Book stipend up to $1000; a monthly housing allowance; All tuition and fee payment for an in-state resident at a public school</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Duration</strong></td>
<td>One-year</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>One month</td>
<td>Lesser of</td>
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of benefits  full-time training plus a period equal to time in service; 48 months maximum

48 months maximum times the duration of active service; 36 months maximum

36 months maximum of education benefits for every month of active duty service; 45 months maximum

36 months or number of months of education benefits for every month of active duty service; 45 months maximum

36 months or number of months of education benefits for every month of active duty service; 45 months maximum

Sources: (Smole and Loane, 2008; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. 2012a)

From the turbulent beginnings of the American Revolution which saw resistance from the populous regarding a standing military, to the Morrill Act of 1862 that created funding for military training within a higher education institution, to present-day where the most generous veteran educational benefits since WWII are offered to returning veterans (Vacchi, 2012), the two military and higher education have had an ebb-and-flow style relationship that can be subdivided into periods based on the level of governmental and public support seen towards veterans. The high periods saw the implementation of vital pieces of legislation including the Morrill Act of 1862, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, and the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill of 2009, which illustrated the vital governmental support for veterans and their pursuit of higher education. While the low periods saw reductions in funding and public animosity towards veterans that forced many to deny their status on college campuses for fear of retribution. Through the political, economic, and cultural influences exerted over 200+ years, the two entities have had a relationship that can be described as nothing short of complex.

As veterans continue to return from war and subsequently enroll in higher education, two-year institutions, or community colleges, have become popular options among those returning from the Middle East. These institutions have different missions,
academic philosophies, and serve a different clientele compared to four-year institutions. For a host of reasons including affordability and campus culture, 43% of returning veterans have chosen community colleges (Wheeler, 2012). The next section will provide a historical context of community colleges, a brief walkthrough of the reasoning behind their creation, and a deeper look at why veterans are resoundingly choosing this type of institution of higher education over another. By providing this background information, it is the hope the necessity of conducting a study regarding the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community colleges is justified and a deeper understanding is developed as a result.

Community Colleges

Simply put, the relationship between the military and higher education can be described as complex. Community colleges cannot trace their relationship with the military and veterans as far back as the American Revolution, but their shortened history forever changed the higher education landscape. With roughly 43% of all veterans enrolling in community colleges upon their return from military service today (Wheeler, 2012), it is worth noting the history of community colleges, their intended purpose and why they were an attraction to veterans since World War II.

The concept of community colleges, or as they were originally known, junior colleges, was grounded in the Morrill Act of 1862, which increased access to higher education (Drury, 2003). There were many societal forces at work that contributed to the creation of community colleges. With the expanding industry in the nation at the turn of the century, there was a large need for trained workers (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Social equality was another driving force behind the creation as education was viewed as
the best option for upward mobility and was seen by many as the great equalizer (Cohen et al., 2014).

The president of the University of Chicago, William Rainey Harper, began the push for a different kind of institution that focused more on teaching than research and divided his own institution into two parts: a “junior college and a “senior college” (Drury, 2003). Harper was also instrumental in the creation of the associate degree to be awarded to those students who complete “junior college” (Drury, 2003). Scholars argue that this separation was to weed out all but the truly intelligent students to proceed onto senior college and was part of the elitist movement that was a motivator for the creation of community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014).

It would not be until 1901 that the first community college in the United States was established due to university presidents coming to the realization that the freshman and sophomore year were not “a part of university-level education” (Drury, 2003, p. 1). Joliet Junior College was founded by Harper and his friend, Joliet Township High School Superintendent J. Stanley Brown, and college-level courses were incorporated into the high school curriculum (Sterling, 2001). The concept of a junior college was slow to catch on but increased steadily with 46 junior colleges established by 1914 (Cohen et al., 2014). Some vocational courses were offered, but college preparation was the main focus of the original junior colleges as the majority of courses offered were liberal arts (Drury, 2003).

Over the next few decades, junior colleges made the transition to offer more vocational courses in an attempt to train unskilled workers to compete in America’s economy and serve the needs of their respective areas (Cohen et al., 2014). This could not
be clearer than during the Great Depression when junior college enrollment drastically increased from 56,000 to 150,000 between the years of 1929 and 1939 primarily due to high school graduates attempting to learn a skill to make them more competitive during times of high unemployment (Drury, 2003). Administrators of junior colleges began to build relationships with their local businesses to gain an understanding of the needs of their communities, so they could in turn offer vocational training that benefited their areas (Cohen et al., 2014).

Community colleges took an active role in WWII, but in a way that differed from the four-year institutions. Harbour (2015) wrote, “Junior colleges also made adjustments in order to build morale, support the United States military, and train defense contractor employees” (p. 89). For example, a community college in Connecticut offered in-service training courses for area defense contractors (Harbour, 2015). In addition, San Francisco Junior College created 32 new courses that covered topics such as civilian defense, air navigation, and how to win the war (Harbour, 2015). Sixteen junior colleges across the nation hosted ROTC programs while 126 served as pilot training centers (Harbour, 2015). Community colleges were as committed as four-year institutions in doing their part for the country during WWII.

After World War II and the G.I. Bill of 1944 was implemented, President Truman’s Commission on Higher Education released a report which called for the creation of a network of community colleges that would serve their respective areas (Rumann, Rivera, and Hernandez, 2011). With the large influx of returning veterans, community colleges proved to be an ideal option for this population through their offering of associate degrees as well as vocational training (Rumann et al., 2011).
Community colleges continued their shift towards vocational training throughout the next few decades and the rate at which these institutions were founded in the 1960s expanded at a rate of roughly one new college a week (Cohen et al., 2014). Roughly 4.9 million veterans under the original G.I. bill would use their benefits for vocational or technical training (Field, 2008). See Table 2.2 for a breakdown of enrollment and number of community colleges for the year 1909 through 1969 to further enhance the true impact the G.I. Bill had on the growth of community colleges.

Table 2.2

*Number of Community Colleges & Number of Students Enrolled in their Respective Years, 1909-1969*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Community Colleges</th>
<th>Number of Students Enrolled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900-01</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915-16</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>2,363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-22</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>16,031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929-30</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>74,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932-33</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>103,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938-39</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>196,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939-40</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>236,160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943-44</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>249,788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944-45</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>251,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945-46</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>294,475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946-47</td>
<td>663</td>
<td>455,048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947-48</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>500,536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948-49</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>465,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949-50</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>562,786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950-51</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>579,475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953-54</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>622,864</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: (Cohen et al., 2014; Colvert and Baker, 1955; Koos, 1947)

As evident in Table 2.2, community colleges had a modest beginning with just eight institutions established by 1900-01 (Colvert and Baker, 1955). However, two
decades later, they quickly began to expand in large numbers and ballooned to 207 and enrolled around 16,000 students by 1922 (Cohen et al., 2014; Colvert and Baker, 1955). They continued their growth and saw a doubling in enrollment from 1943-1944 with 249,788 students to more than 500,000 students in 1947-48 after the G.I. Bill of 1944 was implemented a few years prior (Cohen et al., 2014; Colvert and Baker, 1955). Community colleges experienced a slight reduction in number of institutions in the early 1950s, but continued to expand in enrollment (Cohen et al., 2014; Colvert and Baker, 1955).

Today, there are over 1,100 community colleges in the United States that serve more than twelve million students annually (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017). Of the twelve million students, veterans account for four percent, or roughly 500,000 students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017). Student veterans often choose community colleges over four-year institutions due to the structure, demographic and cost (Boyington, 2015; Evans, Pellegrino, & Hoggan, 2015; Rumann, 2010). As compared to traditional four-year institutions, community colleges typically offer skills-based, vocational training and certifications that parallel the skills learned while they served in the military (Boyington, 2015). The certifications earned at community colleges allow veterans to enter the workforce at a quicker pace than if they enrolled at a traditional university (Fields, 2008). 69% of student veterans responded that their greatest concern was finding a job as they transition to civilian life (Miles, 2014). Arguably, student veterans are attracted to community colleges as a result of the programs offered at these institutions that can quickly prepare them for employment opportunities as compared to four-year institutions.
Another factor why veterans choose community college is their ability to relate to their peers as the typical college student at a community college is over 25 years old and attends part time (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017; Evans et al., 2015). When veterans return to higher education after military service, they will be older than the traditional eighteen-year-old freshman and will be able to connect with people in similar situations as adult learners. Cost is also a significant factor in a veteran’s choice to attend community college (Boyington, 2015). The lower average cost at a community college coupled with the benefits of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill make two-year institutions have a greater appeal when a student veteran is making a college decision from a financial standpoint.

In an attempt to provide further evidence and explanation of the financial advantage of community colleges for student veterans, Table 2.3 provides an explanation of costs covered through the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill at Midlands Technical College, a community college in South Carolina, as well as Wofford College, a private four-year institution in South Carolina. The difference in out-of-pocket costs are confounding and the comparison may provide some context as to why student veterans are choosing to enroll in community colleges over other institutions of higher education.

### Table 2.3

| G.I. Bill Benefit Coverage for Student Veterans who are Eligible to Receive 100% of their Maximum Benefits at Midlands Technical College (Community College) and Wofford College (Private College) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                                 | Midlands Technical College      | Wofford College                 |
| GI Bill pays to school          | $4,924/yr.                      | GI Bill pays to school          | $22,805/yr.                      |
| Tuition and fees charged        | $4,924                          | Tuition and fees charged        | $38,705                          |
| Out of pocket tuition           | $0                               | Out of pocket tuition           | $15,900                          |
### Housing Allowance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing allowance</th>
<th>$1,517/mo.</th>
<th>Housing allowance</th>
<th>$1,451/mo.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Book stipend</td>
<td>$1,000/yr.</td>
<td>Book stipend</td>
<td>$1,000/yr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total paid to you</td>
<td>$14,653</td>
<td>Total paid to you</td>
<td>$9,706</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (GI Bill Comparison Tool, 2017)

With more than one-third (36%) of post-9/11 undergraduate student veterans enrolling in community college, Miles (2014) argues that this high percentage of students is closely connected to the fact that the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill will cover the majority of a student veteran’s tuition. As illustrated in the side-by-side comparison in Table 2.3, a student veteran enrolled at Midlands Technical College would not have any out of pocket costs and would receive an annual book stipend as well as a monthly housing allowance. On the other hand, a student veteran who would enroll at Wofford College would be charged close to $16,000 a year in out of pocket tuition costs. The difference in benefits received and personal financial obligation at a community college as compared to a private institution is staggering.

In summation, community colleges and student veterans have been closely connected for the better half of a century. Rumann, Rivera and Hernandez (2011) stated, “The ability of community colleges to respond to constituent needs makes them ideal spaces to enroll student veterans” (p. 52). However, the 500,000 student veterans enrolled in community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017) oftentimes completely change their lives from a regimented military-style to a laxer higher education setting and can face obstacles and issues when making the transition from the military to community college. The following section will discuss the transition experiences of veterans from military to higher education beginning from a historical perspective and
transitioning to the current transition experiences of student veterans to four-year institutions and community colleges.

**Transitioning to College**

The topic of veterans transitioning from the military to institutions of higher education has been a topic of minor research since post-WWII. After reviewing the current existing literature focused on veterans transitioning to community colleges, zero articles or dissertations were located describing the transition experiences of this population prior to the year 2000. Only one dissertation that researched this topic was found (Rumann, 2010). Using Google Scholar, Education Source and ERIC, and a combination of the search terms “student”, “veteran”, “student veteran”, “transition”, and “community college”, no articles could be located before the turn of the 21st century. A handful of articles and book chapters were uncovered when looking at post-2010. However, many of the contemporary transition experiences veterans faced at community colleges were similar to those experienced at four-year institutions. For that reason, a brief historical overview of transition experiences at four-year institutions is provided as well as landmark studies surrounding the topic. Contemporary transition experiences at community colleges are then discussed in great detail.

**History of Veterans Transitioning to College**

Transitioning from one way of life to another is not always a smooth process. Jones (2017) states, “Transitioning from military service to civilian life can be one of the most difficult challenges faced by an individual” (p. 109). Student veterans have been faced with changing their lives from a structured environment to a way of life that many student veterans were not accustomed to while serving in the military. The following
section will provide a brief historical overview of the transition experiences student veterans faced from post-WWII through the Vietnam War era.

Minor attention was paid to the experience of student veterans transitioning to higher education immediately following the conclusion of WWII (Kraines, 1945). Kinzer (1946) conducted one of the first qualitative studies regarding the transition of veterans to higher education after WWII and wanted to learn more about the transition experiences that student veterans faced, the difference between student veterans and non-veteran students, the effect of university services for this population and the level of maturity and motivation exhibited by student veterans and its impact in higher education. He stated, “The public and professionals alike seem so sure the returning veteran will have problems that it might seem a sign of maladjustment for him not to have them” (Kinzer, 1946, p. 8). The researcher interviewed 72 veterans enrolled during the Fall of 1945 and the winter quarter of 1946 at Ohio State University (Kinzer, 1946, p. 8). Kinzer (1946) discovered that post-WWII student veterans were more motivated as compared to the traditional student population and wanted to complete their programs as quickly as possible due to a feeling of having a late start in life, their higher level of maturity led to a feeling of disconnect with their non-veteran peers, and student veterans were having difficulty adjusting to the lax environment of college. Other transition issues noted in the study included student veterans self-reporting they did not know how to study in an effective manner and difficulty concentrating in the new environment (Kinzer, 1946).

Kraines (1945) begins his post-WWII study by stating, “The veteran who goes to college will present many problems quite different from those of the usual college student” (p. 290). The author emphasizes differences of student veterans similar to those
mentioned in the work of Kinzer (1946) including life experiences, motivation for attending college and focused attitudes (Kraines, 1945). He notes that post-WWII student veterans bring different experiences to higher education as compared to their peers which play a part in impacting their personality and ultimately their coursework (Kraines, 1945). Kraines (1945) mentions other transition issues including restlessness inability to concentrate and extreme irritability, which will all have an impact in coursework, social inadequacies, as well as personal issues related to relationships with family and the responsibility of one’s family often precluding college obligations. Lastly, Kraines (1945) mentions ways in which institutions of higher education can assist this population including providing counseling, have trained professionals regarding governmental aid and offering orientation courses specifically aimed at student veterans.

Toven (1945) also wrote about post-WWII student veterans and stated, “One of the most effective methods of helping these veterans to adjust to civilian life is to provide them with an educational program that is especially designed to meet their needs” (p. 331). The author states that a veteran’s program should be more practical-based than the traditional collegiate experience (Toven, 1945). He argues that a veteran is returning to college after military service to gain skills to acquire work and is focused less on the cultural benefits of a college experience (Toven, 1945). Trained counselors were recommended to steer the veteran toward their goal, but a counselor should also be aware of transition issues such as the student veteran’s life experiences, marital and economic statuses and understand their higher level of maturity as compared to other students (Toven, 1945). Williamson (1944) expanded on this list of transition issues by including the conundrum of prioritizing work or college, a feeling of separation between a student
veteran and their non-veteran counterparts and having to deal with the arduous process of converting military experience to academic credit.

The veterans of the Vietnam War returning to higher education faced a different set of transition issues as compared to veterans of WWII. The hostile environment and negative attitudes towards the ongoing war were rampant across the country, particularly at colleges and universities (Horan, 1990). As a result, the transition to higher education proved to be difficult and lonely as many veterans during this time often denied their military status as not to be a target of protest (DeBenedetti & Chatfield, 1990). Horan (1990) states, “military duty had a negative effect upon post-military achievement; and this population faced special post-war readjustment problems” (p. 1).

The brief, yet detailed history of veterans transitioning from the military to higher education from post-WWII to the Vietnam Era highlights the transition experiences of veterans throughout the middle of the 20th century. The research tells a story of a group of people who were underestimated but thrived when put to the test. They faced difficulties but performed greater than most people’s expectations. The next section will highlight a few landmark studies on the topic as these were pivotal in encouraging future research at community colleges.

Veterans Transitioning to Four-Year Institutions

After reviewing related literature, it became apparent that the majority of research is focused on the transition of veterans to four-year institutions. However, many of the same transition issues students faced at community colleges were also present in students who enrolled at four-year institutions. For this reason, the landmark studies that laid the
groundwork for this area of research and spawned research into the transition experiences of veterans to community college, will be discussed.

The research conducted by Rumann and Hamrick in 2009 served as one of the pivotal studies that focused on the transition of veterans to higher education post-9/11. The study aimed to provide guidance for student affairs professionals in an age where the current faculty and administrators are less likely to bring military experience to their professional roles as compared to previous decades (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). This can lead to complications when trying to implement initiatives and adjust services to accommodate student veterans. The array of issues that student veterans faced when transitioning to higher education cited by Rumann and Hamrick (2009) include academic reentry, financial woes, and the needs for adequate advising. Other issues involve identity renegotiation, difficulty with personal relationships, and finding a supportive environment as they transition from the military to a civilian (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). The authors acknowledge that there are offices that do exist on campuses that address these issues for students, but further tailoring may be needed to address the unique set of needs of student veterans.

Rumann and Hamrick (2009) offer a series of recommendations to combat the myriad of issues previously mentioned. Creating external partnerships with veteran organizations can assist institutions with designing their student services for veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). In addition, student veterans often tend to seek out other veterans as a source of support on campus, and with the lack of military representation in the faculty and administration, the outside organizations can become a source of support for student veterans as they transition (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Another
recommendation proposed by the authors included raising awareness of the unique needs of student veterans to faculty and administration on college campuses in an effort to provide proper support for this population (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

It is vital for the successful transition of a student veteran that they are both aware of the services provided on college campuses and have a voice in the tailoring of services to support their population. The authors outline the issues these students may face when transitioning to four-year institutions as well as offer recommendations for improvement. Rumann and Hamrick (2009) addressed a topic that few had tackled before and laid the groundwork for future research on the subject.

Ackerman, DiRamio, and Garza Mitchell’s (2009) work closely aligns with the research conducted by Rumann and Hamrick (2009) and builds upon their original work in 2008. The research seeks to investigate how administrators can support student veterans as they transition from the military to higher education and face a myriad of issues. Through interviewing twenty-five students enrolled at four-year institutions who had served in Iraq or Afghanistan, Ackerman et al. (2009) highlight that student veterans have unique needs that need to be addressed by college administration.

Participants in the study often cited their transition from combat to college student as the most difficult transition of all (Ackerman et al., 2009). The reported issues included navigating the confusing governmental bureaucracy of the Veterans Administration in order to process their educational benefits, lack of veteran-specific programs on college campuses, and the difficulty of just being a student (Ackerman et al., 2009). There were mixed reviews expressed of the veterans office with some citing it as helpful and created additional connections for students beyond the processing of benefits,
while others reported a negative experience (Ackerman et al., 2009). The same held true in regard to interaction with other student services offices with participants expressing mixed reviews. Research participants relayed the difficulty they faced when re-entering civilian life and enrolling in college and cited such issues as learning how to study again and compared the regimented lifestyle of the military to the loosely structured style of a campus (Ackerman et al., 2009). PTSD was also mentioned by participants as a significant factor that impacted their transition to the classroom that inhibited their ability to focus on schoolwork (Ackerman et al., 2009). Ackerman et al. (2009) concluded their study by voicing the opinions of the research participants on how to improve services for veterans on campuses which included providing opportunities for veterans to connect with one another.

Vacchi (2012) builds upon the work of his predecessors by highlighting the transition difficulties student veterans may face, while also offering recommendations for institutions on how to improve support. Vacchi (2012) makes the argument that institutions of higher education should not expect student veterans to perform poorly but should perform at the same level historically as past student veterans who oftentimes outperformed nonveterans. The strong commitment and motivation veterans exhibit in higher education can be attributed to the student veteran’s intentional decision to attend college which may help to explain student veteran’s greater performance in the classroom (Vacchi, 2012).

Vacchi (2012) reinforces the point that military culture is drastically different from culture in higher education as the military is demanding and is accompanied with high levels of discipline versus the relaxed culture of higher education. Veterans will tend
to not want to impose or be a burden and professors and staff should recognize this characteristic to address their needs. Their lack of knowledge navigating the college bureaucracy can pose a problem, so it is key for administrators to streamline and simplify processes which includes the process of awarding credit for military service and handling G.I. benefits (Vacchi, 2012). Accurate and adequate academic advising is also key in ensuring a smooth transition for this population of students. Vacchi (2012) concludes with a quote that can apply at both four-year institutions and community colleges: “Creating a veteran-friendly campus environment begins with awareness and professionalism” (p. 20).

Student veterans represent a campus resource that is often untapped (Ackerman et al., 2009). These students often face issues as they transition from the military to higher education and it is the obligation of campus staff to develop an understanding of the population in an effort to properly support them. This study conducted by Ackerman et al. (2009) stresses the need for universities to collaborate and share best practices for supporting student veterans as it is likely that the military conflicts in the Middle East will continue and veterans will continue to return home and subsequently enroll in college.

By providing background of the historical relationship between the military and higher education, a brief history of community colleges and how they came to be, and finally, a concise collection of transition experience studies since WWII, the groundwork is laid to now delve deeper and shift the focus to the transition of veterans from the military to community colleges. However, it is vital that the “student veterans” that this research seeks to analyze, are properly defined and described before attempting to
understand their experiences. Based upon data primarily from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the American Council on Education, the “contemporary student veteran” will be thoroughly portrayed through demographic characteristics. It is imperative that this information is provided as the student veteran profile has changed quite drastically from previous generations (Evans et al., 2015).

**Contemporary Student Veteran Profile**

The profiles of student veterans have changed over time coinciding with the changing demographics of American society. No longer do men comprise the entirety of the United States military and no longer are they the only subgroup transitioning to higher education. Before contemporary transition experiences are discussed, it is important to first describe who these students are including gender, age, race, and other key characteristics.

The contemporary student veteran is nontraditional in every sense of the word as defined by Horn and Carroll (1996): part-time enrollment, financially independent, delayed enrollment after high school, employed full-time while attending school and having dependents. According to the National Survey for Student Engagement (2010), 60% of student veterans identify as first-generation students, or individuals who are first in their family to attend college. Unfortunately, first-generation college students are 50% more likely than their peers to drop out within the first year (Evans et al., 2015).

Demographically speaking, roughly 4% of all undergraduate students in the United States are veterans and of that 4%, 21% are female (American Council on Education, 2015). Student veterans are diverse in their racial composition with 63% white, 17% black, 14% Hispanic and 6% other or multicultural (American Council on
Education, 2015). 62% of student veterans are first generation students (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). As stated previously, the majority of veterans choose to attend community colleges when transitioning to and 54% enroll in associate or certificate programs (American Council on Education, 2015).

An estimated five million or more post-9/11 members of the military are expected to transition out of the armed forced by 2020 and many of these veterans will transition into higher education (American Council on Education, 2015). The traditional student enters higher education at the age of 18, while on average, student veterans delay entering college 5 years and are starting at the age of 25 with 47.3% being married and 47% having dependents (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). In addition, 61% enrolled in alternative coursework and 90% of those students enrolled in online classes (American Council on Education, 2015). Lastly, 42% of student veterans are working full-time while in college (American Council on Education, 2015).

With the roughly half a million student veterans attending community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017), there is definitely a need to gain a deeper understanding of this population. According to Aud et al (2011), the completion rates for student veterans is 51.7%. That means that just under half of these students do not complete their degrees. By understanding the transition experiences of student veterans to institutions that serve the highest number of this population, community colleges, colleges and universities can become aware of how to better serve them and as a result, support student veterans to be successful in higher education.
Contemporary Transition Experience to Community College

Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman argue, “Transitions alter our lives—our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions…It is not the transition per se that is critical, but how much it changes one’s roles, relations, routines, and assumptions” (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011, p. 63). The transition from soldier to civilian can be difficult for some due to the vast differences between the two lifestyles. When serving in the military, one’s day is structured. Compare that to college where there are often hours between classes and keeping up with the work and even the responsibility of attending class falls on the student. These large differences can have a negative effect on returning soldiers and can even create a sense of isolation. Many veterans also feel isolated due to their higher level of maturity as compared to their peers in college. Parks & Walker (2014) state, “Regardless of soldier’s specific experiences during military service, if they are exposed to war and death they are likely to find it difficult to relate to civilians when they return home” (p. 57). These feelings can have a negative impact on a veteran with a disability and can affect their work inside the classroom, their willingness to get involved on campus, and ultimately if they persist to graduation.

The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill has caused an increase in both older students as well as students with experiences that are drastically different from their nonveteran peers (Falkey, 2016). There has been very little research conducted involving student veterans and their unique experience transitioning to college despite the increasing numbers of servicemen and servicewomen returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, there are even fewer articles written about student veterans transitioning to community colleges when considering the large proportion of student veterans that are
served at these institutions (Clark, 1998; Miles, 2014; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Approximately 43% of students who identify as veterans and decide to enroll in college will do so at community colleges (Wheeler, 2012). Student veterans will often face difficulties transitioning into the academic community from the military environment due to the stark differences in the environments which has shown to inhibit a successful transition (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986). With post-9/11 veterans being the most diverse group of veterans ever (Miles, 2014), the need to understand and support this population is growing. Literature on the topic of veterans transitioning to college is slowly emerging but remains incomplete. The limited scholarly work regarding transition experiences of student veterans to community colleges will be highlighted in rich detail throughout this section in an attempt to saturate the literature.

The research conducted by Rumann, Rivera, and Hernandez (2011) is often cited as a landmark study in relation to student veterans and their transition to community colleges (Jones, 2017; Wheeler, 2012). One of the most significant transition issues they cite is the drastic change in environments from a highly regimented daily routine to the less structured setting of a college (Rumann et al., 2011). Completely changing daily environments has been shown to be challenging for student veterans as they transition to community college (Rumann et al., 2011). Student veterans also expressed a feeling of disconnect between themselves and their nonveteran peers (Rumann et al., 2011). The student veterans believe that their nonveteran peers do not actually understand what is happening in the Middle East and in effect, cannot relate to the student veterans (Rumann et al., 2011). As a result, student veterans may be reluctant to disclose their military status in fear of how they will be perceived by other students. The insensitivity and immaturity
by other students further enforces the belief that nonveteran students cannot relate to student veterans. These insensitive situations have a potentially negative impact on the transition process (Bauman, 2009). Student veterans may feel isolated and alone on campus when attempting to seek out support which also heightens the difficulty of the transition (Rumann et al., 2011). As a result of this, student veterans tend to drift towards other student veterans to relate and comprehend shared experiences (Rumann, et al, 2011). Having a peer student veteran to relate can help reduce the feeling of isolation and disconnect that many student veterans experience.

Rumann et al., (2011) also draw attention to the role of faculty in the transition of student veterans to community college. A faculty member’s attitude can have either a negative or positive impact on a student veteran. If a faculty member had previously served in the military, student veterans may seem them as a source of support (Rumann et al., 2011). However, if a faculty member espouses anti-military sentiment in class, it may lead to student veterans feeling disconnected or isolated and negatively affect their transition process (Rumann et al., 2011). Lastly, Rumann et al., (2011) cite navigating institutional bureaucracy as a roadblock to a successful transition. For example, bouncing around from office to office to process G.I. Bill benefits causes not only a headache for the student veteran and can lead to feelings of not being a priority to community colleges (Rumann et al., 2011).

Rumann et al., (2011) laid the groundwork for further research regarding student veterans transitioning to community college. Through this study, they effectively started dialogue surrounding a population that deserves further understanding but has yet to receive. It is vital that community colleges actively support student veterans through such
avenues as training for faculty, staff and students to creating networking events for veterans to connect with one another. Veterans should be involved in this process so that their leadership qualities and unique life experiences can benefit the entire campus community (Rumann et al., 2011). By taking these steps and implementing other veteran-focused initiatives, community colleges will show their commitment to this population and enhance veteran success as they transition from the military to community college.

After Rumann et al., (2011) published their work, a slightly greater focus shifted towards student veterans transitioning to community colleges and additional studies were conducted in an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of this population of students. Through a transcendental phenomenological study, Jones (2017) illustrates the transition experiences of a specifically selected group of student veterans “who had been deployed under military orders to a Department of Defense designated hostile or imminent danger pay area since 9/11 and had successfully completed at least a full semester of academic coursework at a Florida community college” (p. 111). Jones (2017) implemented purposeful criterion sampling as the method the select the five participants, whose ages ranged from 26 to mid-40s, who met the aforementioned criteria at the selected community college which had exhibited a vested track record of assisting student veterans. The study utilized in-depth, in-person interviews and focused on the student’s transition from combat to community college. Jones (2017) states, “Because of their high percentage of veteran student, their ability to offer targeted courses and services, and their historically special relationship with the communities they serve, community colleges are at the vanguard of student-veteran transition” (p. 109).
Jones cites Schlossberg’s Theory of Identity (1981) and Vacchi’s Four Cornerstone Model (2014) as popular theories applied to student veterans and found that all student veterans faced transition issues back into civilian life and that transition is a continual process. However, one of the author’s main arguments in the article is that the models of student transition that are often applied to student veterans, such as the aforementioned theories, are not appropriate in understanding student veteran’s transitions. The reasoning Jones provides for discounting the popularized theories is due to the fact that the majority of student veterans attend community college after returning from combat and most of the models are centered around traditional 4-year institutions. Additional findings from the study included all student veterans faced transition issues, including as a result of both physical and psychological injuries, back into civilian life and transition is a continual process. However, Jones (2017) argues that more of the transition was related to the differing military and college environments. Furthermore, student veterans lacked preexisting knowledge on how to navigate higher education including registering for classes, completing admissions applications as well as processing G.I. Bill benefits. Navigating the higher education system proved to be a difficult process particularly for student veterans since 66% of the population are first-generation college students (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010).

Difficulty interacting with college staff also emerged as a theme in Jones’s (2017) study. Many of the research participants cited the lack of knowledge about veterans’ affairs at community colleges and the inefficient bureaucracy as roadblocks in their transition process. In addition, Jones (2017) highlighted the vital role families and peers played in a student veteran’s success in higher education. Research has proven that
supportive and affirming families can play a pivotal role in the transition process (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006).

Lastly, the inability to relate to one’s peers was a theme amongst the research participants. The age difference as well viewing themselves as more focused while lacking the patience in regard to the attitudes of the younger students proved to be difficulties when transitioning from the military to the community college. All of the aforementioned transition issues help to fill a void in academic research where little information is known and highlight issues that student veterans face when transitioning to community colleges from combat.

Research has shown that institutions of higher education are not adequately prepared to properly serve the influx of student veterans (Rumann et al., 2011). Student veterans come to college campuses with their own set of risk factors including delayed entry and being financially independent (Wheeler, 2012). Wheeler (2012) conducted an interpretive qualitative case that examined the transition experiences of student veterans to community colleges which “sought to understand the process veterans experience as they leave overseas deployment in support of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and negotiate the various changes such a transition entails” as they attend community college (p. 775). A community college in upstate New York was chosen as the location of her case study due to 400 of the 37,000 students were student veterans from various branches of the military. Wheeler (2012) implemented purposeful sampling, more specifically, nonproportional quota sampling and snowball sampling, in this study in an attempt to obtain the highest quality data and to ensure equal representation of female soldiers as well as representing multiple military branches. Wheeler (2012) grounded her study in
Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and through analyzing her data, found three themes were present: (a) academic experiences, (b) personal relationships, and (c) benefit bureaucracy. To increase trustworthiness of her data, Wheeler (2012) employed member checking, triangulation and an external peer review.

Through her data analysis, Wheeler (2012) discovered that the majority of the research participants chose community college for academic reasons such as the small class sizes and the remedial help that could be offered at community colleges as compared to other types of institutions. In regard to academic experiences, Wheeler (2012) found that student veterans struggled to make the transition from a structured military-style life to a lax college structure. Wheeler (2012) stated, “This difficult transition is further complicated by the shift from a military culture where ‘authority is absolute’ to higher education where unclear hierarchy, confusing job titles, and multiple student support offices appear disorderly and disconcerting to veterans attempting to navigate this new environment” (p. 776). Some of the research participants cited feeling isolated and disconnected from the institution as a result of not knowing what activities or clubs were available at community college as well as not having made many friends. In addition, there were mixed experiences working with college departments and some participants reported confusion when dealing with the departments. Many of the opinions regarding the college orientation were negative due to the feeling that it was aimed at the “traditional student” rather than an older, nontraditional student such as a student veteran. Despite the difficult transition to community college from the military, all of the research participants reported that their military experience had a positive impact on their
academic experience at community college in regard to organization skills as well as their appreciation for their education.

In addition, Wheeler (2012) found that the research participants struggled in their personal lives as well when transitioning back to civilian life. Wheeler (2012) stated, “Family members and significant others have trouble understanding soldiers’ experiences, which often leads to feelings of frustration and isolation for veterans” (p. 777). A few of the research participants cited being unable to discuss their military experience with family and friends who had not served because they did not fully understand what they experienced. They also reported that the felt a closer relationship to other veterans than they did to civilians. Wheeler (2012) found that research participants felt disconnected from their nonveteran peers at community college due to the differing levels of maturity, lack of appreciation and respect for education exhibited by the nonveterans and insensitivity to veteran experiences.

Wheeler (2012) also cites the confusing federal government bureaucracy as a factor that puts student veterans at risk of success at community college which is closely connected to the student veterans having difficulty transitioning due to the stark differences in environments. Many of the participants reported confusion and lacking clarity in relation to understanding their veteran benefits and navigating government offices.

The research conducted by Wheeler (2012) was one of the earliest studies that focused primarily on student veterans and their transition to community college and aided in shifting the conversation to a population that deserved a deeper understanding. As displayed through Wheeler’s (2012) study, student veterans are a population that have
their own unique set of needs and transition experiences different from other populations. Aspects such as academic experiences, including transitioning from a highly regimented environment to one that is relaxed and independent, adjusting to the changes in one’s own personal relationships, as well as effectively navigating governmental bureaucracy, are some of the major factors that Wheeler (2012) found that impact a student veteran’s transition from the military to community college. It is the role of community colleges, who are the largest server of student veterans in the field of higher education in the United States (Wheeler, 2012), to offer support services specifically aimed at student veterans to aid in their transition such as veteran-themed college orientation, providing counseling services, implementing programming encouraging veterans to gather and network with other veterans, and educating faculty, staff and students about the unique population of student veterans.

Zinger and Cohen (2010) sought to explore the transition of veterans post-deployment to community college. Ten research participants, nine males and one female, were ultimately chosen to participate and data was obtained through structured interviews (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). The participants described ways in which they had changed after their service and the challenges they faced during their transition from the military to community college including handling symptoms related to PTSD, lack of structure in new lifestyle and trouble with personal relationships (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Participants also expressed a semi identity crisis that caused them to reflect on themselves and reevaluate certain aspects of their lives. They compared their lives and who they were prior to their military service and who they were when they returned
home, and some had difficulty accepting what had happened during the war, while others noticed a deeper appreciation for one’s education (Zinger & Cohen, 2010).

Zinger and Cohen (2010) found through their exploratory qualitative study that student veterans had a difficult time transitioning to community college and also concentrating on their studies. Moreover, student veterans felt different from their peers and disconnected in addition to the lack of support espoused by faculty in classes (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Participants cited mixed experiences when having to navigate the institutional bureaucracy including difficulty processing G.I. benefits paperwork and having to handle most administrative processes without assistance or guidance from staff (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). This study reinforces the previously mentioned transition issued faced by student veterans and shows patterns regarding obstacles this population faces when leaving the military and enrolling in community college.

Heineman (2016) reinforces some of the previous findings in her qualitative study. She notes the difficult transition student veterans face from the military to community college. For example, the stark differences in environments has shown to be a contributing factor in the transition experience of these students which can inhibit their acclimation to civilian life and ultimately their integration into community college (Heineman, 2016). Student veterans also feel a sense of disconnect with their nonveteran peers since they cannot relate to their experiences and may not be sensitive when speaking regarding the military (Heineman, 2016). This sense of isolation on a community college has a negative impact on the transition of student veterans to community college (Heineman, 2016).
Falkey (2016) builds upon previously cited transition issues mentioned in this section. Faculty may unwittingly make statements that student veterans deem offensive or may view as antimilitary. As a result, student veterans may feel singled out or unwelcome due to their veteran status (Falkey, 2016). Faculty are not alone in this problem. Students may also make comments that are insensitive to student veterans and may grow frustrated and feel disconnected with their nonveteran peers (Falkey, 2016). Student veterans are also dealing with family issues and the readjustment that goes along with periods of long absences (Falkey, 2016). Health issues, both physical and mental, also impact the transition of this population as student veterans learn to deal with their new physical or emotion realities (Falkey, 2016).

Hammond (2016) takes a different approach to student veterans that most of the existing literature glosses over and fills a void in research by centering his study on the role of identity in the transition process of student veterans. Hammond (2016) states, “Student combat veterans are often thought of as holding multiple roles in our society: the role of veteran, civilian, student, brother, sister, spouse, and/or parent, etc.” (p. 147). While landmark studies such as work conducted by DiRamio (2009) and Rüm and Hamrick (2009) focus primarily on transition issues, Hammond took the path less traveled and ventured out to see if other components played a role in student veterans and their interaction with community colleges. Hammond (2016) implemented a qualitative methodology and a constructivist paradigm when conducting research on how perceptions of identity impacted a student veteran’s experience at community college. In addition, Hammond (2016) implemented components of inductive grounded theory methodology that utilized constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling.
Two community colleges in northwestern Massachusetts were purposefully selected as the research sites due to the enrollment of each site being at least 3,000+ and both institutions were similar demographically. Hammond utilized both purposeful and snowball sampling as a way to identify the research participants at each institution. Hammond gathered his data through the use of two rounds of interviews that utilized a semistructured format that revolved around the author’s central question: “How do combat veterans perceive their own identity and what influence does this have on their experience as college students?” (Hammond, 2016, p. 149). The interview protocol was grounded in Hecht’s CTI (Communication Theory of Identity) and Gee’s Conceptual Model of Identity. These two theories also guided Hammond throughout the study which he saw were pivotal in understanding how sense of identity plays a role in college students, particularly student veterans.

Hammond (2016) states the findings of the study, based off of interviews with nineteen participants, which include four main themes: (a) Perception of self, (b) perception of others, (c) inferred perception of self, and (d) connections to other veterans. The author found that the participants included being a veteran as part of their core identity which helped shaped who they are and acted as a lens on how they viewed different situations and themselves. In addition, identifying as a combat veteran also played a role in how they perceive nonveterans. Many of the research participants viewed themselves as being more mature than their peers as well as more focused and disciplined. All of the research participants highlighted the strong impact being a veteran had on their identity as well as the negative impact on classroom performance due to the clear divide felt between veterans and nonveterans and the frustration that stems from
that feeling. Student veterans in the study also relayed their belief that nonveteran students did not appreciate the education they were receiving and cited such examples of being on their cell phones in class while the professor was instructing.

In regard to “inferred perception of self”, Hammond (2016) described that participants were misjudged based on their status as a combat veteran. Student veterans in the study also expressed their discomfort when their nonveteran peers would ask inappropriate questions about their war experience. Hammond (2016) stated, “Participant responses suggested that they carried an inferred perception of self as emotionally and/or mentally unstable due to their combat experiences due to these regularly occurring microaggressions on campus” (p. 153). Hammond (2016) argued that due to this, student veterans would oftentimes hide their status as a combat veteran when around nonveterans and also led to isolation.

Lastly, Hammond (2016) reported that the participants relied heavily on their fellow veterans which played a pivotal role in the formation of a student veteran’s identity. The connection that is felt between student veterans on campus and the ability to relate to one another allowed them to validate their membership in this unique population (Hammond, 2016). In addition, being around other veterans created an environment that could lead to academic success. The author concludes the study by stressing that the transition from combat veteran to community college student is more fluid, rather than a linear process. The aforementioned themes in the study conducted by Hammond (2016), shed light on a different aspect of the transition process from the military to community college. The higher education community must wipe away all preconceived notions and stigmas they have regarding student veterans and actively reach out to these students
through avenues such as focused programming, providing peer mentorship and engage these students in the educational process. To improve retention and success of student veterans, higher education professionals must develop a deeper understanding of this population and provide an academic environment that is inclusive and provides support.

It is evident that there are few empirical studies that focus on the transition of veterans from the military to community college (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). A figure that is more alarming is the number of studies that focus on this topic and take into consideration gender: two. Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) provide the first empirical study that not only focuses on this under researched topic, but also highlights the factor of gender. This study draws attention to similar themes expressed in previous studies including financial difficulties and difficulty navigating college bureaucracy but illustrates how these transition issues are further complicated by other life events related specifically to females including motherhood.

By employing a qualitative case study methodology that is grounded in Schlossberg’s transition theory, Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) attempt to gain a holistic understanding of the transition experiences of veterans to community college. Using a semistructured interview protocol, the study highlights two female veterans who were both in their twenties. Both reported being motivated to attend community college and credited the military for teaching skills to be successful, but cited difficulties including lack of advising, difficulty relating to peers due to the age difference, and problems having G.I. benefits processed correctly (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). One participant reported the positive role faculty played in her transition, while the other portrayed a pessimistic view of the faculty-student interactions she experienced. In addition to these
factors, both participants also reported how their children and husbands were their main priority and school came second. The ability to secure child care was an issue that often caused the participants to question their priorities and long-term goals for education.

Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) fill a void in the existing literature, but also draw attention to a factor that has not received any research thus far. The study reinforces the notion that student veterans have a unique set of needs different from nonveteran students. The institutional issues cited can be easily addressed to better support student veterans. One area that deserves special attention is ensuring positive faculty-student relationships. Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) cited a finding by Chaves (2006) that stated, “issues of student retention and persistence in community colleges are associated with low levels of faculty-student interaction” (p. 129). Further research is needed to fully examine the impact of the relationship of faculty and student veterans at community colleges.

Of the two million U.S. military members that have returned home from service, almost 16% are women (Heineman, 2017). A few years after the study conducted by Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015) that took gender into consideration when analyzing the transition experiences to community college from the military, Heineman (2017) sought to expand on the research and explore the unique needs of women student veterans and draw attention to the way in which community colleges can better support this population.

With women comprising 57% of the student population of community colleges, the lack of research and gap in the literature is alarming (Heineman, 2017). The women in this study expressed a series of issues they faced when transitioning from the military
to community college including securing adequate childcare, financial worries, difficulty with personal relationships, and the overall significant change from a military lifestyle to the higher education environment (Heineman, 2017). However, additional issues were also mentioned that have been vocalized by female student veterans, not men, including military sexual trauma and its aftermath as well as homecoming adjustment.

Approximately 52% of military women have reported being on the receiving end of offensive sexual behaviors or unwelcome sexual attempts (Heineman, 2017). Studies have shown that military sexual trauma is a more significant factor in explaining PTSD with women veterans than combat exposure (Carlson, Stromwall, & Lietz, 2013). The effects of PTSD and disabilities on student veterans and their transition to community college will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. Women veterans are also more likely to suffer from interpersonal stressors associated with being separated from family and children and face additional stress when having to reintegrate into the family upon the homecoming (Heineman, 2017).

Heineman (2017) argues that the women’s military experience had a negative influence on their socialization on campus which resulted in them not wanting to socialize with their male student veteran counterparts and inhibited their ability to assimilate. In addition, women relied heavily on their family for both support and advice in regard to joining the military and their decision to enroll in community college (Heineman, 2017). The women student veterans will selectively seek out help from faculty and staff while still maintaining their independence (Heineman, 2017).

The research conducted by Heineman (2017) brought attention to a topic that had been researched just once prior (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). As women increase their
presence in the military and community colleges enrolling 43% of veterans (Wheeler, 2012), it would be advantageous for community colleges to address the needs of student veterans, especially women student veterans.

Despite the obstacles and challenges veterans face as they transition from the military to community college, “only 37% of colleges and universities serving student veterans provide transition assistance, and only 47% provide training opportunities for both faculty and staff to enable them to assist student veterans with transition challenges” (McBain, Kim, Cook, and Snead, 2012). To properly support this population, more research must be conducted, and findings relayed to community colleges so that proper programming and services can be implemented and tailored to accommodate the unique set of needs that accompany student veterans.

With the literature now saturated concerning veterans transitioning from the military to community college, it is clear that there is little empirical research on the topic. Another area that has received minor attention is related to veterans with disabilities and the impact, if any, the disability may have on a student’s transition to higher education. With roughly 40% of returning veterans being afflicted with some form of a disability (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011), the topic is well worth mentioning as a potential factor that can impact a successful transition.

**Impact of Disabilities During Transition**

In his final address to the nation in 1977, Hubert H. Humphrey stated that the moral test of the nation would be determined on how the sick, needy, and handicapped are cared for (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). With around sixteen wounded to every one soldier dead in the current conflict in the Middle East, America is now being put to the
test (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Veterans will experience a range of injuries while serving overseas and colleges and universities must be prepared to accommodate student veterans with both visible and nonvisible disabilities.

Just like the general student population, veterans with disabilities come from all different backgrounds and have a broad range of experiences that staff, and other students may not be able to relate to. It is pivotal for college administrators to attempt to comprehend and be supportive of veterans with disabilities. But before one can do that, they must first understand what conditions or disorders a veteran may be experiencing and recognize the symptoms and difficulties associated with the disability that could affect their transition from soldier to civilian, their performance inside and outside of the classroom, as well as their social integration on campus.

Feeling isolated from one’s peers and having a sense of not belonging can be amplified when combined with disorders including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Studies show that as many as 40% of returning veterans will have some form of a disability and roughly 14% of veterans of the War on Terror experience PTSD (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011). PTSD is often brought on by experiencing something traumatic such as death and war, and then having symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety and difficulty concentrating, as a result. Veterans may isolate themselves from their peers because they feel that they would never understand what they are going through. Parks and Walker (2014) argue, “Such a response (isolation) can interfere with a student veteran’s social integration and impede their academic achievement” (p. 59). Ostovary and Dapprich (2011) cite a study that states, “Combat exposure alone may reduce proficiency in sustained attention and memory, including retention and recall, causing
problems in educational and employment settings” (p. 65). Veterans with this condition may struggle to focus in class or perform on tests or assignments due to this condition. For example, PTSD can heighten arousal and when a student veteran is in a crowded and loud classroom, concentration and paying attention may prove difficult. When a student veteran re-experiences war trauma due to PTSD, the stress can potentially have a negative impact on their college education (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). It is clear that PTSD can have a debilitating effect on veterans in their daily lives, especially in their academic aspirations due to the symptoms that accompany PTSD.

Another condition that is becoming more prevalent in veterans returning home is TBI, or traumatic brain injury that afflicts between 11 and 28 percent of combat troops (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). The increased use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) during the current war in the Middle East has led to veterans being diagnosed and treated for TBI (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). As a result, this condition is perhaps the signature injury of the war in the Middle East (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Similar to PTSD, many of the symptoms of TBI are nonvisible and are seen oftentimes through one’s behavior. TBIs can cause visual, hearing and back impairments, as well as difficulty concentrating, that can also inhibit a student veteran from being successful in community college (Evans et al., 2015; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). These students may be reluctant to ask for help, further exacerbating the problem, feeling that it is a sign of weakness (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Some behavioral changes due to TBI include mood changes, difficulty with memory, confusion and trouble with concentration (Shackelford, 2009). These symptoms could clearly have a negative impact on any student and especially on a veteran’s academic progress and social integration. If these symptoms were not severe enough on
their own, studies have concluded, “Individuals who sustain TBIs also commonly develop co-existing disorders, especially PTSD” (Parks & Walker, 2014, p. 62).

Due to the stigma that is associated with mental disorders, coupled with the rugged social environment that soldiers experience in the military, veterans are reluctant to self-identify or seek help for their conditions because they view it as a sign of weakness (Vacchi, 2012). Some reports have indicated that women veterans are more likely to be afflicted with PTSD but are less likely to be diagnosed than men due to the tendency to diagnose a woman with depression or anxiety instead of PTSD (Heineman, 2017). These disorders are going untreated and as a result, suicide rates are increasing for veterans, especially those who suffer from PTSD, TBI, depression or other mental health disorders. Jordan (2016) cites a study conducted by the Defense Department in his article that found around 20 veterans a day are committing suicide (para. 1). A report issued by the RAND corporation found that between 14% and 19% of individuals deployed display symptoms of PTSD, TBI, and/or depression (Heineman, 2016).

Burnett and Segoria (2009) discussed the importance of collaboration to better serve returning veterans with disabilities:

The needs of active duty and returning veterans transitioning from military service to academic life, particularly with injuries and functional limitations that effect their participation in college, call for a conscious effort to permeate boundaries between college support services and, additionally, collaboration with organizations outside academia. (p. 53)

This collaboration involves such entities as the veteran’s services office and the local Department of Social Services to properly identify those with the disabilities and chart a
course to provide support (Burnett & Segoria, 2009). In addition, local veteran-specific organizations as well as hospitals can assist in the process. The need for collaboration also involves on-campus partners including establishing institution-wide committees aimed at addressing the needs of student veterans with disabilities, bring student veterans into the process and giving the group a voice in what services will be beneficial, and providing training for faculty and staff so that they are aware of the signs and symptoms of disabilities student veterans may be exhibiting on campus (Burnett & Segoria, 2009).

According to Parks and Walker (2014), “Data on student veterans indicate that 88 percent of veterans drop out of college during their first year and only three percent make it to graduation” (p. 63). There might not be a single demographic that has such low retention and persistence rates when compared to veterans. It is safe to say that all of the previously mentioned conditions and disabilities such as PTSD and TBIs definitely play a large role in that statistic and have a large impact on a student’s academic progress. As a result of this alarming figure, there are a variety of strategies and adjustments that could and should be made to properly support this population. First, education is key. The staff within the veterans’ affairs office on campus needs to be properly versed and trained on the beneficial approaches when working with veterans with disabilities. This includes not only creating a welcoming and open environment that makes this subgroup comfortable going to the center, but also having the knowledge of outside resources that may be beneficial to refer a student to provide a service that the veterans’ center cannot. Campuses must move away from the medical model of delivery where documentation of the disability is king and transition to a social model where accommodating the student in the best way possible is at the forefront. By doing this, veterans may be more inclined to
disclose their disability and not feel isolated or have the feeling of being weak (Madaus, Miller, & Vance, 2009).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as well as Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) are injuries that have been cited frequently by veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (Wheeler, 2012). Both injuries are accompanied with their own set of symptoms including increase in drugs/alcohol, social isolation, depression, and a sense of self-blame, and as a result, if left untreated, can have adverse effects on a veteran and in effect, on their transition from military to higher education (Wheeler, 2012). Effects include, “preventing veterans from acclimating to civilian life, being successful at work and school, and from having healthy relationships” (Wheeler, 2012, p. 776). Veterans may have a difficult time transitioning from one lifestyle to another. Combine that experience with a disability such as PTSD or TBI, and the transition becomes that much harder.

Just as it is important to understand the experiences and difficulties student veterans may face when leaving the military and enrolling in higher education, it is also vital to discuss recommendations to increase support for student veterans, based off of scholarly research. Best practices currently in place at community colleges across the country will also be discussed in the following section. The purpose is to highlight the beneficial work already occurring to support student veterans and share the wealth of knowledge to other institutions who may require additional programming and services.
Veteran Support Services in Practice

Support Programs & How Veterans Can Be Better Supported

With the large influx of veterans enrolling in community college after returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, community colleges must adapt to the needs to veterans in an attempt to better serve this population. It is urgent that community colleges develop a deeper understanding of the needs of student veterans (Persky & Oliver, 2010). Despite the Soldier to Student II Survey finding that 74% of community colleges have a designated office aimed at serving student veterans (Miles, 2014), there is still much to be learned about understanding this population. This section will discuss programs and support services in place that demonstrate community colleges’ commitment to assisting student veterans prosper and thrive. Recommendations from experts are provided that community colleges should consider when implementing or altering programming aimed at supporting student veterans.

Through questionnaires, interviews, observations and other qualitative methods, Persky and Oliver (2010) discussed the ways community colleges can better assist student veterans as well as the needs of this population at community colleges, which include 5 main themes: (1) credit streamlining, (2) streamlining of programs and services, (3) training of faculty, counselors and advisors, (4) difficulties faced by veterans, and (5) aspects that contribute to creating a veteran-friendly campus. By conducting a mixed methods qualitative case study, Persky & Oliver (2010) grounded their foundational study in the Human Capital Theory and Rendon’s Theory of Validation and implemented purposeful sampling and identified 13 participants from a community college which included veterans as well as faculty and administrators.
Frustration was expressed by the research participants in Persky and Oliver’s (2010) study in regard to the process of equating military experience to academic credit. The researchers argue that by streamlining this process, the institution would be sending a message to student veterans that their service is respected and appreciated. In addition, the need to streamline programs and services, which includes veteran-specific programming, will assist in the veterans feel a connection to the institution. Third, the staff and counselors as well as faculty need to be trained to effectively respond to veteran’s concerns in a sensitive manner.

Persky and Oliver (2010) make a series of recommendations in which community colleges can better serve student veterans and address and difficulties they may face. To help improve credit streamlining, utilizing the Veterans Administration as well as training specific points-of-contact to process the credits. In an effort to provide more programming for student veterans, Persky and Oliver (2010) recommend that community colleges create partnerships with outside agencies for funding as well as creating veteran-specific workshops and seminars. Lastly, participants in the study suggested that counselors and faculty need to be trained to identify and address issues related to student veterans with PTSD. All of these recommendations and more are ways in which community colleges can make their campuses “veteran-friendly”. By making these changes, community colleges will not only be benefiting the students, but will also be helping themselves. By proving to the veteran community that veterans are a priority, student veterans will be drawn to that institution which in turn will increase enrollments and assist with retention of the student veterans already attending.
In the qualitative study conducted by Wheeler (2012), she not only cites the issues that veterans face as they leave the military and transition to community colleges, but she also makes recommendations on how community colleges can make changes to better serve the population. Wheeler (2012) argues that a Veterans’ Service Office should be created on community college campuses to reduce the transition issues that student veterans face due to their unique experiences that set them apart from the traditional adult learner population. Community colleges should also offer counselors who can help address issues related to PTSD and TBI as well as academic advisors that truly understand the experiences of veterans (Wheeler, 2012). In addition, programs that assist student veterans in developing coping skills will allow veterans to better acclimate into civilian life and reduce the negative impact of the transition (Wheeler, 2012).

Studies show that veterans often rely more on their veteran peers as compared to their family or nonveteran peers due to the fact that other veterans can relate to the experiences of the military (Wheeler, 2012). As a result, community colleges should implement programming or mechanisms in which veteran students can connect with one another as a method of support (Wheeler, 2012). Community colleges can also build on this and provide veteran-themed extracurricular activities as a way to involve student veterans on campus, which has shown to be effective in retention (Wheeler, 2012). Lastly, creating a college orientation that is geared towards student veterans and their specific needs, such as G.I. Bill processing, that relays vital institutional information regarding services available will help to reduce the stress of navigating the institutional bureaucracy (Wheeler, 2012).
Veterans face countless transition issues that other college subgroups do not such as PTSD and adjusting their entire way of life from a military mindset to civilian (Heineman, 2016). According to Wheeler (2012) in Heineman (2016), “an estimated 43% of students who served in the military and who decide to attend college will do so at public 2-year institutions, often referred to as community colleges” (p. 219). By compiling research from previous studies conducted by experts in the field such as DiRamio et al., (2008) and Rumann and Hamrick (2009), Heineman (2016) outlines several ways in which community colleges can properly support and ease the transition experience of student veterans. First, providing college orientation that is specific to veterans will give these students a chance to orient to college with students who are in similar situations and have shared experiences (Heineman, 2016). It will give this population a chance to meet support staff and learn more about how to process their G.I. benefits (Heineman, 2016). In addition, by providing this programming, support is shown by campus leadership which can lead to a feeling of inclusivity (Heineman, 2016). Next, as a way for student veterans to feel more connected to the institution, administrators should encourage veteran-geared extracurricular activities such as events and organizations that take advantage of a student veteran’s skillset that often includes leadership and discipline. Thirdly, community colleges must be able to properly assist these students in making the transition from combat to civilian life, which can be guided by efforts through an established veterans’ service office which can service as a one-stop-shop that caters to veteran-specific needs (Heineman, 2016). Individuals interacting with veterans should be properly trained in regard to handling sensitive issues as well as encourage veterans to lean on one another in an attempt to ease the transition.
Community colleges could also offer classes geared towards student veterans that focus on topics such as stress-reduction and interpersonal skill development (Heineman, 2016). Next, community colleges should implement programming or designate space on campus that encourages veteran-to-veteran interaction since studies have shown that veterans often rely on fellow veterans to aid in the transition process (Heineman, 2016).

One of the transition issues that student veterans face at community colleges that inhibits an individual’s acclimation into the new environment is the lack of sensitivity displayed by nonveteran peers and in some respects, faculty (Heineman, 2016). The attitudes espoused by both students and faculty play a pivotal role in how student veterans view the campus and ultimately adjust (Heineman, 2016). When insensitivity is displayed by nonveteran peers, student veterans may seek out faculty in which to confide in (Heineman, 2016). As a result, community colleges should implement sensitivity training for faculty, staff and students in an attempt to raise awareness of student veterans and their unique experiences (Heineman, 2016). Lastly, Heineman (2016) argues that community colleges should reach out to outside organizations and agencies to provide support for student veterans. This study conducted by Heineman (2016) compiles research from many different studies and places it all into one easy-to-read document with recommendations for properly serving student veterans. As more attention is paid to student veterans at community colleges, Heineman (2016) encourages these institutions to be proactive in their approach to properly serving student veterans and make changes that encourage academic and social success of this population.

With the majority of the focus of student veterans returning to college revolving around 4-year institutions, Miles (2014) provides a qualitative comparison study likening
veteran transition experiences at community colleges to 4-year institutions in an attempt to shift the focus toward institutions that serve the majority of the returning veteran population at institutions of higher education: community colleges. However, community colleges may not be prepared to properly support student veterans and understand their unique needs. There exists a Community College Survey of Student Engagement that seeks to examine students’ engagement while in college, however, there is not a way for a student to identify themselves as a veteran on this survey (Miles, 2014). Engagement has been shown to be a key indicator in regard to retention and persistence towards a degree (Kuh, 2006). By developing an understanding of a student veteran’s engagement in community colleges, these institutions may be able to create programming and offer services that more properly support this student population.

Instead of providing theoretical ways community colleges can better serve student veterans, Miles (2014) cites actual examples seen across the United States including Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College in Asheville, NC as well as LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, NY. For example, Asheville-Buncombe Technical College also implemented a mentorship program to connect veterans on campus with veterans in the community (Miles, 2014). Miles (2014) found that these institutions went above and beyond to properly support student veterans in such ways as hiring full-time coordinators who are training in certifying benefits.

Miles (2014) concludes his study by offering additional recommendations including providing counseling services due to the increase of PTSD and other mental health concerns reported by student veterans. With almost 70% of student veterans responding in the Prudential Financial publication that gaining employment after their
military service was a top priority (Miles, 2014), community colleges should take steps to address this concern. Career services need to be a priority for community colleges to assist student veterans in transferring their military experience to the civilian job market (Miles, 2014). Miles (2014) argues that it may be best for community colleges to have a specific point of contact who is knowledgeable in veteran services and also implement faculty and staff training so that all community college personnel have some knowledge on how to properly serve student veterans.

Collaboration within the community college as well as in the community is necessary if community colleges are going to meet the needs of student veterans (Miles, 2014). This study was meant to be the starting point and encourage dialogue about properly serving this subgroup. It is significant in that it is one of the few that provide actual examples of theory to practice.

In the foundational research conducted by Rumann et al., (2011) previously cited in this study, the authors offer ways in which student veterans can better be assisted as they transition from the military to community college. Rumann et al., (2011) made a series of recommendations to help ease the transition process including providing ways for veterans to connect with one another to decrease the feeling of isolation such as creating veteran student organizations as well as specific offices designed to support student veterans and their unique set of needs. In addition, Rumann et al., (2011) recommend community colleges create partnerships with outside organizations to collaborate on the creation of veteran-specific programs to help foster an environment of inclusion. Lastly, community colleges must be sure to involve student veterans in this
process as they are the ones who truly understand their experiences and can voice what they believe will help with their transition (Rumann et al., 2011).

Despite the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill providing the most expansive educational benefits since the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, this alone will not be enough for student veterans to have success in higher education (Falkey, 2016; Vacchi, 2012). Falkey (2016) reinforces ideas previously mentioned in this section including providing training for faculty and staff in how to properly work with veterans, have trained counselors who know how to identify, and address issues related to PTSD and TBI and create a designated veteran space on campus. Progressing through a significant transition can cause unneeded stress. Palethorpe and Wilson (2011) discuss how high stress can inhibit one’s ability to learn, which in turn will lead to high dropout rates and subpar academic performance. Community colleges should assist student veterans in identifying high stress situations and attempt to ease processes that could impact a student veteran’s collegiate experience (Falkey, 2016). Falkey (2016) cites a study by O’Herrin (2011) who laid out ways in which institutions can better service student veterans including: identifying a point of contact for student veterans, create partnerships with community organizations, implement programming or clubs aimed specifically at student veterans, and streamlines veteran services.

To expand beyond the theoretical perspective of assisting student veterans, Falkey (2016) provides actual examples at community colleges across the country where institutions are actively supporting this population. For example, Montgomery Community College (MCC) in Rockville, MD has implemented a transition program called Combat to College: Facilitating College Success for Combat Veterans (Falkey,
Combat to College is a perfect example of where community colleges are reaching out to non-academic organizations to better support student veterans as many of the previously mentioned studies encouraged. MCC partnered with outside organization including the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the National Rehabilitation Hospital, the U.S. Navy and the VA Medical Center to create Combat to College. The aim of the program is to help veterans recognize their skillset and apply their skills towards their academic work to be successful in college (Falkey, 2016). Falkey (2016) also cites San Diego Community College who partnered with Balboa Naval Hospital to offer academic services to veterans as they recover in the nearby hospital. Academic advisors meet with them at the hospital to discuss future academic goals and concrete steps on how to make that goal a reality (Falkey, 2016). As displayed at Montgomery Community College and San Diego Community College, partnerships with outside agencies are possible and more community colleges should actively forge those relationships.

Zinger and Cohen (2010) reinforce previous recommendations such as creating a veteran center where veterans can obtain information regarding their specific support services and benefits and also provides an opportunity for veterans to connect with one another and gain some of the social support they require. Training that ensures college counselors are well versed in veteran affairs and sensitivity training for students, staff and faculty should be implemented to avoid insensitive comments that could have a negative impact on a student veteran’s success in community college (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Lastly, campus health services and counseling centers should be thoroughly trained in
identifying and supporting those individuals with PTSD and other nonvisible disabilities (Zinger & Cohen, 2010).

As seen in the previous section, despite the lack of research, there are ideas being put forward by scholars in an attempt to better support student veterans at community colleges. In addition, community colleges are implementing programs and services that aim to address the unique needs of a deserving population of students. Work has been done, but there is plenty still to do. As I look towards conducting my own study on the topic of veterans transitioning from the military to community colleges, it is imperative that the research is guided by the proper theoretical framework. The following section will discuss the chosen theory for this research.

**Schlossberg’s Transition Theory**

While attempting to understand the experiences of veterans from the military to community college, a transition theory that applied to nontraditional students was required in order to effectively guide my research. Theory grants a researcher the ability to appreciate aspects of a study that would otherwise go unnoticed while at the same time allowing the researcher to make sense of the gathered data (Merriam, 2001). Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) define transition as “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33). Major life transitions including leaving one lifestyle, such as the rigid structure of the military, and entering another, the lax higher education environment, can oftentimes be difficult and include a host of challenges (Wheeler, 2012). According to Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010), “Nancy Schlossberg’s transition theory provides insights into factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment that are likely to determine
the degree of impact a given transition will have at a particular time” (p. 212-213). Evans et al. (2010) argue that this theory typically applies to adult development but is still applicable to traditional college students as well.

**Ontological & Epistemological Assumptions**

Schwandt (2007) defines ontology as “the worldviews and assumptions in which researchers operate in their search for new knowledge” (p. 190). In layperson’s terms, ontology seeks to answer the question, what is reality? According to Evans et al. (2010), “Schlossberg asserted that adaptation was affected by the interaction of three sets of variables: the individual’s perception of the transition, characteristics of the pretransition and posttransition environments, and characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition” (p. 213).

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory as well as the work by Goodman et al. (2006) drew attention to the concept of perception. Similar to the relativist ontological assumption of the constructivist paradigm, an individual’s interpretation is key in their work. Evans et al. (2010) stated, “a transition exists only if it is so defined by the individual experiencing it. Changes may occur without the individual’s attaching much significance to them. Such changes would therefore not be considered transitions” (p. 215). Therefore, an individual’s interpretation of the situation, or their reality, is vital in determining if they are in fact going through a transition, and thus elements of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory may or may not be identified in the research.

Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) define epistemology as “the process of thinking. The relationship between what we know and what we see” (p. 103). Epistemology can also be referred to as how knowledge is created or how meaning is
made. The combination of the type of transition (anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevent), context, and the impact (positive and negative) is the determining factor in determining the meaning of a transition (Evans et al., 2010). Evans et al. (2010) stated, “The meaning attached to transitions by different individuals is relative, as is the way in which the transition is categorized by type. Again, the role of perception is important” (p. 215). In addition, from an epistemological perspective, the “knower” as it relates to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory is anyone who experiences a transition, which aligns with the interpretivist epistemological orientation. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory states that a transition can lead to growth or knowledge, but decline is also possible (Evans et al., 2010).

**Theoretical and Conceptual Components**

According to Anderson and Goodman (2014), “Regardless of the specific nature of the changes involved, a transition requires letting go of aspects of the self and former roles and moving toward a new emerging identity and roles” (p. 43). Schlossberg’s Transition Theory offers a framework through which to understand the process of transitioning as well as the factors that can either assist or inhibit a transition. As mentioned previously, core components that impact a transition include type of transition, the context, and the impact. There is not a defined length of time for a transition to take place nor will the experience be the same for any two individuals even if the transition circumstances are similar.

Based upon years of altering and adjusting, the 4S system of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory was created by Schlossberg and her associate researchers that outline the 4 major factors that impact an individual’s capacity to deal with a transition. These
factors include: situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). When assessing the *situation*, the following factors are influential: (1) trigger of the transition, (2) timing of the transition, (3) control of the transition, (4) role change, (5) duration, (6) previous experience with a similar transition, (7) concurrent stress, and (8) assessment (Evans et al., 2010). In regard to *self*, personal and demographic characteristics, or an individual’s position and background, along with psychosocial resources, such as an individual’s outlook on life or ego, are considered important on impacting a transition (Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011). The third S, *support*, can take a variety of forms such as institutional support, family, and friends (Ryan et al., 2011). The type of support can be fluid and fluctuate over time as well as the level of support (Evans et al., 2010). Lastly, *strategies* are related to the approaches an individual takes when handling a situation. According to Reppert, Buzzetta, and Rose (2014), “Coping may be intended to modify a situation, control the meaning of an issue, or an attempt to manage stress as a result of an event” (p. 88).

In addition, it is vital that an individual experiencing a transition participates in a process referred to as “an appraisal”. A primary appraisal denotes an individual’s perspective on the overall transition (Evans et al., 2010). The primary appraisal is viewed as positive, negative, and possibly even irrelevant. Secondary appraisals involve the self-assessment of one’s own levels of the 4S’s. The differing levels of the 4S’s between individuals explains “why different individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times” (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p. 57).
Critiques & Personal Applicability of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory

Evans et al. (2010) stated, “The complexity of the theory, as well as the lack of formal assessment tools, has undoubtedly given researchers pause when considering ways of testing its merits” (p. 225).

Although Schlossberg’s theory has not been validated statistically, I still believe Schlossberg’s Transition Theory is an appropriate theoretical approach for my dissertation research as I examine the transition experience of veterans from the military to community college. After reviewing literature for a great deal of time, I have been hard-pressed to come across a theory that focuses on nontraditional students in transition. With Schlossberg’s Transition Theory’s primary focus on adult learners, such as veterans, this theory seems like a productive fit. The theory places emphasis on the 4S’s in a transition (situation, self, support, strategies) which aligns very closely with my research questions of (1) how do veterans describe their transition experience from the military to community college, (2) how do veterans perceive institutional aspects of their transition, and (3) how do veterans perceive personal aspects of their transition? Having the aim of my dissertation being developing an understanding of the overall experience and the factors that impact the transition of veterans, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory seeks to provide theoretical framework to help tackle those research areas. By implementing this chosen theory into my dissertation research, I will not only be able to understand the experiences of veterans through their own perspective, but I will also be able to ground my recommendations for improving the transitions of veterans in Schlossberg’s Transition Theory coupled with my empirical findings.
Adopting an appropriate theory in which to frame a deductive study is, in my opinion, one of the most consequential decisions a researcher can make on a research project. Through the various empirical studies that have implemented Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, it is evident that the applicability and utility of this framework is wide-ranging and appropriate in qualitative studies in which researchers seek to understand experiences of people through their own perspectives. By choosing this theory for my dissertation research, I was able to deeply understand the veterans transitioning from the military to community college.

**Synthesis**

Across the limited research surrounding student veterans and their transition to community college, distinct themes were prevalent in the majority of the studies. One, transition is not easy. All of the studies cited student veterans experiencing some form of difficulty when leaving the military and subsequently enrolling at a community college. Issues include difficulty navigating the governmental and institutional bureaucracy, feelings of isolation on campus and disconnect between nonveteran students, and difficulty with personal relationships (Falkey, 2016; Heineman, 2016; Jones, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010;). Combine the issues with the unfortunate situation of 40% of veterans being afflicted with some form of a disability (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011), student veterans overcome a myriad of difficulties to be successful in higher education. Across the limited literature, similar recommendations on how community colleges can better serve this population were prevalent in the research. The recommendations include establishing a veteran’s center, providing sensitivity training to faculty, staff, and students regarding veteran issues, create veteran specific
programming which allows for student veterans to network with one another including a veteran-specific orientation, and create partnerships with outside veteran organizations.

As mentioned previously, there is very limited research on the topic of veterans transitioning to community college and the field is in desperate need of further research on the topic. In an attempt to highlight the existing literature while also drawing attention to existing gaps in research, a literature review table is provided for the eight main studies which includes the scope, methodology, and key findings of each study.

**Literature Review Table**

Table 2.4

*Literature Review Table – Research related to Student Veterans Transitioning to Community College*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zinger and Cohen (2010)</td>
<td>Explore the transition of veterans from the military to community college</td>
<td>Qualitative research design using structured interviews</td>
<td>Student veterans reported having PTSD; difficulty with relationships; overwhelmed in transition to college; difficulty concentrating; feeling of isolation and difficulty relating to peers; issues working with campus offices and processing G.I. benefit paperwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumann, Rivera, and Hernandez (2011)</td>
<td>Identified ways community colleges are ideal for supporting student veterans; emphasize need for more research on student veterans; recommendations are provided for</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>The ability of community colleges to cater to the needs of individuals makes them ideal for student veterans; several community colleges around the United States have implemented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
faculty and staff to better serve student veterans

veteran-specific programs such as a course that assists veterans in transition; veterans experience transition issues such as change in environments, feeling of disconnect with nonveteran peers, difficult navigating institutional bureaucracy and insensitive interactions with faculty;

Recommendations:
create veteran specific programming, institute campus-wide sensitivity training, create veteran networking events; there is very limited research on topic

Wheeler (2012)

Examine the transition process of veterans from the military to community college; attempt to understand the various changes and process veterans experience

Veterans chose community college for financial reasons, flexibility, remedial offerings and small classes; participants had feeling of isolation; difficulty navigating institutional bureaucracy; vets had negative view towards orientation; reestablishing relationships proved challenging; participants felt closer to veteran peers as compared to nonveterans; insensitivity exhibited by nonveteran students.

Recommendations: establish a veteran’s office on campus; offer programs that assist veterans in establishing
Pellegrino and Hoggan (2015)

Examine and better understand the transition of veterans from the military to community college; Takes into consideration gender and focuses on two female veterans

Both female participants faced a myriad of issues including difficulty finding child care, difficulty balancing school and family obligations, concerns regarding finances and processing of G.I. benefits, mixed experiences with faculty; husbands of participants were supportive of their desire to go back to school; military assisted in participants having the necessary skills to be successful in college; more focus needs to be placed on student veterans and their unique needs by community college administrators

Hammond (2016)

Sought to understand how perceptions of identity influenced the community college experience of student veterans who transition from the military to community college

Transitioning from the military to community college is an ongoing process; Participants felt that being a veteran was a significant part of their identity; Identifying as a veteran also impacted how the participants viewed nonveterans – often perceived as less mature and did not appreciate their education; due to transition skills; create opportunities for vets to network with other vets; institute a vet-specific orientation; sensitivity training for staff, students and faculty
interactions with nonveterans, participants often viewed themselves as mentally unstable; participants had strong connection with other veterans. Institutions should follow the “8 Keys to Veterans’ Success” which includes ideas such as centralize campus efforts for all veterans, collaborate with outside organizations, and provide professional development for faculty and staff related to student veterans; a veteran-specific orientation should be implemented; encourage veteran extracurricular participation to allow veterans to connect with institution; create a veterans’ service office; facilitate veteran interaction; establish sensitivity training for faculty, staff, and students; collaborate with local organizations and agencies.

Heineman (2016)

Examines what community colleges can do, and have done, in creating programming and policies to accommodate the unique set of needs of student veterans.

Qualitative – Exploratory

Falkey (2016)

Explores the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college.

Qualitative

Veterans face issues when transitioning from the military to community college including the need for remedial education, require on-campus support groups, PTSD, and TBI, financial concerns, interpersonal
issues, feelings of isolation, and difficulty navigating institutional departments.

Recommendations to better serve veterans:
Falkey (2016) cites other studies’ recommendations including provide professional development for faculty and staff to better work with veterans, establish a veteran center, provide programming and trained counselors who can address vets’ health issues (Cook & Kim, 2009); identify specific points of contact for veterans, create partnerships with outside organizations, create a veteran campus group, and streamline veteran services (O’Herrin, 2011); Falkey (2016) concludes by mentioning actual programs at community colleges including Montgomery Community College and San Diego Community College.

Jones (2017)

Inadequacy of current models in understanding the transition; student veterans do not participate in programming designed for them; vets lacked preexisting knowledge on how to navigate higher education; lack of

Describe the lived experiences of combat veterans who were transitioning from the military to community college. Transcendental phenomenological study.
knowledge about veterans’ issues by college staff; student veterans did not interact with other students on campus; family and friends were significant support during transition; difficult transitioning from regimented military lifestyle to college; there is a large gap in research on topic

Recommendations: create an office that handles all veteran issues; training for faculty and staff on how to support veterans.

Actual programs and services that were implemented across the U.S. at various community colleges are cited in the literature as well. However, studies that focused on the effectiveness or impact of a service or program aimed at veterans in community colleges were not found. Examples were given of community colleges implementing programs such as at Montgomery Community College and San Diego Community College, but there was no mention of if these programs were utilized by the students in which they aimed to serve or if any assessment was completed to determine the usefulness of the service/program.

Conclusion

The military and higher education have had a complex relationship that spans hundreds of years in the United States. The political and social factors that encouraged or inhibited the aforementioned relationship were highlighted throughout the initial section
of this chapter which included pieces of legislation such as the Morrill Act of 1862 that provided funding at land-grant institutions for military training. It was not until after WWII that the relationship between institutions of higher education and the military would be put to the ultimate test when returning soldiers flooded college campuses across the country. Colleges and universities were pleasantly surprised with the level of motivation and superb academic performance exhibited by the veterans (Olson, 1973). However, as governmental funding waned, in the form of revised versions of the G.I. Bill, veterans were less of a presence on campuses and would hide their veteran identity as public opinion towards the military shifted, as seen during the Vietnam War (Horan, 1990).

After the passage of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill in 2008, and implementation in 2009, veterans of the War on Terror have taken advantage of the most significant revision to the G.I. Bill since its inception in 1944 (Caspers & Ackerman, 2012). The plurality, or 43%, of veterans have chosen to utilize their benefits at community colleges (Wheeler, 2012). Rumann et al., (2011) stated, “Community colleges are also geared toward serving a nontraditional student population, which may make them an attractive alternative to student veterans who are trying to transition back into the civilian world following military service” (p. 56).

When making a significant life change such as leaving the military, a highly regimented environment, and transitioning to higher education, a less structured and relaxed setting, issues are sure to arise. Falkey (2016) states, “Today’s student veterans bring many challenges to higher education, such as relocation, academic skills, lack of continuity education, physical issues, psychological issues, and social isolation” (p. 27).
These students may feel like an outsider in the college community and feel as if they do not belong.

The success of a student veteran in higher education falls largely on the individual, but debatably just as much on the institution (Hermann, Raybeck, and Wilson, 2008). Despite 43% of student veterans enrolling in community colleges after returning from the military (Wheeler, 2012), the U.S. Department of Education statistics found that public 4-year institutions were more likely to provide support services specifically for veterans than community colleges (Miles, 2014). With the large influx of student veterans attending higher education, institutions, faculty, and staff must develop a grasp of the unique needs of this increasing student population (Vacchi, 2012).

As a qualitative researcher who seeks to use a theoretical framework that will both contribute to understanding as well as provide a basis for recommending policy and support changes for veterans as they transition to community college, I argue Schlossberg’s Transition Theory is a logical and appropriate fit. This theory is specifically aimed at addressing the transition experiences of adult learners and focuses on the elements of a transition that my research questions address. In addition, as a researcher who identifies as a constructivist who draws heavily from the interpretive tradition, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory is once again in agreement with my personal research beliefs and assumptions.

Student veterans are a valuable resource that community colleges can utilize and thus improve the college experience for both veterans and nonveterans. This population should be asked about what services and programs are beneficial for their transition instead of having institutional bureaucrats deciding what they think is best. Rumann et
al., (2011) encompasses the philosophy that all community colleges should follow and stated, “Rather than feeling silenced, student veterans’ voices need to be heard” (p. 57).
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of my study is to understand the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college and draw special attention to the institutional and personal aspects of student veterans experiences. The site of my study was a community college in the Southeastern United States. In Chapter Two, I provided extensive background and context concerning the interconnectedness of the military and higher education spanning a period of over two hundred years. A brief, yet concise, historical account of community colleges was stated in addition to providing a profile of the typical student that this study would revolve around. Next, I addressed the literature concerning the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college while drawing parallels to student veterans experiencing similar situations at four-year institutions. The lack of empirical research regarding the topic was brought to the forefront of the literature review and the need for further research on the topic was stressed. Chapter Two concluded with a discussion of the conceptual framework that informed this study, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory.

Building upon the literature review as well as the theoretical foundation established in Chapter Two, the subsequent chapter addresses the following methodical components of this study: methodological design, research questions, the research design, ontological and epistemological orientations, positionality statement, research site, participant selection and description, data collection, unit of analysis, validity, reliability
and trustworthiness, data analysis and coding, and research ethics. This chapter laid the groundwork and thought processes behind every decision made both before and during this case study. Chapter 3 will put the reader’s mind at ease that this study was conducted in a thoughtful and ethical manner and the themes presented were supported through sound research and grounded in theory.

**Methodological Design**

According to Schwandt (2001), methodology can be defined as “analysis of the assumptions, principles, and procedures in a particular approach to inquiry” (p. 161). I found choosing a methodological design to be a difficult and grueling process. The first step in choosing the methodology was choosing if I would complete a quantitative or qualitative study. The research questions associated with a study served as the basis on which I delineated the choice. I accounted for the kinds of research questions I was asking, my personal view on how knowledge and reality are created, and the type of knowledge I sought to produce (Merriam, 2001). As I sought to understand the lived experiences of a group of people from their perspectives, qualitative research became the appropriate methodological choice. Sherman and Webb (1988) stated qualitative research “implies a direct concern with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’” (p. 7).

Interpretivists in qualitative research believe that individuals construct their own reality constitute their social worlds through their interactions (Merriam, 2001). Many qualitative research projects closely align with the interpretive tradition as well as the constructivist paradigm, both of which I ascribe to personally in my views on reality and how knowledge is created.
Qualitative researchers seek to understand unique situations “as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of [a particular] setting” (Patton, 1985, p. 1). All qualitative research, regardless of specific type, share a series of common characteristics including the goal to understand, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection, fieldwork as a process of gathering data, and findings represented in rich detail (Merriam, 2001).

For this particular study, I sought to understand the transition experience of veterans from the military to community college and chose a qualitative case study design. Yin (2018) defines a case study as “an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 15). Merriam (2001) describes a case study as an intensive and rich description of a single phenomenon. In addition, this methodology is often accompanied with more variables of interest than data points, is better situated when coupled with a theoretical framework that guides the study and relies on multiple sources of data that are required to converge and triangulate (Yin, 2018).

Yin (2018) suggests conducting a case study if “how” or “why” research questions are used, the researcher does not plan to artificially control behavioral events, and the focus of the study is contemporary. Case studies are the preferred methodology when researchers seek to study a phenomenon and the aim is not the manipulation of behaviors (Yin, 2018). Based upon my research questions which were “how” questions, a
case study methodology was deemed appropriate. In addition, because since little is known about the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college, the phenomenon needed to be examined in a manner that would capture the details of everyday lived experiences.

Ensuring that a chosen methodology aligns with a researcher’s ontological and epistemological orientation is also a pivotal factor when attempting to craft a cohesive study. Based upon my own ontological and epistemological beliefs, including following the constructivist paradigm, espousing a relativist perspective, and a transactional orientation, I believe that reality is created by the individual based upon their prior experiences and is left to individual interpretation. According to Yin (2018), case study research is excellently situated to accommodate a relativist perspective which acknowledges multiple realities. As the goal of my research was to capture the experiences of veterans as they view them, a case study was an appropriate choice.

**Research Questions**

After conducting a thorough and comprehensive literature review, a gap in the literature was evident surrounding student veterans and their experiences as they transition from the military to community college. The limited available empirical research pointed to institutional and personal aspects of a student veteran’s life playing a significant role and impacting the overall transition. As such, the following research questions were formulated to address the distinct gap and further investigate the limited claims surrounding the topic of study:

1. How do student veterans describe their transition experience from the military to community college?
2. How do student veterans perceive their transition?

   a. Institutional aspects?
      
      i. Bureaucratically
      ii. Leadership/Resources/Support
      iii. Classroom/Curriculum
      iv. Co-curricular/extra-curricular

   b. Personal aspects?
      
      i. Emotionally
      ii. Logistically

Research Design

At the most basic level, through the research of this dissertation I aimed to develop a deeper understanding and discover the nuances of transitions of veterans from the military to community college. The first step after selecting a case study as the methodology of choice was the design stage. Yin (2018) stated, “the design is the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study’s initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions” (p. 26). In other words, a research design is a blueprint that maps out the way in which a researcher will draw conclusions based off data retrieved through a particular method that seeks to answer the initial research questions. By creating a research design, a researcher will hopefully avoid the scenario in which the evidence and data gathered do not address the original research questions.

The first component of a research design of a case study includes the research questions. The two questions of this study have been stated previously and were constructed in a manner to gather the richest data possible regarding a phenomenon of
which little is known. I used Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to develop the details of Research Question #2.

The next component of design is defining and bounding the case. It is important to both define and bound the case so that the data that is gathered is meaningful and appropriately answers the research questions. If the phenomenon is not bounded, it is not a true case (Merriam, 2001). For this study, the case is the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college. In this particular study the case is also my unit of analysis – the transition experiences of veterans at a community college in the southeast. Lastly, unlike quantitative analysis that has statistical benchmarks in place to determine if gathered data is significant or not, researchers who conduct qualitative case studies identify and address outliers and rival findings (Yin, 2018) to maintain context and build trustworthiness.

Theory can have a role in the research design of a qualitative case study. Vaughan (1992) stated, “The paradox of theory is that at the same time it tells us where to look, it can keep us from seeing” (p. 195). By this Vaughan (1992) means that theory can guide research but can also cloud our data gathering and analysis by priming us to only see data that aligns with the theoretical framework. Theory must be approached and utilized with caution as it can have a powerful effect on a study.

**Ontological and Epistemological Orientation**

Hatt (2012) stated, “in conducting research it is vital we attempt to better understand people’s interpretations and experiences…while also reflecting on where we stand as researchers and how we construct knowledge” (p. 445). As a qualitative researcher, my understandings of the world, how knowledge is created, and my personal
Perspective played a role in my research; therefore, it is important to disclose them here. The aim of this section is to make known my personal ontological and epistemological beliefs to the reader to offer transparency and build trustworthiness. Before beginning my research, I wrote about my epistemological and ontological orientations and my positionality as a part of a reflexive process at the outset of the research.

Ontology, or as Grix (2002) simply states, “what is out there to know” (p. 180), is a complex, yet vital first step and building block in the research process. In regard to research, an individual’s ontological beliefs seek to answer the question, “What is the nature of the phenomena, or entities, or social ‘reality’ that I wish to investigate?” (Mason, 2002, p. 14).

Grix (2002) states, “It is of paramount importance that students understand how a particular view of the world affects the whole research process” (p. 179). Therefore, the relationship between conducting research and an individual’s ontological positioning is explained in further detail. Before a research question is established, which many believe is the guiding force behind all research, the majority of research begins with one’s worldview, which then inspires the research project. An individual’s ontological perspective, or their idea of what can be researched, leads into the research question, and ultimately guides the entire research process. An individual’s worldview will affect just about every step of the research process including their research question, methodology, and even the way a researcher interprets the data retrieved. In summation, it is valuable to acknowledge and understand one’s own ontological perspective due to the vast impact it has on research overall.
My research was approached from a constructivist theoretical paradigm that follows the relativist ontological approach. It is my belief that within the context of the social world and when researching social phenomena, “reality” is an individual’s experiences. To further elaborate, I believe that the nature of social reality includes an individual’s own interpretation of the world based upon their prior experiences, beliefs, identities, and their ability to make meaning out of situations or attach meaning to items or objects (Prasad, 2005). As such, there is not one fixed or single reality because individuals will create their own realities based off their interpretations.

Within the context of the social world, my definition of the term “truth” is housed within the individual. By this I mean that based off an individual’s interpretation of reality, they themselves will create a personal definition of a “truth”. This will vary from individual to individual as a result of each person constructing their own reality based off their interpretations. A person’s values also come into play because an individual’s values guide their research and ultimately what they view as a “truth”.

The idea of “reality” and “truth” are both left to interpretation. Both concepts are subjective and there is not one correct interpretation, nor is one interpretation valued greater than another. Both are housed within the individual and each person will have a different idea of what actually constitutes the two ideas.

My relativist ontological assumptions are based off both personal experiences of my life as well as my disciplinary background in education. I do not subscribe to the thought that simply because people come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, practice the same religion, and are raised in similar households, that they will have the
same sense of “reality”. Everyone has different experiences, which have different effects on how an individual views reality as well as what they view as a “truth”.

Epistemology, though similar to ontology, is a separate component of the research process. According to Mason (2002), “Your epistemology is, literally, your theory of knowledge, and should therefore concern the principles and rules by which you decide whether and how social phenomena can be known, and how knowledge can be demonstrated” (p. 16). Remaining consistent with my ontological beliefs, my epistemological perspective would most closely be classified as transactional or subjective where there are multiple “realities” which vary by individual and their interpretation of events and experiences (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Prasad (2005) states, “All interpretive traditions emerge from a scholarly position that takes human interpretation as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world” (p. 13).

Following this framework, I view knowledge as an individual’s experiences and ultimately their interpretation of said experiences. Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) expand on what is defined as knowledge under the constructivist paradigm and define it as “individual or collective reconstructions coalescing around consensus” (p. 99). The authors shed light on an important aspect knowledge under the constructivist paradigm: consensus. General agreement often plays a role in what constructivists view as knowledge. Those who identify with this paradigm create knowledge based from their own interpretations, while also comparing their interpretation against what others see as knowledge. Therefore, I believe that I know what I know because of interaction with and confirmation received from the social world.
Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

As I addressed in Chapter Two, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory has been implemented in research involving adult learners (Evans et al., 2010) and is used frequently in studies surrounding college students. Specifically, the work by Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) described how Schlossberg’s Transition Theory can be implemented in the higher education setting aimed at supporting nontraditional students including adult learners. Applying Schlossberg’s Transition Theory provides a variety of opportunities for practitioners as well as for researchers. This theory allows qualitative researchers to develop an in-depth understanding of transitions and the ways people experience them. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory not only allows researchers to develop a deeper understanding of how a student progresses through a life transition, but it can also serve as theoretical framework on which to base interventions aimed at assisting students. (Champagne and Petitpas, 1989).

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory in constructed in a manner that enables a researcher to pursue primarily qualitative research questions aimed at understanding the transition experiences of a group of people which is evident when discussing the findings in Chapter Four. This theory was appropriate in this study because I aimed to understand the transition experiences of a group of individuals from their emic perspectives.

Positionality

A researcher’s positionality encompasses a host of personal characteristics including gender, race, beliefs, biases, personal experiences, and age, just to name a few (Berger, 2015). These characteristics, identities, roles, positions, commitments, and beliefs can have an impact on a study including impacting a researcher’s access to the
population of interest. For example, a potential participant may be more willing to agree to participate and divulge more details regarding their experiences if the researcher has a similar positioning to that participant (De Tona, 2006).

I personally conducted all interviews, focus groups, and examined documents (social media activity); therefore, I am the primary instrument for data collection. For the purposes of transparency, I believe it is of the utmost importance to divulge my positionality related to this dissertation research. I am a mid-20s, middle-class, Caucasian male who was born and raised in the Midwest. I am a southern transplant and currently employed as a student affairs administrator at the University of South Carolina, where I received my master’s degree. I have never been an active duty member of the military, nor do I have immediate family members or friends who are veterans. In addition, I have never attended Southern Plains Community College, nor do I have any connection to the institution. By all definitions, I am an outsider to the research site and participants. And by outsider, I refer to a person who does not belong to the group being studied based off of personal identification and shared experiences (Gair, 2012).

There are benefits and limitations in having an outsider status. Due to my distance from the research topic, I entered the process with very little tacit knowledge about the site and participants. Being an outsider allowed me to analyze the results in a fair and balanced manner and the temptation to spin the results in a manner that aligns with my personal beliefs regarding the world as socially constructed was limited. However, due to the lack of connections to the study participants, I feared that I may be at a disadvantage in regard to a participant’s willingness to participate and divulge information, as compared to if an actual student veteran were to conduct this study. I did not find this to
be the case in this study. The student veteran research participants were extremely willing to participate and provided thoughtful and descriptive responses during both the interviews as well as the focus groups.

**Research Site**

Choosing community colleges over four-year institutions proved a simple, yet purposeful decision due to the 43% of veterans choosing to attend community college (Wheeler, 2012) as well as the lack of available literature on the topic despite community colleges being the largest server of this student population. It was of the utmost importance that the selected site contained buy-in from both the administration as well as the students and that both parties understood the importance and impact this study could have on its student veteran population. Southern Plains Community College (SPCC) had both of these aspects present through the enthusiasm expressed by both the veteran center coordinator, upper-level administration, as well as the student veterans who participated in the study. All parties involved voiced their strong support for the study and stressed that the research being conducted was a way to better serve student veterans at their community college and beyond. The study examined one community/technical colleges in the southeastern region of the United States.

Due to the plethora of military bases located within the region and a significant population of veterans residing in the region (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010) and attending the community college (n = 1,000+), Southern Plains Community College made for an ideal location to recruit quality research participants for this study as the veteran population accounted for roughly 7% of the total student population. SPCC is located within a few miles of a large military base that is well associated with the
community college and funnels a significant population of student veterans to the institution every year. Additionally, SPCC was the only college in the state with this size student veteran population. Further research can occur in other states and/or multiple sites across the country with significant veteran populations or areas that are located surrounding military bases.

SPCC was also chosen due to the ease of access to the student veteran population. I owe a great deal of gratitude to a personal contact who previously worked at SPCC as a student veteran liaison and was able to utilize his contacts to arrange a meeting with the veteran services coordinator. The coordinator, referred to as Angela for anonymity, was overwhelmed and extremely receptive to the idea of having a study conducted aimed at assisting the student veteran population. Angela then sought and gained the approval from her supervisor and offered to host me in the veteran success center.

To provide further context and description of SPCC, Katsinas (2003) provides a series of guiding principles to consider when classifying two-year institutions including institutional control, governance, geographic locale, and size. Classification of institutions, particularly two-year, is useful and “help frame how we know what we know” (Katsinas, 2003, p. 19). By having a system of classification for institutions of higher education, a system of benchmarks can be created to aid in the process of assessment and improving educational practices (Katsinas, 2003). The first major classification to consider is institutional control. SPCC is a publicly-operated and controlled two-year institution. In regard to governance, SPCC is a multi-campus community college system. However, this case study was conducted only at the main campus due to the majority of student veterans attending this branch. According to the
National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), SPCC is classified as a large suburban two-year institution with roughly 14,000 students. Of that student population, SPCC serves more than 1,000 enrolled student veterans and the institution touts that it serves as the one of the largest sources of transfer students to the nearby large 4-year research institution.

**Participant Selection and Description**

Selecting participants for this study was approached in a purposeful and selective manner in hopes of obtaining the richest data possible. The number of participants in any given study largely depends on the research questions being posed, the data that is sought, and the resources that are available to support the study (Merriam, 2001). After consulting with my dissertation chair, the target was to gather around 8-15 research participants. Ultimately 15 participants were interviewed, and 11/15 student veterans participated in the focus groups.

The initial goal was the have representation from all five military branches (Army, Navy, Coast Guard, Marines, and Air Force). However, due to the geographic location of SPCC and the type of surrounding military bases, a participant from the Coast Guard was not represented in this study. This limitation will be discussed in Chapter Five and provides an option for future research on a group of student veterans who were not able to be contacted for this particular study.

By recruiting 8-15 research participants, the aim was to triangulate the data through three independent sources and be able to draw common themes from the data gathered. Yin (2018) encourages data triangulation, or the method of using multiple data-gathering techniques. If common patterns emerge after utilizing multiple data-gathering
techniques and analyzing the data gathered from the three or more independent data sources, the trustworthiness of the themes and conclusions reached in the study will be greater.

In regard to accessing this population of students, contact was made with the veteran services office at Southern Plains Community College, located in the southeastern region of the United States. I made multiple visits to the Veteran Center and was able to actively recruit from the student veterans who frequented the center. Specific criterion for the research participants were established: (1) being a veteran that was honorably discharged from the United States military from one of the five main branches, (2) discharged from the military within the past five years, and (3) be a currently enrolled student in community college maintaining at least a half-time enrollment status (6 credits per semester). Criterion driven sampling is referred to as purposive, or purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was used initially to identify 10 of the 15 student veterans. Special attention was paid to ensure that before the student veterans were accepted into the study, they met the selection criteria, understood the study, and signed the letter of intent to participate. Also, the Veteran Center coordinator was able to tap into some of her personal contacts at Southern Plains Community College (SPCC) and encourage them to participate in this study.

Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) describe purposive sampling as “the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses” (p. 2). This is a nonrandom form of sampling that is oftentimes used in qualitative research as a way to identify individuals that are well-informed of the phenomenon being researched (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposive/purposeful sampling operates under the
assumption that the researcher seeks to understand, not generalize, and therefore a sample that will return the richest and useful data must be selected (Merriam, 2001). Unlike studies that incorporate random sampling methods which aim to include a representative sample of a population, purposive samplings seek to accomplish the opposite and identify individuals that meet a certain list of characteristics who are willing to participate in the study in order to provide data that is rich in detail.

In addition, snowball sampling was utilized with research participants in an effort to recruit more student veterans through the process of referral (Merriam, 2001). However, the contacts must also have met the criteria of the study. Dusek, Yurova, and Ruppel (2015) define snowball sampling as “when a qualified participant shares an invitation with other subjects similar to them who fulfill the qualifications defined for the targeted population” (p. 281). Snowball sampling is often implemented when a population is known to exist and hard to reach, such as veterans, and the researcher hopes to be connected to the population through an initial point of contact (Dusek et al., 2015). Ten of the fifteen student veterans research participants were recruited using purposeful sampling, while 5 of the fifteen research participants were recruited using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was implemented at the very beginning of the study and continued throughout the duration of the data collection phase as a way to increase participation in the study. After every interview conducted, the research participant was asked if they had any other student veteran contacts that may be interested in also being part of the study. Contact was subsequently made with the referrals which ultimately resulted in five participants gathered through snowball sampling.
Additionally, an attempt was made in this study to gather a sample of student veterans that was as representative as possible of the makeup of the actual U.S. Military in regard to the branches of the military. According to the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness (2018), the Army accounts for roughly 36% of the total armed services, Navy and Air Force are each roughly 24%, and the Marines makeup roughly 14% of the United States military. For this study, the Army accounted for 40%, the Navy was 13%, Air Force was 20% and Marines represented 26% of the total sample. The Army was most accurately represented while the Marines were slightly overrepresented, and the Navy and Air Force were slightly underrepresented. I did not deem this to have a negative impact on the study nor should it be interpreted as lessening the trustworthiness and reliability of the conclusions reached. The less-than-perfect representation of the branches of the military can be viewed as a limitation but should be viewed more as an opportunity for future research. Future research that “perfectly” represents the actual composition of the military can be conducted to support or refute the findings of this study. However, citing precedent and qualitative research in general, it is not required for samples to perfectly represent the composition of the larger population from which the sample is drawn, nor is the aim of qualitative research to generalize the results of the study to the entire population as it is commonly for quantitative research.

The research participants also had varying military ranks. It is the opinion of this researcher that rank did not have an impact on the quality of data or the participant’s willingness to share information regarding their transition. To ensure the anonymity of the student veterans, the rank is not included in Table 4.1 but is provided in general terms.
for context. The ranks are broken down into the following: corporal (2), sergeant (6), master sergeant (1), lieutenant (2), specialist (1), senior airman (2), and captain (1).

When gathering the research participants, representation of multiple races was also placed at the forefront and viewed as an important aspect to consider. I did not want to conduct a study that consisted of student veterans from only one racial background but placed special effort to recruit a diverse sample. Of the 15 research participants, 4 identified as White, 4 identified as African American, 2 identified as Middle Eastern, 2 identified as Hispanic, 1 identified as Asian, and 2 identified as mixed or mentioned more than 1 race.

The ages of the research participants also varied. The age range included a 30-year gap and had student veterans as young as 22 and as senior as 52 with the average age being roughly 34 years old. The hope in having a wide age range and not setting a specific criterion in regard to age was to gain a variety of different perspectives from student veterans who were more around the age of the typical nontraditional student, 25+ (NCES, 2016), and perspectives from older students who are farther removed from the educational system in general and transition back into an environment they have either never experienced or have been removed from for quite some time. Lastly, Participants 6 and 7 were the only student veterans who had enrolled in community college previously while the other 13 participants did not have any previous higher education experience.

Table 3.1

**Student Veteran Research Participant Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Branch of Military</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Marines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Military Branch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Asian/Hispanic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Marines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muhammad</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenny</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Navy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isiah</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>African American/Asian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Marines</td>
</tr>
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<td>David</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Marines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
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<td>Asian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Navy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Risks & Benefits to Participants**

Recalling military experience and experiences involving transitioning from one way of life to another can be very emotional. As a result, there were not any physical risks to participants by participating in this study, but some participants did get quite emotional during the study. For example, one of the participants exhibited signs of sorrow and frustration when he mentioned his continued struggle with PTSD and how it has impacted him academically, socially, and emotionally. Reliving experiences can be painful and cause internal distress. It was of utmost importance during my study to cause as little stress or discomfort as possible when interviewing participants. Properly constructing the interview protocol with questions that were phrased in a manner that was
sensitive and respectful to the military as well as reading body language to know when to take a break from interviewing or change the subject when a participant is clearly uncomfortable were some of the methods I implemented to reduce risks to participants.

On the other hand, research participants benefitted from joining the study. Speaking about traumatic experiences can be therapeutic for some individuals and can help them understand their experiences (Rosetto, 2014). This benefit is realistic and through careful observations of the research participants, it is my belief that some individuals felt a sense of relief after participating in the study.

Data Collection

Merriam (2001) stated, “Data are nothing more than ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment” (p. 70). The case for whether or not data is included in the study relies solely on the perspective and interest of the researcher (Merriam, 2001). As previously stated, case studies require three or more independent sources of data. Data collection in a case study can be an interactive process, one source leading to other sources of data (Merriam, 2001). In this research, my data collection process included completing 22 individual interviews with 15 student veterans, 3 focus group sessions with 11/15 student veterans, and examined the Twitter accounts of the student veteran research participants, if applicable.

Individual Interviews

Patton (1990) stated, “We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe…We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time” (p. 196). I implemented an interview protocol that included 17 open-ended and semi-open-ended
questions, to gain a deeper understanding of the transition experiences of student veterans to community colleges. *(See Appendix A)*. In an attempt to utilize an interview protocol that gathers the richest data possible, I shared the protocol draft with my personal student veteran contacts and allowed them to review the questions. By doing so, I hoped to gain feedback and a different perspective to formulate questions that truly capture the veteran experience as they transition from the military to community college.

Before sharing the protocol, I had a list of about 10 questions in which to ask the research participants. However, after having the student veteran contacts review the interview protocol, they brought important aspects of a transition to my attention that student veterans may experience as opposed to different groups of students who are transitioning. For example, the words “war zone” were removed from question #7 due to making the decision to not limit the focus of my study to just veterans who served in combat, but to be inclusive and include non-combat veterans as well. The input from the student veterans added a personal styling to the wording of the questions that aided in gathering rich and thick description in the responses to the interview protocol *(see Appendix B for original interview protocol)*.

Multiple rounds of interviewing were implemented with 7 of the 15 research participants and followed a semi-structured format that lasted about 60-90 minutes per interview. By utilizing a semi-structured format instead of a structured format, participants had the opportunity to speak about their experiences in an organic manner that may not have been elicited by the interview questions alone. Utilizing a semi-structured format allowed me as the researcher to respond in an appropriate manner throughout the interview and adjust the questioning and flow as was needed. For
example, if a research participant addressed the topic of a succeeding question, I would jump ahead to that question to keep the participant speaking about that topic instead of changing the subject and then jumping back to the topic they were already speaking about but were redirected.

The interviews were recorded, and I transcribed them using the app, Otter. The fact that the research participants were being recorded was fully disclosed both verbally and in the letter of intent to participate that I provided to each research participant before they participated in the study.

However, Taylor and Bogdan (1984) recommend a researcher address key issues at the start of every interview: motive and purpose, protecting participants, and fidelity of interpretation. The first issue is the researcher’s motives and purpose regarding the research. I was completely upfront with each of the student veteran research participants and relayed to them the purpose of the study was to learn more about their experiences so positive institutional change can occur and proper support systems can be put into place for future veterans. In addition, I disclosed that the interview was part of my dissertation research and the intent was purely research-based and educational.

The next key issue was ensuring the protection of the research participants. To accomplish this, I informed the student veterans that I would be utilizing pseudonyms. I have used pseudonyms throughout the discussion of the findings to protect their identity and have not included any identifiable information.

The third issue Taylor and Bogdan (1984) raise is being clear about which party has the final say over what is relayed in the study. I implemented member checking with the participants after data was collected and analysis was complete. I did this to ensure
that I best captured the voice and essence of the participants and that I was not describing their experience in a misleading manner. Additionally, a consent form was given to the participants to sign that explained in detail the previously mentioned topics of concern including the motivation behind the research and how I am using their information (See Appendix C).

After conducting the first round of interviews with the participants, follow-up interviews were scheduled with certain participants who I believed impactful data could be retrieved from further interaction. Follow-up interviews were also scheduled if I, as the researcher, deemed that the participant had a greater chance of opening up in a second interview once trust and rapport were established in the first interview. Additional interviews were scheduled if I deemed the respondents were “good” respondents as Merriam (2001) describes, or research participants who easily express their thoughts, emotions, experiences, and their unique perspective. It is worth noting that 13 of the 15 research participants were asked back for a second round of interviewing. However, due to scheduling and participants willingness to complete another interview, ultimately 7 follow-up interviews were conducted. The interview protocol remained the same as the initial interview, but participants were observed as being more relaxed during the second interviews and divulged more information. It is my opinion that the interviewer/respondent relationship proved pivotal in the quality of data gathered for this research. The interviews were conducted over a semester-length of time in the Fall of 2018.
Focus Groups

Focus groups are an effective manner in which to collect information from a group of people who share common characteristics (Kreuger & Casey, 2000). Three focus group sessions were conducted during the Fall of 2018. The majority of the interview protocol (Appendix A) was utilized during the focus groups. It was not necessary to repeat questions related to demographics or some of the more closed-ended questions as the responses would not change. Questions 1 and 17 were excluded from the focus group sessions. Three focus group sessions were conducted with 3 participants in the first focus group, 5 participants in the second focus group, and 3 participants in the third focus group. Each session lasted for roughly 2 hours. I audio recorded the focus groups using the app, Otter. See Table 3.1 for the schedule of the focus group sessions.

Table 3.2

Schedule of Focus Group Sessions and Number of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Date</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November 12, 2018</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 14, 2018</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 19, 2018</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

New data and responses arose from focus group interaction that was not present in the individual interviews conducted prior to the focus groups. Some of the research participants appeared to be more apt to discuss transition in a group setting. There was concern expressed by a committee member who researches veterans before conducting the focus groups that focus groups may not be a productive method of data collection.
because student veterans of varying rank might be reluctant to speak out with possible higher ranking servicemembers in the room. However, I did not find this to be the case in the slightest. All of the research participants were engaging and quite rambunctious at times discussing their military service. I did not note reluctance to speak on the topics that were addressed in the focus groups. For the purpose of context, the ranks are broken down into the following: corporal (2), sergeant (6), master sergeant (1), lieutenant (2), specialist (1), senior airman (2), and captain (1).

**Social Media**

Lastly, examining social media posts provided data that was helpful when researching for this study because social media is the place where many people voice their opinions freely and honestly. I often equate social media as being the 21st century version of a diary where thoughts and feelings are expressed. With the ever-growing popularity of social media, examining the student veterans’ social media accounts, specifically Twitter, proved fruitful in the effort to delve deeper into their personal thoughts and feelings on their transition.

After each individual interview concluded, I asked each student veteran about their social media platforms and if they were comfortable and willing to accept a “follow request” from me. One must proceed with caution when examining and incorporating documents into research and keep in mind that despite bias that may be present in a personal document, the document will most likely reflect the participant’s perspective which is what most qualitative research seeks (Merriam, 2001). Social media activity were gathered from the participants from the time they were leaving the military to the Fall of 2018. Gathering this data included scrolling through participant’s social media
“feeds” and examining their posts in search of posts related to their transition. Results of the social media analysis, including screenshots of posts, will be highlighted in Chapter 4 when the findings are discussed in great detail. Table 3.2 provides additional information regarding the research participants who had Twitter accounts. As shown in Table 3.2, 10/15 or 67% of the student veterans utilized Twitter as a form of social media. It was my decision to exclusively focus on Twitter as compared to other forms of social media due to Twitter being the most popular amongst the student veterans.

Table 3.3

*Utilization of Twitter by Student Veteran Research Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participant</th>
<th>Twitter Account</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Triangulation, or the process of comparing data that was retrieved in different manners in order to determine if the phenomenon under examination remains the same and similar results are produced (Stake, 1995) was key in this study. Data was gathered through multiple techniques including interviews, focus groups, and social media. Only points that were made across all three unique sources became themes that will be discussed in Chapter Four.

**Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis was the transition experiences of student veterans who were attending college at a two-year institution in the southeastern region of the United States. The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of this population as they transitioned from the military to community college including what institutional and personal aspects impacted their transition.

In an effort to demonstrate the connection between the research questions and the individual and focus group interview questions, Table 3.2 was constructed. As evidenced in the table, every question from the interview protocol does not address every research question. However, all research questions are addressed across the entire interview protocol. Question 1, which sought demographic information, is excluded from this table.

Table 3.4  
*The Interconnectedness between the Research Questions and the Interview Protocol*
### Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do student veterans describe their transition experience from the military to community college?</th>
<th>How do student veterans perceive institutional aspects of their transition?</th>
<th>How do student veterans perceive personal aspects of their transition?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How long did you serve in the military? What motivated you to join the military?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What motivated you to enroll in college after you returned from your service?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did you choose community college over a 4-year institution?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What role, if any, did receiving the G.I. Bill play into your decision to enroll in college, or specifically community college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What expectations about higher education, or community college, did you have before enrolling in college? How were your expectations met or not met? Please describe what the transition was like for you coming back to college after your military service. What difficulties did you face at community college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How was the transition in regard to academics? What was your experience being in the classroom?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How was your transition experience related to your social relationships?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What role did your family or peers play?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has your daily life schedule changed since enrolling in community college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How was your experience transitioning back to civilian life?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have been sources of support during your transition? (e.g., family support, peers, college services)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What roles did various community college offices play during your transition back to college life? Were there any offices that you can recall that were helpful? Not helpful?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When working with a department on campus, how important was it for you to deal with another veteran staff members as compared to a nonveteran? What characteristics were you looking for in a non-veteran staff member when you were seeking assistance on campus?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What resources were available to you? (Financial, social, networking opportunities) Did you utilize any of the resources that the military offered to you?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What was your experience accessing and utilizing these resources? If yes to utilizing military resources, how did community college resources compare to military resources?

X  X

How did you learn about campus resources?

X  X

What type of resources do you wish were available to you when you were transitioning to community college? Did you participate in any military-based education programs while in service? If yes, how was it different from your community college experience? What do you think institutions of higher education do not understand about veterans?

X  X

Do you recall expressing any of your transition experiences through social media? If yes, will you approve me “friending” you on social media so I can review your posts?

X  X  X

---

**Validity and Trustworthiness**

Merriam (2001) stated, “Choosing a qualitative research design presupposes a certain view of the world that in turn defines how a researcher selects a sample, collects data, analyzes data, and approaches issues of validity, reliability, and ethics” (p. 151). In an effort to be as transparent as possible and to enhance the rigor of research designs, a series of strategies have been established that some qualitative researchers use to evaluate
the quality of qualitative research. The strategies that will be discussed include internal validity, reflexivity, and the use of analytic memos. It is important to disclose how I strove to demonstrate these criteria throughout his study in an effort to demonstrate trustworthiness of the findings. Research studies are trustworthy to the degree that validity and trustworthiness has been considered (Merriam, 2001).

**Internal Validity**

Internal validity is primarily concerned with addressing to what degree the research findings align with reality (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2018). But, what is reality? According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), reality is “a multiple set of mental constructions…made by humans, their constructions are on their minds, and they are, in the main, accessible to the humans who make them” (p. 295). Merriam (2001) argues that since humans are the primary instrument in data collection in qualitative research, humans are actually closer to the data and reality and thus when reality is viewed in this manner, internal validity is a strength of research conducted qualitatively.

Internal validity can be enhanced through the following strategies posited by Merriam (2001) including triangulation, member checks, participatory modes of research, and reflecting as a researcher on our own biases. In this study, I pursued triangulation, pursued member checking, and practiced reflexivity. First, triangulation was key in my study. Individual interviews, focus groups, and social media posts reflecting expressions and experiences about transition constituted my three unique data sources across which I coded and analyzed for themes. Second, allowing the student veterans to confirm the conclusions I drew based upon their responses assisted in strengthening the internal
validity of this study. I pursued member checking through the sharing of the transcripts of the interviews as well as the focus group sessions to ensure accuracy.

Although unanticipated, veteran student feedback on my original interview protocol opened a space for the co-construction of the final interview protocol. This process was a participatory mode of research (Merriam, 2001). Lastly, my positionality and intentions were relayed to the research participants through conversation as well as in the intent to participate letter (Appendix C).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity, or “the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome” (Berger, 2015, p. 220), is essential to address. Reflexivity requires the researcher to look inward at oneself and consider how their positionality is impacting the study across the research process from the construction of research questions to how the data is analyzed and represented.

Practicing reflexivity begins with reflecting on how and why I created the research questions and choices across the research process. To enhance reflexivity for this dissertation, I disclosed my positionality including personal characteristics such as age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, and level of education, and practiced “reflexivity as recognition of self” (Pillow, 2003, p. 181). When a researcher can acknowledge and be cognizant of the ways in which their positionality is impacting their research, they are practicing reflexivity (Pillow, 2003). Sharing one’s positionality is one way to pursue
transparency in the research process which helps build trustworthiness between the researcher and participants and ultimately, between researchers and their audiences.

Reflexivity involves conducting two projects of inquiry at the same time: one on the topic at hand and the other into oneself, an individual’s interactions, and the impact on the research process (Glesne, 2016). Questions I asked myself throughout the research process included: (1) What philosophical beliefs do I have regarding research? (2) What values and experiences are impacting my perspective? (3) During the data analysis stage, why did I choose to include what I included and why did I omit what I omitted? (4) What do I know and how did I come to know it? (Glesne, 2016). Through acknowledging my own subjectivity, positionality, and continually having an internal conversation with myself about these topics, I practiced reflexivity, in turn contributing to the trustworthiness of my study. Additionally, by leaving the door open for multiple rounds of interviews with the same research participants, practicing member checking, triangulation, and by accounting for my own positionality and monitoring the impact throughout the study, increased reflexivity led to greater credibility of the findings (Pillow, 2003; Berger, 2015).

**Analytic Memos**

Constructing analytic memos throughout the data collection stage as well as during data analysis is another reflective process that allows the researcher to gather their thoughts while also remaining open to new insights and perspectives (Glesne, 2016). Analytic memos aid the researcher in reflecting on coding processes and choices, ultimately leading towards categories and emergent themes in the data (Saldaña, 2013). By simply jotting down one’s own thoughts on topics such as a researcher’s personal
relationship to the study, code choices, research questions, emergent patterns, and/or possible links between the codes, a researcher can develop a deeper understanding and think on a more critical level regarding the research process and the gathered data.

In order to be cognizant of my own positionality, assumptions, beliefs, and understand how these factors impact my own research, analytic memos were utilized during the data collection and analysis phases. Not only does writing analytic memos accomplish the aforementioned tasks, but it also served as a category-generating method and additional code (Saldaña, 2013). Memo writing can lead to better quality codes or even cause a new code to emerge. Constructing analytic memos for this study allowed me to draw connections between the data while also remaining aware of how factors that I may or may not have been aware of influenced the overall study.

For example, on November 12, 2018, during the first of the focus group sessions, I documented my shock, yet contentment surrounding the quality data that was emerging from the focus group conversation. The following is an excerpt from that memo:

Wow. This is going much better than I thought. Advisers warned focus group for SVs might not work, but that’s not true. Mike is much more chatty than he was during the interview. Hmm…I wonder what that is about. Probably because he is around other vets. Probably more comfortable than he was one-on-one with me. Hey, whatever works. Said his vet buddies have been great throughout process. Hmm, I think that’s also in the lit, will have to look back to confirm.

The topic of this analytic memo was an example of how veteran peers are a key support mechanism for other veterans during their transition which was repeated during the interviews as well as the focus groups. This example shows how analytic memos can aid
in the development of themes while also serving as a beneficial manner in which to document interpretations and inside dialogue.

**Data Coding and Analysis**

The practice of qualitative research is not a linear process. Data collection and analysis conducted during a qualitative study is a simultaneous practice (Merriam, 2001). Analysis occurs from the very onset of the research during the initial interview, as soon as the researcher begins engaging critically with the information. If analysis and collection are not conducted concurrently, results may prove to be unsubstantiated.

Below, I discuss the coding and analysis in this qualitative case study in great detail.

As each semi-structured interview, focus group session, and/or social media post was completed and compiled, the analysis process began, which included writing analytic memos as well as generating codes. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that most qualitative researchers code their data both during data collection as well as after. Coding is analysis. And coding is a part of the larger analytical process. According to Salaña (2013), “The purposes of analytic memo writing are to document and reflect on: your coding processes and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data” (p. 41). Coding and analytic memo writing were conducted simultaneously in this study due to the reciprocal relationship between coding and the process of developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being researched (Weston et al., 2001). These two processes were conducted simultaneously in order to produce codes from the analytic memos themselves (Saldaña, 2013).
Accurate transcription is key in any qualitative research study as it is the mission of qualitative researchers to accurately capture the essence and nuances of the human experience. I utilized the iPhone application, Otter, which greatly reduced the burden of transcription. This application audio records conversations and transcribes simultaneously. That being said, the software is not perfect and did not accurately transcribe every single word or phrase correctly. As a result, after Otter transcribed the interview, I went back into the produced transcription and played the audio and edited the transcription text to accurately reflect the interview and focus group responses. Transcription occurred after each interview, not at the end of data collection. I wanted to keep the interview experience fresh and have a greater chance of accurately capturing and ultimately relaying the tone and lived experiences of the student veterans.

Once transcription was complete for the 15 initial semi-structured interviews, 7 follow-up interviews, and 3 focus group sessions, and the relevant social media posts were compiled, and the initial round of coding was completed during data collection after each interview or focus group session, the formal first cycle coding was initiated. According to Saldaña (2013), “A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Coding is beneficial to see the connection between the data collected and what it actually means and is often seen as the “critical link” between the two (Charmaz, 2001).

To begin the first cycle of coding, I immersed myself in the data, entered the process with an open mind, and created codes based off the data, also referred to as inductive category development (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I completed two types of
elemental methods of coding: in vivo coding and descriptive coding. In vivo coding, using short phrases or words directly from the research participant’s own language as codes (Saldaña, 2013), was one of the methods of coding that added value to this research project as a way to center the participants’ ideas. The decision to use this type of coding was made before the initial review of data, was based on wanting to allow the student veterans’ voices to be heard, and was part of the case study design and aligned with my constructivist orientation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Additionally, descriptive coding, assigning a short phrase or word that captures the essence of a passage of data (Saldaña, 2013), was another primary method of coding used during early stages of data analysis in an attempt to identify salient points that might become themes. The decision to use descriptive coding was made after I began to review the data, field notes, and analytic memos.

Once I examined and analyzed the data using in vivo coding and descriptive coding, I returned for a third round of first cycle coding – emotion coding. Due to the life-altering experience that a transition truly can be and the information I sought to answer my research questions, I used emotion coding to capture the lived experience of the student veterans as they transitioned from the military to community college. Emotion coding is suitable for almost all qualitative studies and “provides insight into the participants’ perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 263). For example, during multiple interviews, the emotion of “feeling stressed” and “uncertainty” were expressed by student veterans when discussing their transition, specifically as it related to navigating the bureaucracy of a community college and changing their way of life from a structured environment to a lax one. Difficulty navigating the community
college system as well as difficulty adjusting to another way of life would become subsidiary themes for this study.

Protocol coding, or “the coding of qualitative data according to a pre-established, recommended, standardized, or prescribed system” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 266) was the final round of first cycle coding and provided an explicit way to discuss the findings alongside Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. As explained in Chapter Two, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory has not been applied extensively to research on student veterans transitioning from the military to community college.

Using in vivo, descriptive, and emotion coding methods, I revisited and coded the data using protocol coding to determine if my findings supported or refuted the empirical evidence put forth by other scholars who used Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. As was the case, there were multiple instances where the data in this study supported the claims of other scholars and would ultimately become central themes of this study including difficulty navigating the institutional bureaucracy of a community college.

After the first cycle of coding was complete, I initiated the second cycle to “develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 207) from the codes produced during the first cycle. The codes were then sorted into categories based off shared characteristics (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) utilizing the constant comparative method of data analysis (Merriam, 2001). The categories were then reviewed based upon the similarities, often referred to as pattern coding during second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2013). This was practiced across individual interviews, focus group sessions, and social media activity.
According to Miles and Huberman (1994), pattern codes are “explanatory or inferential codes, one that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis” (p. 69). This type of coding is deemed appropriate by qualitative researchers during the second cycle of coding when a researcher is attempting to develop major themes (Saldaña, 2013). After repeating the same process to the all of the interview/focus group and social media-produced codes, a master list was created that ultimately contained the themes from the study (Merriam, 2001). The central themes of this study are discussed in Chapter 4.

All of the coding, category development, and theme identification were conducted using Microsoft Excel, not qualitative coding software. I found the software to be unintuitive and clumsy. Additionally, as this was my first major coding and in-depth analysis conducted as a qualitative researcher, I wanted to really immerse myself in the data. It is important to note that only applicable and appropriate methods of coding were utilized for this study as there are countless forms of coding, such as longitudinal, that were considered but deemed not appropriate and would not be effective for the purposes of this study.

Triangulation was key in my case study. A form of triangulation that was implemented in this study was data source triangulation, or the process of comparing data that was retrieved in different manners in order to determine if the phenomenon under examination remains the same and similar results are produced (Stake, 1995). For example, by implementing interviews, focus groups, and social media activity in my study, I was able to compare and contrast the data retrieved from each method and
ultimately claim triangulation when the different methods resulted in the similar codes and categories. For example, I transcribed and analyzed the interview responses of the research participants and compare that to the responses from other participants as well as the responses provided during the focus groups while examining social media activity on Twitter to identify common categories which ultimately produced the themes of this study.

**Research Ethics**

At its most basic form, ethics relates to doing good and to the best of a researcher’s ability, avoiding harm (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Ethical issues arise in all forms of research particularly during data collection and in the dissemination of research findings. Some of the ethical dilemmas that arise originate in the power relationship between researcher and participant (Merriam, 2001), the researcher’s interpretation of the data, and in the research design (Orb et al., 2001). This study closely adhered to the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice.

First, in an effort to be completely forthcoming and operate under full-disclosure, my motives for conducting the study were relayed to the research participants. The student veterans were informed that I was conducting this study for purely academic purposes and to bring attention to an area of higher education that deserves more research. A letter of intent to participate was provided to the individuals explaining the study in depth and assure them of anonymity and confidentiality. Next, there can also be power issues during the forms of data collection such as during interviewing. I made every concerted effort to ensure that my interview questions did not cause emotional
harm to the research participants. I had student veteran contacts review the interviews were conducted to be sure the questions were phrased in a respectable manner.

Data coding and analysis is accompanied with its own set of ethical issues as well. It is truly impossible for human researchers to be completely without bias. As such is the case, disclosing biases, positionality, conflicts of interest, and onto-epistemological beliefs is key in striving for ethical research. Additionally, representing the research participants in a fair and accurate manner should be a concern of all ethical researchers.

In this study, I implemented member checking to ensure that I was depicting the experiences and the participants as accurately as possible and not slanting the results to align with personal views.

As Yin (2018) recommends, by disclosing my positionality and viewpoints on the world, I attempted to examine all evidence during data analysis free of preconceived notions and to not ignore conflicting evidence simply because it does not fit within the narrative of my dissertation. One method that I implemented to test my tolerance of contrary findings was to provide the preliminary findings gathered during data collection to colleagues to review. The hope was that the colleagues offer alternative explanations for the results and thus, bias may be reduced (Yin, 2018). I found this to a beneficial practice as my colleagues illuminated different points of interests and other ways to look at the findings.

Conducting research in an ethical manner ultimately comes down to the researcher themselves acting and researching in an ethical manner according to their own values. It is impossible to predict all ethical issues that can arise in a study. However, I made every attempt to act as a responsible and ethical researcher and respond
accordingly. Being honest, having a responsibility to scholarship, and maintaining a professional competence (Yin, 2018) was of the utmost importance throughout this study.

Summary

Choosing the appropriate methodology and method for a research study can prove to be fruitful or disastrous for the final product and gathered data. As the goal of my study was to understand the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college and develop a grasp of their personal perceptions, a qualitative case study was the fitting choice. Yin (2018) and Merriam (2001) recommend case studies for qualitative research when “how” questions are used as well as when there is very little known about a topic. Additionally, it is imperative that a methodology aligns with a researcher’s own onto-epistemological beliefs; therefore, a qualitative case study was once again a logical choice as it coincides with my own relativist perspective, or my belief in multiple constructed realities.

Merriam (2001) stated, “rigor in a qualitative research derives from the researcher’s presence, the nature of the interaction between researcher and participants, the triangulation of data, the interpretation of perceptions, and rich, thick description” (p. 151). Case studies are often criticized for not being as rigorous as other qualitative methods (Yin, 2018). However, case studies are accompanied with their own set of merits. The knowledge learned from this methodology differs from other styles by being more concrete (Merriam, 2001). By this it is meant that case study knowledge is more applicable with individuals’ own experiences and is more vivid than abstract (Merriam, 2001). A qualitative case study seeks to bring to light the emotions and personal feelings a research participant or population has experienced. As humans, it is much easier to
relate to rich detail surrounding actual experiences than theoretical jargon. Also, case studies are more contextual in that due to individual’s own experiences being rooted in context, knowledge produced from case studies is as well (Merriam, 2001). Lastly, the knowledge is based more on reference populations that are determined by the reader of the study (Merriam, 2001).

A detailed description of a qualitative case study was provided in this chapter as the chosen methodology to discover more about the experiences of student veterans as they transition from the military to community college. A justification for the selected research questions focused on the lack of empirical research despite the desperate need to know more about this population. In an effort to divulge all biases and personal viewpoints, my own onto-epistemological beliefs as well as my positionality were disclosed. Chapter Three then discussed the process for selecting the research site and participants before discussing the data collection methods which included interviewing, focus groups, and social media analysis. Lastly, the chapter concluded by touching on the unit of analysis and examined efforts to ensure the trustworthiness of the study including validity. Chapter Four will provide in-depth insights into the findings and themes of this case study.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

This study that examined the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college involved the interviewing, focus group participation, and social media analysis of 15 student veterans from Southern Plains Community College (SPCC). The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do student veterans describe their transition experience from the military to community college?

2. How do student veterans perceive their transition?
   a. Institutional aspects?
      i. Bureaucratically
      ii. Leadership/Resources/Support
      iii. Classroom/Curriculum
      iv. Co-curricular/extra-curricular
   b. Personal aspects?
      i. Emotionally
      ii. Logistically

Semi-structured interviews were one of the three data collection methods utilized for this qualitative case study. The interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes each and followed a veteran-reviewed interview protocol constructed under the theoretical framework of Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition. Focus groups were the second form of
data collection that involved no more than five student veterans participating during one scheduled session. These sessions averaged around a two-hour duration. Lastly, document analysis through examining the social media posts of the research participants was the third and final method of data collection. I analyzed the Twitter accounts to seek out if and how the student veterans expressed their thoughts and feelings during and regarding their transition to community college. Three methods of data collection were implemented for this study in order to ensure the gathering of the richest data possible as well as to increase the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings through triangulation.

This chapter will provide an in-depth look at the themes and main findings of the study that were posited and will be discussed in great detail. Lastly, the interpretation of the data will be provided before concluding the chapter and beginning Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications.

**Thematic Development**

Student veterans transitioning from the military to Southern Plains Community College endured a wide array of emotions and experiences. Research participants in this study highlighted the positive aspects while also shedding light on areas that hindered their successful transition. The student veterans shared their insights through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and through their social media accounts. After the data was collected, analyzed, and coded, distinct themes emerged. Supporting direct quotations and Twitter posts are included in the following section to provide evidence supporting the theme. While it was impossible to include every passage that substantiated the theme, the excerpts that are provided in this section were deemed the most applicable
and powerful quotes that enhanced the overall study and truly captured the lived experiences of this group of students.

As highlighted in the limited available research, student veterans reported a myriad of experiences as they transitioned from the military. The transition of the student veterans is broken down into four distinct themes with subsidiary themes mentioned in their corresponding sections that aid in answering the research questions posited for this study: [1] motivation to enroll in community college, [2] experiencing community college as an institution during a transition [3] transitioning into academics, and [4] the role of relationships and systems of support during a transition. Only points that were present in all three forms of data collection evolved into the themes in this study. Table 4.1 provides a simple breakdown of the themes and subsidiary themes that will be discussed in this chapter as well as an alignment of Schlossberg’s 4S’s coping factors to each theme. Clear connections between the themes and subsidiary themes to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory will be evident throughout this chapter and how the 4S’s (situation, self, support, strategies) were present and exhibited by the research participants throughout their transition.

Table 4.1

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Theme 1: Motivation to Enroll in Community College

With 43% of veterans choosing community college over other types of higher education (Wheeler, 2012), one of the initial questions asked during the interviews and focus groups related to the reasoning behind this choice. It was pivotal to gather more empirical evidence on this topic, especially as it relates to the topic of this dissertation to determine why veterans were attracted to community college initially. By gaining an understanding of the reasoning, community colleges can better serve this population of
students as well as other types of higher education institutions can take note of what is working at community colleges and attempt to emulate those aspects at their institutions.

Not only was it important to understand the motivation behind the choice of veterans to choose community college, but student veterans in this study continually cited why they chose community college over other types of higher education. For example, John shared the following during his individual interview:

I decided to enroll in community college because I wanted to ease into the process of college. I figured going to a four-year school would not be a good idea…I didn’t think I would be able to handle the workload and intensity of classes at a four-year school. Not that the military didn’t prepare me to handle anything that came my way (laughter) but I just needed to ease into college, not just be thrown to the wolves.

Lenny mentioned similar reasons for enrolling in community college after the military during his interview:

I didn’t feel I was ready to go to real college. I needed to prepare for college and develop study habits that would allow me to be successful. I could do this at my own pace at SPCC where I felt I would not have that transition period if I went right to a four-year school.

Both John and Lenny cited concerns related to their own abilities and needing to ease into the college process as reasons for choosing community college. While John and Lenny were both present in the Moving In stage of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, they both clearly conducted an appraisal of the third S, *self*. They were both realistic about their own personal academic abilities and made the decision to attend what they viewed as a
less rigorous form of higher education. Nathan cited reasoning related to employment for enrolling in community college. Nathan stated the following during a focus group session:

I needed to get good job to help out my family. Without a college degree, options would be limited, and I would not make as much without the degree. Also, I wanted to start working quick and I did not want to wait four years to get into the workforce. Getting a two-year degree would get me into workforce much quicker than getting a bachelor’s degree. This way, I could start working faster and start helping my family the way I want.

Andrew also stressed the importance of getting a better job through earning a degree and entering the workforce at a quicker pace than if he would have gone to a four-year institution during his interview:

Dude I just needed a job (laughter). You can’t do anything without a college degree anymore or some sort of training, so I didn’t want to bum around my whole life from one crappy job to another, so I figured I would struggle a little bit for a few years and go to school so I could benefit from it for the rest of my life. I knew that I would be looked down upon when applying for jobs if I were to go up against someone with a degree and me not having one.

Affordability was also a common theme amongst the research participants as more than half of the student veterans cited the lower cost of community college as a driving factor behind their enrollment. Muhammad mentioned the following during a focus group session:
Money was the biggest thing. Even with the G.I. Bill, I would still have to dish out more money than I wanted if I were to go to a four-year school. With the G.I. Bill at SPCC, I paid basically nothing for tuition…you see all these kids with loads of student loan debt and I did not want that to be me.

Juan shared his thoughts on the affordability of community college coupled with the G.I. Bill on Twitter:

The role of affordability of community colleges versus four-year institutions as well as the influence of the G.I. Bill motivated research participants to choose community colleges. Juan and Muhammad both conducted appraisals of one of the 4S’s of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, situation. They were both going through a transition and based their decision to attend community college largely in part due to their financial situation and background.

Additionally, student veteran research participants cited the flexibility of community colleges in regard to their class offerings as well as the flexibility of the time offerings. Jackson commended community colleges during his interview for providing an opportunity for nontraditional students to attend college:

Coming out of the military and being in my late 40s and then enrolling in college was a hell of an experience (laughter). I was an old man compared to these students! I had a family and kids to provide for, being a full-time student was not an option. I had to work and go to school, and if push came to shove, work had to
take priority. I couldn’t risk losing a paycheck. Luckily, it never came to that.

Community college really get vets and us older students. They don’t offer 90% of their courses between 9am to 3pm like I feel four-year schools do. All of my courses were offered at a bunch of different times, especially at night after work. It all worked out where I could go to work and then shoot right on over to SPCC and go to class.

Oscar echoed similar sentiments during a focus group session:

Yeah with my work schedule, four-year woulda been impossible. All of the classes are scheduled at these random ass times, usually in the morning and I have to work…I mean I get it, most of the kids going to four-year are going full-time and school is their priority but someone like me, I’m going part time and need courses that are offered at times that people who actually have lives outside of school can attend…SPCC had classes at all different times which was one of the main reasons I came here.

Isiah discussed the flexibility of course offerings during a focus group session and stated that SPCC had classes that “fit my schedule”. He also discussed the ease of enrollment that was an attractive feature of community colleges:

Like I’ve been saying, I’m an old man who’s been out the game for a while now (laughter), so I didn’t know how to do anything about getting into college. I looked around on SPCC’s website a little bit and it seemed pretty straight forward, but I am old school and just wanted to talk to someone face-to-face to get some help. I came up to SPCC one day and talked to an admissions person and it was almost too easy to come here (laughter). I thought to myself, ok what’s
the catch? This some kind of scam? They’re almost too eager to enroll me and
take my money (laughter). But nah it was easy. Filled out a couple things and they
said ok you’re in!

Lastly, research participants cited more personal reasons as their motivation for
enrolling in community college. Alan shared the following during his interview:

I obviously enrolled in college so I could get a better job and make more money.
Isn’t that why everyone goes? But beyond that, I wanted to set an example for my
daughter. I mean she’s only 4 years old but I want her to be proud of me one day
when she understands the importance of education and the real work it is to
actually get a degree. I hope she’ll see that one day and go to college herself one
day.

Justin also touched on a more personal reason for attending community college during a
focus group session:

I wanted my family AND friends to be proud of me. I’m very close with my
family I was actually the first one in my family to go to college. Everyone else
either finished just high school, or not even that. So, I wanted to not only prove to
myself that I could do it but also prove to my family…And I felt like I owed it to
my friends. They would listen to me and really helped me a lot when I came back
and I don’t think I woulda come this far in school without them so I have to see it
all the way through.

The student veteran research participants cited a variety of reasons that they chose
to attend community college, some of which are documented in other literature as reasons
community colleges are an attractive option to veterans as well as the general student
population. Some cited the stereotype of community colleges that the coursework and requirements would be less grueling as compared to a four-year institution and student veterans would be able to “ease” into college. Many of these participants also cited their own academic abilities and being “rusty” in regard to their study habits and not being academically prepared to handle a four-year course schedule. Many felt that they would start at community college and “work up to four-year”. Additionally, the want/need for better employment options was a driving force for many of the research participants. Some wanted to “get into the workforce quicker” than they would if they would have attended a four-year institution, while some felt they “needed the piece of paper” in order to be “taken serious” when applying for “better jobs”.

Affordability also played a prevalent role in reasoning provided by the student veterans for attending community college. SPCC was viewed as a “cheaper option” for “basically getting the same thing as I would at a four-year”. Some of the research participants also cited the vital role that the G.I. Bill played in their decision to attend community college stating that “I was basically paid to go to school” through the G.I. Bill and felt that they would get “more bang for my buck” through utilizing the military assistance at community college versus a four-year institution.

The flexibility of community colleges was also at the forefront of many of the responses provided by the student veterans in this study. Some referred to flexibility as the streamlined and simple process of actually gaining admissions to SPCC while more referenced the flexibility in terms of course offerings. As student veterans are viewed as nontraditional students due to meeting “one or more of the following criteria: college entry was delayed after high school by one or more years, single parents, do not have a
high school diploma, students attending college part time, or 25 years of age or older” (Falkey, 2016, p. 29), this student population has to juggle multiple responsibilities outside of school. In this instance, SPCC offered courses that “fit” the student veterans’ schedules which allowed them to pursue their degree. Many of the research participants compared SPCC’s offerings to what they viewed as likely offerings at a four-year institution and said they would never have been able to attend a four-year institution just due to the times the courses were offered. Lastly, personal reasons were cited for the decision to attend community college which included needing to get a better job to support their family and wanting to “make my family proud of me” through earning a college degree.

It is important that attention be drawn to the motivation behind why student veterans are attending community college, specifically SPCC for this case study. Additionally, the stigma surrounding community colleges that courses would be “easier” as compared to four-year institutions seemed to help SPCC attract veterans due to some feeling not academically prepared and lacking the necessary skillset to handle a four-year institution’s requirements. Lastly, the flexibility of community colleges as well as the lower price compared to four-year institutions coupled with military assistance seems to have been a driving force behind veterans choosing SPCC. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory System of 4S’s emphasizes multiple factors that impact individual’s abilities to deal with a transition. The participants who were “moving in” to the transition and were cognizant of their own abilities seemed to have assessed their personal level of self and made a decision regarding their enrollment. Additionally, the participants who highlighted the flexibility of course offerings as a motivation to attend were assessing
their own situation. Community colleges such as SPCC and across the nation can use this information in an effort to not only attract veterans to enroll at their campus, but also use this data to implement support services and resources once they are enrolled. This topic will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

**Theme 2, Subsidiary Theme 1: Changing Environments.** As highlighted in the limited research, student veterans who were transitioning from the military to community college experienced a myriad of experiences as they attempted to navigate a new or unfamiliar terrain: higher education, specifically community college. The literature highlights changing environments from highly structured (military) to lax (higher education) (Jones, 2017; Parks & Walker, 2014; Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010;) and navigating institutional and governmental bureaucracy (Jones, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010) as common themes expressed by student veterans transitioning to community college. Both of these were also expressed by the research participants in this study and will be discussed along with other difficulties faced while also highlighting mechanisms that seemed to aid in the transition of this population.

Mike stated the following during his one-on-one interview:

> It was crazy how different everything was. I was so used to being in the military and having someone constantly telling me what to do and having every second planned out for me…then I get to college and I’m on my own. No one telling me what to do or where to go or anything. I mean on one hand it was nice, I was my own boss again, but then again, I had never been to college. I went to the military right out of high school and didn’t think college was ever an option for me. But
when I left the military and found out how much they would pay, I thought why not? So, then I get here and I’m like uh how do I even enroll, pay my bill, do anything? At that point I kinda missed being in the military and having everything done for me!

Lenny echoed the sentiments of Mike during his interview and stated:

I kinda felt like I fell off a cliff after leaving the military and coming to SPCC. I had to do everything on my own! I had so much free time that I didn’t know what to do with myself. I didn’t have a second to myself in the military besides when I went so sleep and now I was in college and I was really lost. I wanted to be back in the military where I was busy and had stuff to do and got stuff done.

Difficulty transitioning from a highly structured environment to a lax environment was also evident in the focus groups as well. Jackson stated:

Man, I never thought I’d say this but after I left the military and had nothing to do, I missed it! (laughter) Every damn second of the day I had something to do in the military…I get to SPCC and there is so much time between class and I’m just sitting there twiddling my thumbs like uhh shouldn’t I be doing something? I felt like a waste of life!

John expressed the difficulty he faced in regard to this topic via Twitter:

Remember in the military when I had shit to do? Yeah not no more

When asked if this post was related to his experience with the differing environments, John verified that it indeed was related to the topic.
Andrew also shared his thoughts on Twitter:

**So like...what do people do between classes?**

Lastly, Oscar provided insight via Twitter:

**DAMN I'M BORED. #missthemilitary**

Not having a structured schedule as they did in the military was highlighted as an issue student veterans faced during their transition. The community college environment was unlike any other they had faced where the individuals were responsible for handling everything as it related to higher education as compared to the military where one’s day was planned for them. This subsidiary theme connects back to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory 4S System as it related to the coping factor *situation* during the Moving In stage of a transition. Feeling a sense of control over a situation, or lack thereof, is a key tenant of *situation*, and the student veterans expressed not knowing what to do in the lax situation and ultimately lacking control. Transitioning away from one type of environment to a starkly different was shown as a roadblock by the research participants. Not that this difficulty was insurmountable, but the majority of the research participants did cite this as an issue.

**Theme 2, Subsidiary Theme 2: Navigating Institutional Bureaucracy.**

Understanding the bureaucracy of any institution of higher education can feel overwhelming and seem like a huge undertaking for any newly-enrolled student. This
experience can be further complicated for a student veteran who may have never attended an institution of higher education or has not been enrolled for a significant period of time and has to take additional steps to ensure their military benefits are processed. Student veterans are often utilizing the G.I. Bill or other military programs to subsidize their educational costs which is a program that traditional students do not have to navigate to secure funding. Student veterans also may be dealing with the process of transferring in military credits to the community college and having to navigate that process and learn what office(s) handle this process.

These previously mentioned scenarios are just two of the issues a student veteran may face when transitioning to a community college and being forced to navigate how the institution functions and acquiring the knowledge to effectively utilize and take advantage of the necessary resources. The difficulty of navigating the different offices of SPCC and the lack of knowledge regarding which offices handle what processes were feelings expressed by the research participants. For example, during his one-on-one interview, Juan stated:

It was confusing as hell! I had no idea where to go or who I needed to talk to in order to get my stuff done. When I went to admissions for help, they shipped me to financial aid. When I sent to financial aid, they shipped me to the billing office. When I went to the billing office, they said I needed to talk to the veteran center and that they could help me better. It was out of control! Nobody could give me a straight answer! All I wanted to do was go to school and use my G.I. Bill money that I earned and it was like everyone kept passing the buck to the next office just to get rid of me.
Muhammad echoed the same experience during his one-on-one interview:

I got so annoyed it wasn’t even funny. I went to 400 different offices just looking for some help and you’d think I was asking for something ridiculous or a free hand out! No! I was just trying to find out how I can have the military pay for my schooling like I was promised. Every office had some excuse as to why they couldn’t help me, oh you know, oh sorry we don’t handle that, you need to speak to so-and-so. Oh sorry, we don’t handle that, you need to speak with this office ACROSS THE CAMPUS! It got to be comical when I got to the 4th or 5th office. I hope this isn’t how all colleges operate.

Jackson raised similar sentiments during his participation in one of the focus groups:

Yeah it was out of control how no one could give you a straight answer. Then when you finally got to the right place, you still had to jump through a million hoops to get everything situated. It was like, I get it, I mean I’m sure these offices are just following the policies and rules set on them by some big-wig in some office on the 77th floor, but put yourself in our shoes for one day…I just got back from serving and all I’m trying to do is do better for myself and family and get a degree so I can get a good paying job…and all I do is get the runaround. Not saying these offices are purposefully trying to give me the runaround, it’s just kinda disrespectful that no one wants to help after everything I’ve done in the military. Once again, not looking for a thank you or anything like that, just a little help might be nice though.

Miguel shared his thoughts on the topic on Twitter:
Miguel also shared his thoughts on the topic during a focus group:

Yep exactly what the rest of these guys are saying happened to me too. Started at one office. Nope, wrong office. Ok went to the next office. Nope sorry, try again. Alright, went to the next office. Oops! Wrong again! Ok this next one has to be right to get my sh** situated…Oh so close but not quite.

Navigating the college environment for any student can lead to feelings of frustration and disrespect as exhibited by the research participants. Nevertheless, when compared to the process of a traditional student enrolling in community college versus a veteran, these experiences are starkly different. Veterans returning to community college must oftentimes take additional steps in order to secure certain aspects of their education. For example, some student veterans may have enrolled in military education courses or have other credits from past experiences that they are looking to transfer into the new community college to assist with their work towards earning a degree. One of the improvements cited in the current literature surrounding veterans transitioning from the military to community college includes credit streamlining (Persky & Oliver, 2010). Two student veterans experienced the cumbersome process that must be undertaken in order for their military credits to be transferred into higher education. Lenny commented on this process and his experience at a community college he attempted to attend before SPCC:
One of the reasons I chose SPCC over the other one was cause of just the process. At the other one, I kept getting pushed around from office to office with people not knowing what to do with my military credits. See, I think the issue was that they didn’t have a veteran center with someone like Ms. Angela…you had a bunch of different offices who had to try to handle stuff related to veterans and no one in charge of veteran stuff who knew what needed to be done and how our stuff is different from normal students…the classes I was trying to get transferred in aren’t your typical history 101, they were military credits which are much different than the typical classes these people were probably used to processing. Finally, I gave up and drove out of my way to SPCC to see if they were any different or more helpful with this…I worked hard for these credits! I wasn’t about to just give em up and have wasted my time and chalk it up to a loss. SPCC was a one-stop shop.

Joseph had a similar experience when he attempted to attend a different community college in the surrounding area before ultimately deciding on SPCC:

See, I tried to go to CCC (Coastal Community College; a pseudonym) and so I went to their admissions office and figured, shit, this is gonna be easy, I mean it’s community college (laughter)? And I started talking about how I’m a vet and need some more information about how I go about getting my credits transferred and my G.I. Bill handled and I looked at them and it looked like they saw a damn ghost! (laughter) I thought I was speaking another language or something for a second. The people had no idea what I was talking about and had no idea where to
even send me. I took that as an immediate sign that CCC was not the place for me (laughter).

The experiences of these two student veterans facing difficulty in transferring their military credits are examples of community colleges as institutions providing infrastructure to address the transfer credits associated with this particular population. In contrast, the issue related to difficulty transferring in military credits was not cited by the research participants at SPCC. An established veteran center at SPCC and informed coordinator who was fluent in services related to student veterans on campus contrasted other campus experiences participants had. Many had positive experiences with the center and coordinator. In the next section, I will delve deeper into the transition of the student veterans as it relates to the community college environment, specifically focused on the role of an established veteran center.

**Theme 2, Subsidiary Theme 3: Pivotal Role of the Veteran Center.** Despite the negative experiences of the research participants, the student veterans did shed light on one positive aspect that was cited so frequently that it became a dominant theme in the data: the pivotal role of the Veteran Center and its coordinator. The absence of and the want for a designated veteran center has been cited in the limited available literature (Heineman, 2016; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010) as a resource that student veterans would like to see implemented at community colleges. However, at Southern Plains Community College, a student veteran center already exists and is utilized frequently by the research participants and countless other student veterans.

Mike stated during his one-on-one interview:
Man, you have no idea what a help the veteran center was, especially Ms. Angela. She helped me with everything. She helped me get my G.I. Bill to go through…helped with getting into the classes I needed…and the vet center is dope. Nice to just come here between class and chill out with other vets. Better than sitting around young kids…

Alan reiterated the importance of the veteran center and veteran coordinator during his one-on-one interview:

Ms. Angela is the single greatest thing SPCC has to offer. She knows everything about everything here and if she doesn’t, she knows who to talk to find out. For real, I don’t know where any of us would be without her. Nice lady…yeah, I like the vet center. I can print out my papers, watch some tv, talk with buddies…

During one of the focus groups, there was unanimous agreement that the veteran center and having an established veteran coordinator positively impacted the students’ transitions to Southern Plains Community College. Isiah stated:

Being older than most of these fellas, I probably had a different time than they did. Ya know, they still remember high school and what being in school was like. I was in my 40s when I went to college! It was a long ass time since my ass was in school…I had no clue how to get into classes or what classes I had to take! Ms. Angela handled all of that for me. That lady needs a raise! (laughter)

Isiah was clearly conducting an appraisal of his self and his own abilities and limitations. During the Moving In stage of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, he addressed how his own age impacted his transition, mostly in a negative manner as he was not accustomed
to the college environment. During another focus group, the student veteran research participants continued to praise the veteran center and coordinator. Joseph commented:

I love going there (veteran center) just to chill and kick back between classes…get to see a bunch of my buddies…don’t have to hang around these 18-year olds is pretty sweet too…Angela is the man! Ha I mean woman! I don’t deal with anyone else but her at SPCC.

The importance of the veteran center and coordinator was further represented through some of the research participants’ social media. Justin expressed his views on Twitter:

Chillin. Vets only. 👍

The vital role of a veteran coordinator who understands veterans and their needs was on full display through David’s Twitter post:

FINALLY SOMEONE WHO KNOWS WHAT THEY’RE TALKING ABOUT!!!!

As discussed in the limited available literature, veterans cited support mechanisms that they deemed would have a positive impact on their transition which included a designated veterans’ affairs office (Heineman, 2016; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010;) and networking opportunities for veterans (Wheeler, 2012) provided by the community college. The student veteran research participants reiterated and supported this point by stressing the positive impact that the established veteran center and veteran coordinator had throughout their transition. During the Moving In stage of Schlossberg’s
Transition Theory, the student veterans exhibited two coping factors: strategies and support. Multiple research participants sought out assistance from the veteran center for guidance navigating the community college environment. Additionally, the student veterans viewed the veteran center as well as the veterans who frequented the center as sources of support and served as a place of refuge during their transitions. Through interview and focus group responses as well as social media posts, the student veterans expressed the vital role that these two entities played during their transition which clearly aided in their transition from the military to community college.

**Theme 3: Transitioning into Academics**

As mentioned in the previous section, student veterans face challenges when transitioning to community college including navigating the institutional bureaucracy. However, the transition does not stop at the doors of the community college but also continues into the classroom. The classroom experience of student veterans was mentioned by almost all of the 15 research participants as a key part of their transition that had a memorable impact during their transition period. The classroom experience included their experience with being in the classroom in general as it relates to learning and completing the requirements of a course, the interactions of student veterans and other classmates, as well as the interactions between student veterans and faculty members. I represent each of the aforementioned points through interview and focus group responses and social media posts in an effort to highlight the experiences present in this theme.

**Theme 3, Subsidiary Theme 1: Experiencing the Collegiate Classroom as a Learner.** Enrolling in college for the first time or possibly returning to college after
military service is certainly an adjustment. Transitioning from the military environment and entering an academic one where instructions are given, but the responsibility for completing a task falls heavily upon the individual is a stark difference that participants noted. Additionally, the experience of just being in the classroom and having to sit through lectures, complete assignments, and study on one’s own is vastly different than the military. Juan discussed being in the classroom and going through the learning process during his one-on-one interview:

I remember the first time I uh walked into the classroom for the first time. It was surreal…I sat down at a desk in the back and waited for the teacher to come in. I waited and waited and waited and waited. It was bout 5 minutes past when the class was supposed to start and finally this guy walks in and doesn’t even apologize for being late! Do you know what would have happened if you were late for something in the Army? Let me rephrase that, you don’t wanna know! But like I was saying, the professor walks in late and goes up to the front, barely introduces himself, hands out the syllabus and starts lecturing. I was trying to keep up and write down everything I heard but I was falling behind and it was the first day! (laughter). I kept getting distracted by everything. The guy in front of me texting, the girl next to me texting, I knew it would be a bad idea sitting in the back…The next class, I was right up in front! Nothing to pay attention to but what the professor was saying…I found myself doing the same stuff at home and getting distracted. I would try to read for class but would end up looking at my phone or getting distracted by my dog walking by or I would read the same page over and over again and not even know what I had just read…luckily, I caught on
early enough and knew that if I was going to pass school, I needed to isolate myself at home and go in a separate room without any distractions. I could only do that so much being in the classroom but sitting up front for sure helped me with that.

During the Moving Through stage of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, Juan exhibited signs that he had conducted an appraisal of his self and understood that he had to make accommodations and changes to his study habits if he were to be successful in community college. Isiah discussed his experiences in the classroom as a learner:

I remember my first business class I took and boy did it knock me on my ass (laughter). I knew I hadn’t been in school in years and knew I would be kinda rusty with studying and all but man did I get a wakeup call. I was used to having my superiors tell me exactly what I needed to do and when to do it. At SPCC, I was on my own…I mean don’t get me wrong, the teachers gave you a syllabus with everything that had to be done, but then everything else was on you. I had to keep up with my reading, assignments and that was only for one class! I was in two other classes at the time. It was hell! I remember going in to take my first exam and I thought I had studied pretty well and kept up with most of my work and then I got my grade back. I got a D! I couldn’t believe it (laughter). I aint ever get a D in my life, not even in high school. I was more embarrassed than anything. I hid it from my wife and when she asked how I did, I said ok but I’m going to try harder next time. Luckily, she didn’t ask again, I think she secretly knew what that meant (laughter).

Andrew also commented on the topic during a focus group session:
My biggest problem being back in school was trying to stay focused. My PTSD definitely played a big part. I had trouble just sitting still in class. I was always fidgeting and really on-edge…I remember one time I was sitting in class and uh this kid comes and sits next to me and he slams his book down hard on the desk and it kinda triggered my PTSD. I had a flashback to the war and I had to get up and leave. It was too much to handle…the next class when I came back, the same kid came up to me and apologized if he did something to upset me that I had to leave the last class. I briefly explained my background and just let him know if he could not slam his book again, I’d appreciate it (laughter)…studying was also an issue, I don’t know I just kinda felt dumb like I wasn’t understanding the material. It gave me crazy anxiety and made me lash out a lot at my family when they would ask me what was wrong…it was hard balancing my PTSD and school and trying to work through one to succeed in the other.

Nathan reiterated similar sentiments during his interaction in one of the focus groups:
Yes, school was much harder than I thought. It was difficult getting back into swing of things after not being in school for a while. Keeping up with work and going to class was the hardest part. Having to sit down for a couple hours and listen to professor lecture also was a pain (laughter). I forgot what it was like being in school since I had not been since high school…I am happy I started at SPCC, not four-year cause I feel like I would have dropped out and not been able to do all the work at four-year.

Mike shared his thoughts about being in the classroom via Twitter:
Oscar also expressed his thoughts about being back in school via Twitter:

Yooooo. So anyone else feel like this whole going back to school thing is harder than they thought?

As illustrated through the interview and focus group responses as well as the Twitter posts, the student veteran research participants faced a series of challenges as they transitioned from the military to community college. From difficulty focusing in the classroom, trouble studying, to adjusting to the environment overall, student veterans experienced a myriad of obstacles in the classroom as learners.

Theme 3, Subsidiary Theme 2: Experiencing Non-Veteran Students in the Classroom. There are a handful of studies on the topic of veterans transitioning from the military to community college. In that literature, the inability to relate to nonveteran peers (Falkey, 2016; Heineman, 2016; Jones, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010;) is an issue that student veterans have cited. As shown previously in the data of this study and will continue to be on display, the student veteran research participants stated the importance of connecting with other veterans and how they felt more comfortable in a student veteran center which allowed them to be around other veterans and those who have similar experiences. As will be highlighted in this section, the research participants in this study expressed their feelings on interacting with non-veterans inside the classroom.
Justin expressed the following regarding his experience in the classroom with non-veteran peers:

Most of the students were fine and didn’t give me any shit, but I still felt different than them. A lot of them were fresh out of high school, so uh, about 18 years old or so and I mean I’m in my 30s so that may only be ya know, 10 or 12-year difference but it felt like 30 years when you’re in the situation…every now and again I would hear a dumbass remark by one of them about how rough their life is or how tough they have it that they have to wake up early to come to class. I just stared at them and shook my head. Being in college is a walk in the park compared to what me and other vets have been through. I think that the military service should be a requirement for all citizens because it really does put a lot of things into perspective and make you appreciate what you have.

Miguel stated the following during his one-on-one interview:

Yeah, I mean, I had a run-in every now and then with another student. You know, these 18-year olds think they know it all and they’ve been through so much but they don’t know much at all. Not saying I do (laughter) but I’m sure I’ve seen more than they have…every now and again I’d get asked some dumb question about my service like oh have you ever killed anyone or ever seen a dead body? I mean, I get it, like, they haven’t been in the military so they see everything on tv and in the movies and think that it’s everyday life. Sure, some of the stuff on tv you see actually does happen, but it’s not like we’re in the trenches 24 hours a day and behind enemy lines running a secret mission (laughter)... I just felt a lot more comfortable being around other vets. They just get it, ya know? But to circle back
to where I started on this tangent (laughter), for the most part, the students in my classes were fine. You would just have that occasional asshole who thought they were funny and would try to push my buttons. I’m sure it happened to more than just me.

Oscar shared his thoughts on the topic during a focus group session:

Back when I was in the Air Force, I was around all other servicemen, obviously (laughs), and so we were all in the same boat. Even though we came from way different backgrounds, we were all in this together…so when I got back to school, it was the opposite. There wasn’t another airman in my class, or even another vet, so I felt kinda out of place. Not that the other students did anything to make me feel that, for the most part, but just personally I felt like I wasn’t clicking with my classmates. They would be talking about going out and going out to the bars this weekend and I was over here like I gotta rush home every day to make sure I’m there to watch my daughter so my wife can go off to work. Yeah no time for the bars for me (laughter) those days are long gone. So, I had trouble finding common ground with my classmates, I guess you could say. I definitely felt the age difference between us. I know I’m only 26 so I feel like I should relate more to them being ya know, 18, 19, 20 years old, but I just didn’t. I have a family to support and do better for and a full-time job while going to school and have been to some crazy places and they’re still living with their parents and probably still getting money from them and I’m on my own. Just at two different points in our lives.
Muhammad echoed similar sentiments during the same focus group regarding the difference in maturity level while being in the classroom with other non-veteran students:

Yeah man I know exactly what you mean. I just felt like an old man (laughter) when I was in class. Like you said (referencing Oscar who spoke prior), I’m a dude in my 20s and so I’m not that far off from the rest of the people in my classes, but there was such a distinct gap between us. I’m sure other people who are older feel it too, not just veterans. I can’t decide if it’s because we’re vets or because we’re a few years older than some of the students in our classes. Probably a combination of both. Probably has to do with our life situations too like Oscar mentioned. I personally don’t have any kids but I work full-time outside of school and have a wife so I don’t have as much freedom as some people do or like I had when I was 18 (laughter). School is just one of my obligations that unfortunately has to come after my job and family…now I’m not claiming that I know all of these kid’s lives and I’m sure they have responsibilities outside of school too, some of them (laughter), but I feel like we have more (laughter).

David shared his thoughts regarding interacting with non-veteran students in the classroom via Twitter and it was confirmed his tweet was in reference to the topic:

Y'all are immature AF ☝️

Alan tweeted his reaction to being back in college around younger students and how he felt regarding the age difference and maturity level. The tweet was confirmed to be in relation to the topic at hand:
As evidenced through the interview and focus group responses as well as in the Twitter posts, the student veteran research participants displayed a feeling of disconnect and at times discomfort being around non-veteran students. They expressed a variety of reasons for these feelings including the literal age gap and the expression of immaturity exhibited by the non-veteran students. More than half of the 15 student veterans cited instances of offensive or insensitive comments made by non-veteran students inquiring about their military service and even demeaning veterans in general. Non-veteran students were cited as saying how the current war was “pointless” and that vets were not “true heroes” in their own right. In some instances, the student veterans said the non-veteran students were aware that they were indeed a veteran and still proceeded to make the comments while in other situations, the veteran status was not disclosed to the non-veteran students.

The student veterans in this study often compared their own situations to the situations of the non-veteran students. They stressed that they had more “adult responsibilities” as compared to their peers such as family and full-time employment. The research participants did not exhibit jealousy towards the non-veteran students and their situations and none of the participants indicated that they wish they were in their situation instead of their own. However, the majority of the research participants made a point to address how their situations differed from many of their classmates which often led to the topic of maturity both the lack thereof in regard to the non-veteran students and
their own higher level. Many of the research participants stressed how the military made them mature quickly due to the nature of the environment and the “maturity needed to survive in some situations”. Many cited their “worldly experiences” and “seeing things that most people haven’t” as reasons for their increased maturity when comparing it to their non-veteran peers. A few of the research participants also discussed how the military is a “brotherhood” and everyone “looks out for one another” particularly in dangerous and uncertain situations. The majority of the student veterans stated that their military units were “like family” and they would “protect one another to the end”. This level of comradery and the creation of a pseudo-family unit is debatably another reason for the increased level of maturity. When lives are on the line, especially lives of people the student veterans cared deeply about, the situations that these student veterans were in forced them to “grow up” and face the situation from an adult perspective, rather than as a “young kid”. The research participants in this study exhibited signs of being present in the Moving Through stage of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and conducting a self-assessment of their situation. They understood that their situation was different than that of a non-veteran peer, and did their best to deal with their circumstances while juggling multiple responsibilities.

Regardless of the reason, the student veterans felt disconnected from their non-veteran peers. The inability to relate to nonveteran peers (Falkey, 2016; Heineman, 2016; Jones, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010) has been documented in previous topics as an issue student veterans face when transitioning from the military to community college. These authors have recommended sensitivity training be implemented campus-wide to avoid issues that have arisen between the two parties
and a better understanding be developed by non-veterans. This recommendation will be discussed in Chapter 5.

**Theme 3, Subsidiary Theme 3: Interactions with Faculty Members.** Facing the classroom environment, whether it be the learning aspect or interacting with other students, can be a daunting task for any individual who has not been in that environment for a significant period of time or ever. As displayed in previous sections, the student veteran research participants in this study felt that their experiences in the classroom as a learner as well as their experiences with non-veteran students impacted their transition in negative ways.

The limited available literature on the topic of veterans transitioning from the military to community college mentions supportive faculty (Falkey, 2016; Rumann et al., 2011) as a support mechanism that student veterans highlighted as having a positive impact on their transition. This factor was also evident in the responses of the research participants in this study on both ends of the spectrum. Supportive faculty assisted in the transition process for some while faculty that exerted a negative influence inhibited the transition of others. John stated the following during his one-on-one interview:

I guess I was one of the luckier ones. I had a handful of good professors who actually gave a shit about their students. I had one professor who went out of his way to help me. I was struggling a little bit in class, ya know, just getting back into the swing of things with school and everything while working and everything else going on. So, I figured it would probably be best to meet with my professor outside of class to get some extra help so I could catch up and not struggle all semester. But his office hours were these random hours during the middle of the
day when I was working. So, I asked him after class one day if he would be willing to meet during a different time or something so I could get some help and he gave me a bunch of different times he could meet with me and even offered to FaceTime office hours if that worked out better for me. I couldn’t believe how chill the guy was. I was expecting the guy to be strict and only offer office hours when advertised but he went out of his way to help me. I appreciated that more than you can imagine. I don’t know if I would have passed the course without his help.

Isiah echoed similar sentiments during his interview:

Being an older fella (laughter) and probably a little closer to the age of my professors, there was a level of respect between us. I felt like being in class with them, they looked at me different than they did the younger students. Maybe that they expected more from me or knew that I wouldn’t be a problem in class since I should be mature and act as an adult at my age (laughter)? I don’t know honestly, but it was in a good way. When I would come into class, my professors would ask me how my day was going and things like that, I didn’t really see that happening as much or at the same level with other students. We related to each other more probably due to us being older…I never had an issue though with any professor really. Never heard any anti-military or anti-war comments come from them which was a relief because I was really worried about that honestly. I have a bit of a temper and ya know, you see all the time on the news where colleges are real far one way on a lot of topics and so I was expecting to enter the classroom and have to deal with that crap with professors preaching their points of view which were
probably going to be against mine, but I was wrong. Nothing really like that at all. They did their jobs and taught the material and kept most of their opinions to themselves.

Justin shared his thoughts on the topic during a focus group session:

I’ve been complaining about the students I had to deal with in class (laughter) but actually the professors weren’t half bad. When I first got to college, I was really confused how to do everything. I didn’t know where to go to pay my bill or stuff like that. I remember going to one of my first classes and I had a younger teacher, probably in his mid to late 30s, and he was cool. We connected instantly. I don’t remember how we got on the topic but we would always shoot the shit together before and after class about working out or sports or whatever. We both liked the same stuff…but I remember him helping me a lot and it didn’t feel like I was talking to a superior or someone who I had to feel inferior around. It felt like I was talking to one of my buddies. He gave me good information about where to go to get help for certain things and recommended certain websites to buy cheap books and just normal stuff that a lot of students already know but I didn’t…what’s funny is that after the semester was over, and he was technically no longer my professor, we went out for a drink and we still hangout sometimes. He’s actually turned into one of my drinking buddies (laughter).

Andrew delved into detail during a focus group session regarding how his professor was supportive of him inside and outside class in addition to recognizing his PTSD and providing accommodations to assist:
When I got to SPCC, I knew that my PTSD would cause issues for me in class with studying and learning and focusing in class. I tried to manage it myself and not let it affect me but it did. I was taking an exam in one of my business classes and I could not focus to save my life. I thought I was making pretty good progress on the exam and then all of a sudden, I check my watch and the class was ending in like two minutes and I still had a ton more to go. I looked around and I saw everyone packing up their stuff and getting ready to go. I instantly started to panic and knew I was done for. After everyone had left, I got up and turned my exam into the professor and felt like shit. I had remembered during the first day of class when the professor was going over the syllabus that he had mentioned something about disability services and registering with them and talking with the professor about it so they can accommodate you but I didn’t do any of that because I thought I would be able to manage the PTSD and work through it and not let it affect my schoolwork…well I figured when I was turning in my exam that I completed about half of was as good a time as any to talk about my PTSD with my professor (laughter). I told him how I was a veteran and had PTSD and had trouble focusing and clearly I didn’t have enough time to finish this exam and knew I failed it, not because I didn’t know the material, but because I didn’t have enough time to focus and work on it. I thought for sure the professor was going to be a dick and say oh well you should have registered like I said before any of this happened and say oh well I can’t do anything about your failing grade on this exam because you didn’t do what I told you to do at the beginning of the semester, but the professor basically said the exact opposite. He told me how he
understood the stigma and the reluctance to register with the disability office but said how it was the only way he could give me more time to take an exam over the rest of the class. He gave me more information and actually walked me down to the disability office to talk about what I had to do to register my PTSD and get extra time for exams and stuff…and then I thought well this is definitely going to help me in the future but it kinda sucks that I didn’t do this earlier cause now I have an F on this exam. I don’t know if the professor was allowed to do this or not but he told me that once I got everything handled with the disability office, to show him my paperwork and he would let me retake the exam with the extra time. I think he felt sympathy for me and didn’t want me to do bad in the class cause of my own stupidity for not registering with the disability office (laughter)…from that point on, I made sure to let every one of my professors know what was going on so I wouldn’t be in the same boat I was like I was during that class.

One Twitter post was able to be located on the role that faculty play during a student veteran’s transition. Juan shared the following from his Twitter account:

I guess all college professors aren’t stuffy old white men. I stand corrected. 😁

Despite the offensiveness of this tweet and the stereotyping present, the tweet highlighted some of the preconceived notions that Juan had regarding college professors in general that other student veterans probably shared as well as the general student population. The tweet demonstrates the shifting of opinion after Juan had a positive experience during their transition that likely aided him during his transition as he was more comfortable
approaching professors in the future and asking for assistance that benefitted him in regard to academics and his feelings regarding the environment of higher education in general. As it relates to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and being in the Moving Through stage of their transition, the research participants were taking advantage of their supportive faculty in order to succeed in community college. This strategy that the student veterans were implementing aided in their transition.

From offering office hours that accommodated a nontraditional student’s schedule, to creating an environment that was friendly towards veterans, as well as guiding a student veteran through the process for gaining accommodations due to a disability, the professors at SPCC that the research participants interacted with aided them through their transition. Arguably, through offering support for the student veterans during this tumultuous time in their lives, the student veterans were able to experience a smoother transition through the assistance of faculty. However, despite the positive experiences with faculty that assisted the aforementioned student veteran research participants during their transition from the military to community college, the opposite end of the spectrum was also present for this population attending SPCC. Faculty who were perceived by the research participants as not being helpful in their transition are described in this section in an effort to draw contrast and highlight the role faculty play in a student veteran’s transition, whether it be in a positive or negative manner. Joseph highlighted a negative experience he had in the classroom:

When I was in the Army, you have everyone believing the same things, for the most part, ya know, believing that what we’re doing is for the good of the country and we’re making a difference. Well, I guess I was naïve to think that everyone in
the world thought that…I get to college and the first couple classes are fine, professors seem fine, I go to class and listen to them lecture and I leave. That’s what I thought most of college would be. But then I went to my sociology class…the professor was a middle-aged woman, not that that matters but I just wanted to set the scene (laughter), and the very first day, she dives right into politics. I was fine with this, I like politics and I thought it would be a good discussion. Well, then the professor starts bashing the president and the military. She starts saying stuff like well if we weren’t fighting useless wars then we’d have more money to spend on healthcare and blah blah blah. She then starts saying shit like the military needs to be defunded and we should be spending our money on more important things. It took everything out of me to bite my tongue and just sit there and not explode on her. Other kids in the class were chiming in and some agreed while some had a different opinion and sided more with the military. When those kids would speak, she would either just ignore what they said completely and move on or bash them to and say how they don’t support poor people having healthcare and blah blah blah. It was absolute bullshit. I had to sit through an entire semester of that crap. It made me not want to come to class and frankly made me just want to drop out so I didn’t have to listen to that for an entire semester. I mean I defended our country and to get such little appreciation and actually be attacked for what I was doing, it just wasn’t right. I’m not sure if she knew I was a veteran, I don’t think it would have changed how she acted if she did. You know, I’m all for free speech and right to an opinion, that’s what I was fighting for everyone to have their rights. But there’s also a way in which to
express your opinion where you aren’t demeaning. She clearly didn’t understand the difference. The saddest part of this whole story is that I wrote my papers in alignment to her way of thinking just so I knew I would get a good grade. It killed me to do it but I was scared that if I voiced my actual opinion on a topic that I figured she would believe the opposite, she would give me a bad grade. I hope no one else has to go through that.

Oscar shared a similar experience during a focus group session he had with a professor that made the classroom environment feel unwelcoming and had a negative impact on his transition:

I typically keep to myself in class and try to participate as little as possible (laughter) but my one history professor I had just pushed me over the edge. He was lecturing about World War II and of course that somehow transitioned to talking about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan…so he started off fine just talking about the differences between the wars and then he jumped right into saying how World War II was a justified war where the wars in the Middle East are a waste of time and were started by a bunch of angry white men who wanted oil. He didn’t stop there though. He started saying how the soldiers in World War II were true heroes while the soldiers in the Middle East are just playing in the sand. I held back up until that point. I raised my hand and just let him have it. I asked him if he had ever been over to the Middle East. He said no. I asked him if he had any idea how many hours of training soldiers go through or the typical daily schedule of a solider. He said no. I laid into him for about a solid five minutes telling him and the class about my experience and he just sat there with a smug look on his
face. After I stopped talking and felt better, he just looked away and called on another student. He didn’t even address anything I said. I went home that day and looked at his online reviews and I should have looked at them before I took his class. He had terrible ratings talking about the same stuff I had just gone through about how biased he was and thought his opinion was right and no one else could be. That night, I decided for my own sanity to drop the class. It was close to the middle of the semester and I knew I wouldn’t get my money back and I would get something on my transcript showing I dropped but I didn’t care. I couldn’t sit in that classroom and listen to him. That whole experience honestly made me want to drop out completely. I thought why am I giving my money to a school that has employees who talk like this and brainwash their students into thinking the same way? What am I even doing here? Why don’t I just go something where I don’t need a degree? Thought about becoming a construction worker or something like that but then I thought about my life in the long term and the Air Force inside me made me stick with it and not quit. I did drop the class, but I wouldn’t let him ruin the rest of my schedule.

Alan shared his thoughts via Twitter on the topic of a faculty member who made the classroom environment uncomfortable as a student veteran. Part of the tweet is blocked out due to Alan tweeting directly at the institution’s Twitter account where this case study took place:

Hey [blocked] how bout you stop employing these anti-America professors?
David shared his thoughts on Twitter questioning if college was in fact right for him. During follow-up questioning, David revealed that the “lack of help” and “understanding” of a veteran’s needs demonstrated by the faculty he encountered was a major factor in him questioning not only his strive to stay in college, but also his own intellectual abilities. He posted:

![Twitter post image]

Yeahhh not so sure this whole college thing is for me. Any other ideas? 🤔🤔

As evidenced in this section, student veterans struggled during their transition when faced with a non-supportive faculty member. Joseph went against his beliefs and constructed his assignments to align with the faculty member’s beliefs in order to receive a passing grade while Oscar ended up dropping the course he was enrolled in where the faculty member created an unfriendly environment to student veterans. Two students noted courses with professors who minimized the cost and role of the U.S. military. One professor recommended decreasing the military’s budget in favor of other government support while another professor used a false equivalency in comparing WWII to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq minimizing the contributions military service personnel have made in contemporary conflict. Both ends of the spectrum were displayed to show the stark contrast and difference a supportive faculty member can play during a transition as compared to a faculty member that the student veterans perceive to be not supportive. John even went as far as to say that he was unsure if he would have passed the course without the help of the professor while David questioned his life choices and wondered if in fact he was a “good fit” for college. Once again, the research participants were present
in the Moving Through stage of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and assessed what strategies they could implement to be successful which unfortunately included altering their viewpoints for assignments as well as dropping courses.

**Theme 4: Role of Relationships and Systems of Support During a Transition**

Another theme that emerged from the data that was also somewhat present in the limited available empirical research was the effect on student veterans’ personal lives during the transition and how the relationships, or lack thereof, ultimately impacted their transition. The ability to connect and relate to other veterans (Wheeler, 2012) and the role of family and friends (Jones, 2017) have both been cited in the literature as support mechanisms that student veterans have stated in past studies have aided in their transition. This section will discuss the role that family, friends, and other veteran peers play during the transition of a veteran from the military to community college.

**Theme 4, Subsidiary Theme 1: Family and Friends.** In many of the responses gathered during this study, the student veteran research participants coupled “family” and “friends” together when responding to the sources of support and did not differentiate between different roles these two entities may have played in regard to emotional support. However, they did differentiate between “family and friends” where financial support was provided by “family” and no research participant cited “friends” as providing financial support. This section will begin by discussing “family and friends”. John stated during his one-on-one interview:

> Man, when I was in the Marines, I uh would talk to my family every now and again, ya know, here and there…when I got back home, I relied on them so damn much!...it was hard coming back but they helped out a ton. My parents let me
come back and live with them while I was figuring out what I wanted to do…my brother would spot me money if I was short…my sister helped me get into SPCC. She had already done the whole college thing so she knew her way around that kinda stuff.

Nathan also highlighted the role that his family and friends played during his transition during his one-on-one interview:

I was very happy to come home after the military. It was difficult getting back to normal…my family has always been close and they help me a lot…They gave me money to go to college and anything I need while I was in school.

While John and Nathan primarily discussed the assistance they received in the form of monetary help and assistance in enrolling in college, Andrew discussed the emotional support he received from his family and friends:

When I got back home, I was a mess to be honest. I have PTSD from serving and it’s been a daily struggle…my emotions get crazy sometimes and I get triggered by the smallest stuff…it’s ya know, gotten better, but I remember when I first got home not wanting to do much…I stayed in the house a lot and really didn’t want to socialize with anyone…my parents suggested maybe I try therapy to try to deal with my PTSD. I gave it a shot and it actually helped a lot…outside of that, my parents were like my pseudo-therapists too (laughter). We would sit out on the patio a lot of nights and they would let me ramble on about my service and it was kinda therapeutic for me. Made me feel better to get it off my chest.

During one of the focus groups, Justin touched on the emotional aspect of support exhibited by his friends during the transition:
It was just nice to have someone to talk to. I kept in touch with a bunch of my old high school buddies even when I was in the military. I mean, even though they didn’t go into the military and experience the same stuff I did, they were all ears when we would hang out. I think I kinda depressed them a little bit at first (laughter) with all of the stories but it was cool to have friends who actually cared about the things I was going through. I had a few vet buddies who I knew were struggling a lot more than I was…who knows, maybe they were just bottling it all up inside.

Isiah also highlighted the pivotal role family and friends played during his transition from the military to community college during a focus group session and discussed being slightly older than the typical student veteran:

After I got out of the military, I came home and it probably was different than most of these fellas around me just because I’m old as hell (laughter). I felt like it was almost expected of me to have everything in order since I was older and should have had my life together at that point (laughter) even thought I was completely changing my life!...I would say it a was a combination of help from both family and friends that got me through…my wife was amazing, god I love that woman! She knew it was going to be a rough few years with me trying to go to school and not having a full-time salary coming in but she stuck with me! She knew it would pay off in the long run, I think…and my friends were always down to get a drink and shoot the shit with me (laughter). Helps ya forget!

A few of the research participants also expressed their feelings regarding their relationships via Twitter. David posted:
Miguel shared:

It is evident that family and friends played a crucial role in the transition of these student veterans from the military to community college. Family and friends have been cited as sources of support (Jones, 2017) and in this study for student veterans through a variety of means including financially and emotionally. As mentioned prior, the research participants did not differentiate different experiences or different types of emotional support exhibited by family versus friends. The term “family and friends” was often used by the research participants when discussing types of support that would be classified as “emotional” for the purposes of this study. These types of support included “listening” to them discuss their experiences, offering a supportive environment, etc. The difference in support came when discussing financial support which was only cited as being offered by family. Financial support included offering a place to live, money for school, and funding for life in general.

To further reinforce the point of the importance of family and friends as sources of support during a transition, a few of the research participants discussed how their family and friends did not provide any support or provided a form of “negative support”. Lenny described his experience coming home from the military during his one-on-one interview:
So my family and I have never really been that close and it was actually one of the reasons I decided to enlist in the first place. We would keep in touch here or there but not like some of the guys with me who would be talking to their families almost every day if they could. I just didn’t have that with my family. But anyway, so I get discharged from the military and I’m not working so I call up my sister and ask if I can crash with her for a little bit until I get back on my feet and she basically tells me she has too much going on right now to have to deal with me to. So I called my other sister and asked her if I could crash with her and I swear they must have called each other in-between me calling my other sister cause the other one said some kind of bull along the same lines…so to people who say that family always has your back, well not mine! I was on my own. Looking back, I guess it made me who I am always having to do things on my own and struggling. I don’t have to rely on anyone and don’t owe anyone any favors.

Mike discussed the strong relationships he had with friends before going into the military and the opposite situation he faced when returning during a focus group session:

Before I left for the Marines, my buddies and I were extremely tight. We hungout almost every day either going to the bars or just hanging out at one of our houses doing dumb shit. Loved them all like brothers and I think they felt the same way (laughter). So I went and served in the Marines and came back and hit up my buddies just like the old days and usually it wasn’t even a question, it was more like, ok what are we doing tonight, not do you want to do something tonight? But I hit up a couple of them and asked them if they wanted to meet up at one of our
favorite bars and I sensed some hesitation, I don’t know what it was. But finally after some convincing, we all met up. It was cool at first, they all gave me a big hug and said welcome home and then it got a little awkward. We were sitting there and then my friends started talking about something that happened a few weeks ago before I was home and I obviously couldn’t chime in on the conversation so I kinda just sat there and listened. They all continued to do this and almost purposefully leave me out of the conversation. So finally I jumped in and started to tell a story about the Marines and my buddies all kinda just sat there and looked around and then when I was done talking, the conversation just moved onto something else that didn’t relate to me…I left the bar that night and went home and thought to myself, wow, the old phrase really is true, you can’t go home again. It’s like my life at home was on hold while I was in the Marines but their lives kept moving on and clearly moving on without me…I struggled with this for a long time. I let it get to me when I shouldn’t have. I mean I’m a Marine and I was acting like a weakling letting them not wanting me in their lives get to me. I swear I went through like a mini depression from it. I just couldn’t believe that they would do that.

Miguel shared his thoughts on the topic on Twitter through posting lyrics of a country song that applied to the situation:

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Never stop to think 'what's in it for me?' or 'it's way too far.'
They just show on up with that big old heart
You find out who you're friends are
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It was quite the emotional rollercoaster to listen to some of the student veterans who raved about their families and how supportive they were during their transition and then hear completely opposite stories where veterans struggled to even get by both financially and emotionally due to their strained relationships with family and friends. Jackson briefly discussed how his family preferred he not talk about his military service because it “bored” them which he classified as a form of “negative support”. From Lenny not having anywhere to live for a brief period of time to Mike struggling with a bout of depression to Jackson having to keep his feelings and emotions bottled up inside, these situations highlight the negative effects of a lack of support system and contrast the value and benefit of those student veterans who have a positive support system during their transition. As it relates to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, the student veterans were attempting to “move through” their transition and continue to acclimate to their new environment. As such, some research participants cited great examples of support during their transition while others shared the opposite.

**Theme 4, Subsidiary Theme 2: Veteran Peers.** Beyond “family and friends”, which most of the research participants grouped together, one of the key groups that was differentiated and mentioned by almost all of the 15 student veterans that served as a source of support during the transition was other veterans. The inability to relate to nonveteran peers (Falkey, 2016; Heineman, 2016; Jones, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010;) has been cited in past empirical studies as a potential roadblock for student veterans when they are transitioning. However, in the same studies, student veterans themselves have cited being able to connect with other veterans as a support mechanism.
The ability for veterans to connect with one another and lean on each other is also evident in this study through the research participants’ responses regarding the importance of an established veteran center previously mentioned. In these responses through interviews, focus groups, and Twitter posts, the student veterans stressed the importance of being able to be around people like them and who have had similar experiences. This notion is further enforced and supported through the responses of the research participants surrounding their veteran peers serving as support mechanisms.

Juan stated during his one-on-one interview:

I would have to say the biggest source of support, even over family, don’t tell them that (laughter) would have to be the dudes I talk to in here (veteran center at SPCC) and the ones I still text from when I was in the military. We’ll come across something dumb that reminds us of something that happened in the military and we’ll take a picture of it and send it to each other and laugh…it’s better to laugh about this stuff now that it’s over than dwell.

Nathan reiterated similar sentiments during his interview:

Being around other vets has helped. I found it much easier to talk to other vets than normal students I see around SPCC. They don’t get it like the vets do. I prefer being around vets so we can talk about things and I don’t have to explain what everything means and they just get it…ya know, when I first got out of the military and came to SPCC, I struggled. I had trouble meeting people and felt like an outcast, for real. One day I stumbled upon the vet center and everything got better. I met a bunch of dudes who are still my friends to this day and have helped
me get through my rough patch (laughter) and come out stronger on the other side.

Andrew shared his experience during his interview regarding the importance of having a supportive network of veterans especially as it related to dealing with PTSD:

Having PTSD and trying to go to college while having to do a million other things outside of school was hard. PTSD made me not want to be around people a lot and made me very testy so I tried to avoid any issues that could come up by being around annoying students (laughter). It almost got to the point where I met with my advisor and talked about withdrawing cause I didn’t think I’d be able to handle it all. I thought that maybe I had rushed into school right out of the military and didn’t take enough time to chill and get back into civilian mode. I was really right on the edge of dropping out and I kept talking it over with my family and some of my friends who I would hang out with in the vet center and I have to say, they pulled me back from the edge (laughter). I hated school and it would have been so easy to just drop out, but they kept putting it in my head that I would be making a big mistake and it would get better. And it did. All the dudes in the vet center really kept me going.

The importance of having a support system of other veterans was also on full display during the focus group sessions. Muhammad stated:

Not trying to give these guys a big head or anything (laughter) but they’ve been cool…a bunch of these guys are some of my good friends now but I still keep in contact with my buddies from the Army. We’ve all been through some shit, but
we all get it. We know what it’s like to serve our country…just nothing can replace that bond of brotherhood we all share.

David followed up on Muhammad’s comments during the focus group session:

I don’t know what it is but I just feel more at ease around other vets. Not that I have anything against someone who isn’t, but especially at school, it’s just easier to be around them, if that makes sense…they’re always down to talk or be an ear if you need one. Or if you just wanna sit in silence and not have to worry about these immature punks around SPCC saying dumb shit, that helps too!...I remember a few times where I came in here (vet center) and did really bad on an exam or was just having a shitty day and I thought about quitting altogether. Then I came in here and had a chat with my buddies and they righted my attitude (laughter). I think if I didn’t have this group of guys, I probably wouldn’t be sitting here right now, and that’s the truth.

The importance of the having a support system of veteran peers was evident in the Twitter posts of some of the research participants as well. Joseph posted:

My boys always have my back #army4life

Alan echoed those sentiments in his Twitter post:

Sometimes you have to figure out who your friends are the hard way…and sometimes you just know #semperFi
Having the support of other veterans proved to be a key support mechanism for this group of veterans. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory highlights the factor of support as a key metric of how an individual handles a transition. The student veterans in this study stressed the pivotal role of the support they received from other veterans. Having shared similar experiences and are self-proclaimed “more mature” than their non-veteran peers, it was clear to see why this group of student veterans, and student veterans in general are able to relate more to one another as compared to their non-veteran peers. It is human nature to drift towards people who are similar and feel more comfortable around people that share similarities or experiences. Research participants commented on how they could speak the “military jargon” to one another and did not have to go through the process of explaining what everything meant. Additionally, the student veterans used each other as a “sounding board” in which to “vent” and have discussions as a form of pseudo-therapy, but the relationships were also pivotal in their persistence towards their degree in some cases. Both David and Andrew stated that their veteran peers were one of the reasons behind them staying in school and not dropping out or taking a leave of absence. Lastly, participants highlighted how their veteran friends “always had their back” and the “brotherhood” that existed between those who were in the military was a bond that “almost can’t be described”.

It is worth noting that all 15 research participants mentioned other veterans as one of their sources of support. This response was provided more than “family” or “friends”. The relationships that were forged between the student veterans proved to be instrumental in their transition from the military to community college. Whether serving as an active listener or taking on a more influential role and impacting their continued enrollment, the
connection between veterans and their veteran peers was an obvious subsidiary theme in this study. As networking opportunities for veterans (Wheeler, 2012) is cited as a form of support that more veterans would like to see implemented at community colleges, it is no wonder that this emerged as a subsidiary theme in this study. More networking opportunities for veterans will be discussed in Chapter Five regarding recommendations that can be made to better support student veterans.

**Schlossberg’s Transition Theory**

When examining the themes of this study, I chose to examine it through the lens of theory as well. Theory grants a researcher the ability to appreciate aspects of a study that would otherwise go unnoticed while at the same time allowing the researcher to make sense of the gathered data (Merriam, 2001). The raw data of this study was coded through the lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory in an effort to develop view the transition of the student veterans through their own interpretation as per the tenets of the theory at hand.

As mentioned prior when describing the theoretical framework of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, Evans et al., (2010) stated, “to understand the meaning that a transition has for a particular individual requires considering the type, context, and impact of the transition” (p. 215). The transitions experienced by the student veterans in this study were anticipated transitions as they were all scheduled to be discharged from the military and made the decision to enroll in community college. Next, context refers to their relationship to the transition and the setting where the transition occurs which in this case refers to their own transition that is taking place in almost all aspects of their lives including work, personal relationships, and at community college. Lastly, the impact
relates to the role that a transition plays in affecting an individual’s life. Schlossberg’s 4S system provides background regarding the set of factors that impact an individual’s ability to process a transition. These factors include situation, self, support, and strategies and their ability is dependent upon their resources in the four aforementioned categories.

An individual’s “appraisal” of the transition is a significant determiner of how an individual experiencing a transition copes (Evans et al., 2010). The primary appraisal involves their own perspective on the transition while a secondary appraisal is their evaluation of their own resources they have or do not have during their transition in relation to the categories in the 4S system (Evans et al., 2010).

It is important to remember that the level or the degree to which all three of these factors impact a transition is dependent upon the individual as the “role of perception is important” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 215) and a transition is only occurring to begin with if the individual identifies it as such. Schlossberg also postulated that the transition duration included three stages referred to as moving in, moving through, and moving out (Evans et al., 2010). During the moving in stage, an individual perceiving that they are going through a transition is experiencing a new environment and attempts to understand the new norms. During the moving through stage, an individual must learn to handle the new situation while also balancing other responsibilities. Lastly, during the moving out stage, the individual is nearing the end of their transition, if they interpret it as such, and looking towards the future and their next steps as they have transitioned from their former experiences. Now that the underlying principles of the theory have been established, the transition process including the three aforementioned stages and Schlossberg’s 4S system
is discussed before delving into the role that each of the factors of the theory played in the thematic analysis of this study.

Moving In

During the moving in stage, an individual is experiencing a new environment and attempting to familiarize themselves with their new environment while moving away from their former environment. This can be a rather difficult phase for some (but it is largely dependent on the individual’s level of resources in each of the 4S categories) as an individual must now shed portions of their former identity and tackle a completely and often unfamiliar situation. During this study, the “moving in” stage can be interpreted as the period when the veteran research participants were exiting the military and making the decision to enroll in community college and then ultimately enrolling in community college. Additionally, this is also the period when the student veterans were experiencing all aspects of a community college such as the classroom and learning how to navigate the institution.

Moving In: Situation

When evaluating a student veteran’s situation, a variety of factors are considered including timing and control (Evans et al., 2010). In regard to timing, Schlossberg proposes that individuals perceiving that they are going through a transition evaluate it as such in terms of if the transition is happening at a “good” or “bad” time (Evans et al., 2010). In this study, the participants had mixed reactions in regard to how they evaluated the timing of their transition. Some of the participants described the timing as “well it’s now or never”, “my family was able to help me out financially so I figured it would be a good time to enroll”, or “the G.I. Bill was paying so why not!” . Many of the responses
provided are connected to the third S of the 4S system, support, and the research participants connected the timing as “good” or “bad” in relation to the level of support they were receiving.

Evans et al., (2010) define control as, “what does the individual perceive as being within his or her control (for example, the transition itself, his or her reaction to it” (p. 217). In relation to the “control” of situation, the research participants also commonly connected that back to the level of support they were receiving during this stage. For example, when attempting to apply to other community colleges or have their benefits apply, some of the research participants experienced less than stellar experiences by community college staff members. As a result, they felt they did not have any control over the situation and their future of enrolling in college was in somebody else’s hands.

**Moving In: Self**

In connection to the second S, *self*, research participants also commented on their own abilities to handle the change in their lives as they were moving away from the military and moving into community college. Important factors related to *self* are broken own into personal and demographic characteristics as well as psychological resources (Evans et al., 2010). Once again, how research participants viewed their situation in relation to *self* was oftentimes connected to their system of support. For example, some research participants described “hesitancy” towards enrolling in community college due to their status as a first-generation college student and knew that they would be trekking this collegiate path on their own with little to no help from their family in regard to navigating the college process. Additionally, socioeconomic status also played a part in enrolling in community college through participants choosing community college “over
four-year cause community college is cheaper and I don’t have the money to attend a four-year”. A few of the participants echoed those concerns when making the decision to enroll in community college as they described their background as being “lower-middle class” and their families not having the resources to help them out financially enroll in college or persist. Lastly, psychological resources also came into play during the transition when some of the research participants chose to attend community college over four-year institutions due to them knowing their “own abilities” and felt they were not “academically prepared” to attend a four-year institution.

**Moving In: Support**

The third S, *support*, can take a variety of forms such as institutional support, family, and friends (Ryan et al., 2011). The type of support can be fluid and fluctuate over time as well as the level of support (Evans et al., 2010). Research participants in the study who admitted to having a less than ideal system of support during their transition described this period as “difficult” and “something I’ve never done before”. On the contrary, research participants who had parents, siblings, or friends who had attended college and had more insight into the processes described this period as “a change of lifestyle but wasn’t too bad” and “a lot easier for me since I had other buddies from the military already go through the process”. Additionally, institutional support played a role during the “moving in” phase. For example, when some of the research participants attempted to attend another institution and received little assistance, that experience swayed them to attend SPCC due to the ease of admission and assistance they received.

After examining the raw data through the lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, it was important that the role of family, friends, and veteran peers be examined
from a theoretical perspective. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory offers a framework in which to understand the process of transitioning as well as the factors that can either assist or inhibit a transition. It is important for those in a transition to obtain and identify their support system as the support component of the 4s system plays an equally important role in having individuals move successfully through their transition. As clearly displayed in prior testimony from the research participants, those who had a perceived support system found the “moving in” phase to be less difficult than those who perceived their support system to be lacking during this stage.

**Moving In: Strategies**

Lastly, strategies were implemented by some of the research participants in order to effectively handle their transition from the military to community college. For example, Mike stated the following during his individual interview when asked about why he chose community college over a four-year institution and how he learned more about resources for veterans:

> I did a lot of research on my own. Everything you need should be on their website so that’s where I started. I figured I could do this on my own and would ask someone at SPCC for help if I needed it. I found all the admission info on their site and some stuff about vet benefits. It was all really easy.

Mike implemented his own strategies and took information seeking into his own hands in order to handle the transition. Additionally, other research participants sought out the help of SPCC staff members in order to help them enroll in community college. For example, some discovered the veteran success center and contacted Angela for assistance.
regarding their transition from the military to community college in hopes of assistance with enrolling, registering for classes, paying, and resources related to counseling.

Moving Through

During the “moving through” stage of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, an individual is now in the new environment and attempting to handle the new responsibilities associated with that new situation/environment while also balancing prior and ongoing responsibilities. The individual at this stage may be assimilating into their new role and shedding some of their former self in an effort to successfully transition. The successful transition is once again dependent upon their level of resources in the four categories of the 4S system as well as their own interpretation of their progress during the transition.

Moving Through: Situation

In regard to the situation during the “moving through” stage, “control” once again played a role in the transition of the student veterans. At times some of the student veteran research participants felt like they were in control of the situation while some felt that certain aspects of their transition was out of their hands. For example, Mike who implemented his own information seeking strategies reported that he felt “comfortable” and “not overwhelmed” by the entire process. On the other hand, some of the research participants expressed their feelings of “hopelessness” in regard to having their military benefits processed and which institutional offices handled which processes before getting into contact with the veteran success center. The concept of role changes was also exhibited by the research participants through the data during this stage. However, no complete abandonments of their former selves was evident in this study and 100% of the
research participants commented on how some aspect of their identity in the military carried forward to their time at community college and even helped prepare them for the transition. Characteristics such as “increased maturity” and “dedication” were qualities that the student veterans mentioned were developed and held over from their military experience.

**Moving Through: Self**

Next, examining the role of *self* in the “moving through” phase of the research participants was important in evaluating the role of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory in this study. Isiah continually mentioned how his age impacted his transition and somewhat was viewed as a handicap when he compared himself to other students. He viewed his advanced age as a hindrance due to being out of school for an extended period of time and lacking the necessary study skills and knowledge regarding navigating a college environment. Additionally, student veterans commented on how their current stage of life proved to be a barrier when interacting with non-veteran students. Student veterans felt more mature than other students and felt a level of “disconnect” due to differing life situations. For example, some of the research participants had spouses, children, or other family members that relied on them for support, both financially and/or emotionally. The interpretation of the student veterans was that the majority of their non-veteran peers were “immature” and school was their main priority and “didn’t take it seriously”. As a result of the perceived differing stages of life, student veterans faced roadblocks when attempting to interact with non-veteran students which negatively impacted their ability to transition smoothly into the community college environment.
Moving Through: Support

The third S, *support*, played a prevalent role in the “moving through” stage. As described in extensive detail in Chapter Four, the sources of support through family, friends, veteran-peers, the veteran success center, and faculty proved to be invaluable resources to the student veterans during their transition. For those student veterans who perceived their support systems to have a positive influence on their transition, they cited such reasoning as their family, friends, and veteran-peers being both “financially” and “emotionally” supportive. Additionally, the veteran success center and faculty were viewed as helping them “adjust to college” and develop an “understanding of what I needed to do” in order to be successful in college. On the other hand, the student veterans who perceived their systems of support as deficient or lacking seemed to struggle more than the student veterans with an established support system. For example, Joseph and Oscar both described what they perceived as negative experiences and less-than-supportive faculty members. As a result, both participants questioned dropping the class or dropping out of college altogether due to the lack of support and negative environment that was created by the faculty members during their transition. The pivotal role of support systems during a transition was a key finding in this study and supports Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and the 4S system.

Moving Through: Strategies

Lastly, *strategies* employed by the research participants during the “moving through” stage were evident. Some of the research participants stated that they made an effort to connect with other veterans on campus by frequenting the veteran success center and attempting to make connections with other veterans due to them “understanding what
we’re going through” and being able to “relax and feel comfortable” around them compared to non-veteran students. Additionally, student veterans took action and sought out assistance from their faculty members in regard to receiving additional help on classwork and assignments instead of allowing themselves to fall behind.

**Summary**

Theory, particularly Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, played a prevalent role in this study. Not only did it help to establish the framework of the study and assist in formulating the research questions, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory also aided in coding the data and interpreting the responses provided by the research participants. Being largely grounded in the basis of an individual’s own interpretation of a transition, the chosen theory complimented the qualitative case study design that sought to share the experiences of a population that has been under researched through their own eyes. As Schlossberg’s Transition Theory is ideal for examining adult student behavior, it proved to be invaluable during every step of examining the transition experience of veterans from the military to community college.

**Interpretation**

Operating under the constructivist point-of-view, this section will briefly discuss my personal interpretation of the findings of this study that I consider to be the most significant and will have the greatest impact on future student veterans transitioning from the military to community college. The section will begin by discussing the glaring overall conclusion reached in this study: the pivotal role of a support system during a transition. Second, potential roadblocks will be identified for that student veterans in this study faced and likely other student veterans across the country face in an effort to draw
attention to factors that could potentially inhibit a transition in hopes that community colleges will take them into consideration when implementing resources for student veterans.

**Support is Key**

Operating under Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, five factors were identified that can be classified under the *support* category of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory 4s System that were exhibited throughout the “moving in” and “moving through” stages. These factors include: [1] family, [2] friends, [3] veteran peers, [4] institutional, and [5] faculty. These elements have been cited in past studies concerning veterans transitioning from the military to higher education as support mechanisms for student veterans (Falkey, 2016; Jones, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012;) and this study further reinforces reiterates and highlights the importance of these entities in the transition of a student veteran.

The presence or absence of the aforementioned factors were shown to be instrumental in impacting the transition of a student veteran in this study. The perceived level of support exhibited by an individual’s family was mentioned frequently by the research participants as having an impact on their transition, whether it be in a positive or negative manner. Participants cited their family as offering financial assistance as well as emotional support throughout the transition. The student veterans credited their families with “pushing” them to attend college, “helping” them navigate the college process, and “offering money” to help with college related expenses or housing. Additionally, both families and friends were cited as offering a level of what I classify as emotional support. Emotional support included being an active listener and helping the student veterans open
up and discuss any of their military experiences that might have been weighing on them or ensuring that they were connected to the appropriate resources to handle their transition. On the opposite end of the spectrum, participants who perceived their family or friends to have a negative influence on their transition or their absence was noted inhibited their transition.

Veteran peers were also mentioned by the majority of the research participants as having a strong influence on their transition both on campus and off. Veteran peers were cited by all of the fifteen research participants as having a positive influence and aided in their transition. Some of the research participants went as far as to suggest that they would not have attended or persisted in community college without the support of fellow veterans. Veteran peers was the most mentioned and most discussed form of support by the student veteran research participants.

Institutional and faculty support at SPCC also played an influential role during a transition of student veterans and had an effect similar to family and friends. If the student veterans perceived themselves having a positive interaction with institutional staff or faculty members, they stated that the two entities aided in their transition. On the contrary, if student veterans had a negatively perceived interaction with faculty and staff, they described that their transition was negatively impacted. All 15 of the research participants cited the pivotal role the veteran success center as well as the veteran coordinator played during their transition. The center served as a safe haven for the research participants to escape from the “immaturity” of non-veteran students and stress of college and provided an opportunity to network with other veterans. Additionally, the
veteran coordinator provided ample resources for navigating the community college environment and aided the student veterans during every step of their transition.

In regard to faculty, Andrew described one of his professors who helped him both inside and outside of the classroom in relation to accommodating his PTSD. Through helping explain the process for receiving accommodations inside the classroom for PTSD, the professor helped the student veteran in not only his class, but succeed in future classes by disclosing his condition to other professors. However, student veterans such as Oscar described a situation where the faculty member created a non-welcoming environment. Some of the research participants stated how the negative experiences with faculty caused them to question whether or not to stay enrolled in college and persist while those who had a positive experience credited their faculty with being a reason for their success during their transition.

**Potential Roadblocks to a Smooth Transition**

I believe the key to assisting student veterans transition from the military to community college is not only in identifying the key support systems that aid in a smooth transition but also in pinpointing the factors that could potentially stop a transition in its tracks or have a negative impact. By identifying the factors that student veterans in this study mentioned most frequently as hindrances to their transition, the information can hopefully be taken into consideration by community colleges across the country when crafting programming and support services for student veterans. Recommendations to remedy and overcome these factors will be provided in Chapter 5.

Common subsidiary themes emerged that encapsulate the factors that served as hindrances to the student veterans during their transition which include: the changing
environments, navigating the institutional bureaucracy of a community college, and acclimating oneself to the collegiate classroom. First, the drastic change of environments from the strict and structured one experienced in the military to the lax environment of higher education proved to require an adjustment period and for veterans to alter the way they think and their daily lives. Second, student veterans reported difficulty understanding the complex processes of the collegiate environment from applying for admissions to locating the office that handles the processing of G.I. Bill benefits. The burdensome and inefficient processes of other community colleges pushed some of the student veterans to apply to SPCC, but they still faced issues at SPCC as well. Lastly, acclimating or reacclimating oneself to the collegiate classroom or getting back into “school-mode” proved to be a challenge for some of the research participants. They reported having to relearn good study habits, not performing well on exams, and difficulty focusing inside the classroom. Additionally, student veterans cited issues they faced while being around non-veteran students in classes and stated that they were “immature” and “insensitive”.

As highlighted throughout this section, it is my interpretation that the most important findings from the study were recognizing the pivotal role that a support system plays for a student veteran both during the “moving in” and “moving through” stages of a transition as well as identifying the potential roadblocks a student veteran may experience. By acknowledging both of these topics, it is the hope of the researcher that community colleges will examine the findings of this study and implement more resources for this population. Additionally, this study aims to encourage future research
regarding specific programming and services aimed at supporting student veterans throughout their transition.

**Summary**

Chapter Four: Findings began by restating the research questions to clearly show how the subsequent findings related to and provided evidence towards satisfying the research inquiry. The chapter then shifts to a thick and rich description of the themes with complimenting evidence offered for each claim through the various data collection methods. Lastly, my personal interpretation of the regarding the most significant findings of the study was provided.

This qualitative case study sought to uncover more information related to how student veterans describe and perceive their transition from the military to community college in relation to both institutional as well as personal aspects. Through the triangulation and analysis of semi-structured interview responses, focus group participation, and social media analysis, in addition to examining the data through the lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, themes were established. The themes included: [1] motivation to enroll in community college, [2] experiencing community college as an institution during a transition, [3] transitioning into academics, and [4] the role of relationships and systems of support during a transition. The themes as well as the subsidiary themes are clearly broken down in Table 4.2. Each of the themes connect back to and help to answer the two research questions posited in this study which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications.

As clearly displayed throughout Chapter Four, the transition of a student veteran from the military to community college is dependent upon many different factors which
can either have a positive or negative influence on the overall transition. However, as Schlossberg’s Transition Theory clearly states, perception and an individual’s own interpretation is key. To conclude, student veterans in this study described their transition based upon the factors that impacted it, whether it be in a positive or negative manner, grounded in their own perception and interpretation.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Chapters 1-3 laid out the necessary components required to conduct a qualitative case study surrounding veterans and their transition from the military to community college. Chapter One, Introduction, provided the research context that offered the necessary background to justify the study and concluded with the research questions that would guide the study. Chapter Two, Literature Review, began by providing a rich and descriptive historical background of the relationship between the military and higher education before saturating the limited available literature surrounding the topic of veterans transitioning to community college. Chapter Three, Methodology, clearly laid out the methods that were implemented to gather the richest data possible while paying special attention to the validity and trustworthiness of the study. Chapter Four, Findings, provided my interpretation of the data based upon thematic analysis that relied upon the thick and rich description provided in the raw data. After laying this groundwork, Chapter Five, Discussion and Implications, will begin by clearly showcasing how the findings of this study connect and satisfy the two research questions. This final chapter will then move on to address the implications the findings of study have on both research and practice and provide recommendations. Chapter Five will conclude with relevance to the literature, final thoughts, and a brief summary of the study.
Research Questions and Findings

This section will address each of the two research questions while drawing on the themes and subsidiary themes. The themes developed during thematic analysis as well as supporting evidence will be discussed to illustrate how the study’s findings satisfy the following research questions: (1) How do student veterans describe their transition experience from the military to community college? (2) How do student veterans perceive their transition? Institutionally? Personally?

How do student veterans describe their transition experience from the military to community college? How do student veterans perceive their transition? Institutional aspects? Personal aspects?

I, as the researcher, concluded that student veterans in this study described their transition based upon the factors that impacted it, whether it be in a positive or negative manner, grounded in their own perception and interpretation. As such, I made the decision to discuss both of the research questions together as the themes discussed in Chapter Four: Findings overlap and are interwoven between the two research questions. Through the analysis of individual interviews, focus group sessions, and social media activity, four distinct themes and multiple subsidiary themes were deduced from the raw data. As the aim of this study was triangulation, only themes that were present across all three methods of data collections were designated as “themes”.

As previously mentioned, 43% of veterans who attend higher education decide to do so at community colleges (Wheeler, 2012). Student veterans cited that they chose community college for a variety of reasons including ease of enrollment, flexible course offerings, as well as the reduced cost as compared to four-year institutions. As all of the
research participants are classified as nontraditional students, the flexible course offerings reasoning made sense to me. Nontraditional students often have dependents they tend to and have other responsibilities such as families and full-time employment. They are not like the traditional eighteen-year-old student fresh out of high school whose main responsibility is to attend school. Student veterans are typically older and are balancing school around working and taking care of their families. As a result, they are not able to attend classes in the middle of the day when many undergraduate courses are typically offered at four-year institutions. Community colleges seem to cater to nontraditional students to a greater degree than four-year institutions in this manner. Additionally, the cost played a huge factor in their decision as the G.I. Bill was a motivator for them to attend college in the first place and many did not want to take on huge amounts of debt to attend college as their primary goal was to get an education, so they could attain a better job for themselves and their families. Student veterans viewed community colleges as an ideal way to earn their education when they were able to attend class and not go into an exorbitant amount of debt. Highlighting this theme will hopefully draw attention to how community colleges are better recruiting student veterans and encourage other types of higher education to re-evaluate their own methods and practices as it relates to nontraditional students.

Second, experiencing community college as an institution was further broken down into three subsidiary themes: changing environments, navigating the institutional bureaucracy, and the pivotal role of a veteran center. Many of the student veteran research participants struggled with the transition as it related to the drastic change of setting. The student veterans were accustomed to the highly structured and authoritarian
nature of the military where their days were structured and decision making fell mostly on higher-ranking individuals. On the contrary, when the student veterans were leaving that environment and transition into the higher education setting that was extremely lax and having gaps of time in which to fill fell upon the student veteran, the research participants cited difficulty they faced with the drastic change of environment.

Next, navigating the institutional bureaucracy was another difficulty the student veterans faced that connected to their transition to community college, institutionally speaking. Student veteran research participants cited multiple instances where they lacked the knowledge required to know where to go on campus in order to satisfy their certain needs. For example, many of the student veterans cited being pushed around from office to office when attempting to figure out where to go to have their G.I. Bill benefits processed. A few of the research participants even cited this as a reason they did not attend another community college due to receiving the run around and not being given a straight answer. This is an area that all institutions of higher education, especially community colleges, can improve upon by becoming more fluent in veteran issues and having knowledgeable administrative staff who can either assist the population with their concerns or at the bare minimum connect them with the appropriate party that can be of assistance.

The veteran success center proved to be an invaluable asset for all of the student veterans involved in this study. Many of the research participants cited having difficulty navigating the institutional bureaucracy until they were introduced to the veteran success center as well as the coordinator who handled veteran issues. They viewed the veteran center as a source of knowledge having Angela serving as a supportive and competent
guide to the student veterans as they learn and acclimate to their new environment. The student veterans also viewed the success center as a refuge and a place they could network and connect with other veterans. The role of veteran peers will be discussed later in this section, but it is worth highlighting how the established veteran center played a large role in each of the student veteran’s transition. Student veterans were able to be around other people who shared similar experiences and people who could relate to their circumstances and not be forced to be around non-veteran peers who are often in different life situations and are unable to relate to the student veterans.

Third, student veterans experienced their transition to community college through the classroom experience. The transition to the classroom was further broken down into three subsidiary themes: experiencing the classroom as a learner, interacting with faculty, and interactions with non-veteran peers. Student veterans described difficulty adjusting and acclimating to the classroom environment and getting into “student mode” in terms of developing study habits and paying attention in the classroom. However, some of the research participants cited as being assisted in this area with the help of their faculty members. Some of the faculty members went out of their way in order to assist the student veterans adjust to the classroom environment and offer them additional support in regard to homework and exams. On the contrary, some research participants cited hostile faculty members who did the opposite and created an unwelcoming environment for the student veterans which forced some to question if college was right for them and pushed them to the brink of dropping out. Lastly, student veterans repeatedly cited instances with non-veteran students who were insensitive to their military service and were viewed as “immature” by the student veterans. Both the non-supportive faculty members as well as
non-veteran peers played a negative role in the transition of the student veterans while supportive faculty members had a positive influence.

Fourth, the role of relationships and systems of support during a transition was the final theme present in this study. Similar to the other two themes, student veterans perceived their personal relationships and systems of support either from a positive or negative viewpoint and as either assisting or hindering their transition from the military to community college. Family and friends were viewed as instrumental in the transition process. Both parties offered various forms of support for the transitioning student veterans including financial and emotional. Families and friends who were viewed positively during the transition were viewed as being supportive and helpful. However, some family and friends who did not offer support to the student veterans had a negative influence during the transition process. Additionally, veteran peers were viewed positively by all research participants and were viewed as playing a supportive role during the transition process. The role of veteran peers connects back to the pivotal role of the veteran center as well as the recommendation that student veterans would like to see more networking opportunities for veterans on campus. Veterans view the relationships they form with other veterans as instrumental and key to their successful transition from the military to community college.

In conclusion, throughout this study, student veterans described their transition based upon the factors that impacted it, whether it be in a positive or negative manner, grounded in their own perception and interpretation. Instead of describing their transition as simply “hard” or “easy”, the research participants provided more thoughtful and well-rounded responses that tapped into their experiences and the factors that influenced their
transition, either in a positive or negative manner. The themes and subsidiary themes provided in Chapter Four: Findings help to answer the two research questions in this study by providing evidence through interview responses, focus group participation, as well as social media activity.

Implications and Recommendations

The aim of this study was three-fold. First, developing a deeper understanding and adding to the existing body of literature on the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college was a key motivator in undertaking this qualitative case study. Second, providing empirical evidence to community colleges across the nation surrounding the experiences of transitioning veterans and drawing attention to the aspects that are working well and some of the roadblocks that are inhibiting the transition. It is the hope of this researcher that community colleges will take note of the findings of the study and adjust and/or improve their veteran programming/services to better support this population. Third, providing a voice to a population that has been largely ignored in both academic research as well as at the community college level was a driving force behind this research.

Recommendations for Research

The following section highlights areas deserving of future research as it relates to student veterans and their experience at community colleges based off the findings of this study. The opportunity for additional research on veterans, in general, is limitless especially as it relates to additional research on veterans at the community college. Due to 43% of veterans who enroll in higher education choosing community college (Wheeler, 2012), it is the personal belief of this researcher that researchers should attempt
to research veterans at community colleges over four-year institutions due to the research having the ability to impact the largest subgroup of this population. Additionally, since there have been more studies conducted on veterans transitioning from the military to four-year institutions, more research is desperately needed in the community college sector to enforce or refute the conclusions reached in this study. Specifically, areas of further research that are recommended include:

1. *Qualitative studies focusing on the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college.* As this was the topic chosen for this dissertation due to the lack of available research, I begin my recommendations for research here. My study only begins to scrape the surface of this topic and is one of only a handful of studies available. Using this framework as a guide and replicating the case study methodology is an initial place to start. However, it may be beneficial to study the transition experiences utilizing a narrative inquiry methodology, interview-study methodology, phenomenology, or possibly even an ethnography if time permits. This study could also be conducted as a multi-site case study as this study was conducted at one site. I highly recommend all studies be qualitative to truly capture the essence of the transition experience as it is my personal opinion that quantitative studies would not be appropriate for this topic.

2. *More specifically, qualitative studies focusing specifically on the community college institutional factors that impacted the transition of a student veteran.* Beginning with the initial theme of this study, it became clear that institutional factors play a role in the transition experience. Whether it being difficulty navigating the institutional bureaucracy or the changing environments from a
military one to higher education, the community college as an institution plays a part in how a student veteran handles a transition. This study focused on the transition overall, institutional factors, as well as personal factors, but one could make the case that an entire study could focus exclusively on just the institutional factors.

3. *Qualitative studies focusing exclusively on the personal factors that impact the transition of student veterans.* The role of personal factors, or in this study the role of support, became a central finding and theme after data analysis. From the pivotal role of family and friends, both in a positive and negative manner, to veteran peers, support systems or lack thereof, were key in this study. Similar to recommendation #2, it is worth exploring in future research and could potentially be the primary focus of future studies.

4. *Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods studies examining the academic outcomes of student veterans.* While little is known about a veteran’s experience transitioning to the community college, even less is known about the academic outcomes of student veterans. According to Parks and Walker (2014), “Data on student veterans indicate that 88 percent of veterans drop out of college during their first year and only three percent make it to graduation” (p. 63). However, this study focused on student veterans at four-year institutions. Do student veterans at community colleges drop out at the same rates? Why? Do student veterans transfer to four-year institutions to complete their degree and so they are included in the percentage that “do not complete a degree”? There is much to
learn about how student veterans fair academically compared to their non-veteran peers. Further research is desperately needed on this topic.

5. *Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods studies examining the effectiveness of current veteran support services implemented at community colleges.* While many institutions of higher education do some form of self-assessment on their programming and services, a comprehensive overview and evaluation of the support services and their effectiveness at community colleges is needed. Community colleges may believe that their programming is benefitting student veterans, but have they asked them? This type of study may be best conducted as a case study at one or more institutions.

The preceding recommendations are just a handful of possible studies that could be conducted related to student veterans at community college based off the findings of this study. Since such little is known on the topic, the possibilities are truly limitless. I hope to tackle a few of these topics myself in subsequent studies.

**Implications for Practice**

The problem I find with academics making recommendations or discussing implications after studies are completed is oftentimes they are making these recommendations based off their own interpretation of the data and acting on behalf of a population that they may or may not represent. I will not pretend to be an insider and speak on behalf of the student veteran population and think that I know what they need. Instead, recommendation provided in this section will be based off common responses by the student veteran research participants when they discussed the type of resources they
wish they had during their transition and other support services they feel would benefit their population.

1. *More opportunities for veterans to connect and network and veteran specific events on campus.* One of the most dominant themes in this study was the pivotal role that veteran-peers played during the transition from the military to community college. The research participants also communicated how important the veteran center was to their transition serving as a place for veterans to gather together. However, multiple veterans expressed their want for more opportunities to meet and network with other veterans. For example, Joseph stated the following during his individual interview:

   Man, I love coming to the vet center and hanging out, but I feel like it’s the same group of guys everyday (laughter). I’m sure there’s more vets on campus who don’t come here (vet center) and they probably would like hanging out here too…maybe SPCC needs to have some events every once in a while that are just for veterans, haven’t seen that yet.

Other research participants echoed those sentiments during their individual interviews as well as during the focus group sessions. The want for more networking opportunities with other veterans has been cited in the limited available literature as a support mechanism that veterans would like to see implemented at community colleges (Wheeler, 2012). The role of support, especially from other veterans, was a dominant theme in this study that was a positive influence on the transition of a student veteran. Community colleges,
particularly SPCC, could host networking events in the veteran success center or plan other similar events geared specifically at veterans. By offering more opportunities to connect this population, community colleges as well as the veterans themselves will benefit.

2. *Establish a veteran center (if one has not already been established) and increase support to center and coordinator.* The pivotal role of the veteran success center was highlighted in Chapter Four: Findings. From providing a place to gather for veterans to serving as an oasis from the non-veteran students that many of the research participants viewed as “immature”, the veteran success center proved to be an invaluable asset to the veterans in this case study. The establishment of a dedicated veteran center is cited often in the limited available literature (Wheeler, 2012; Heineman, 2016; Zinger & Cohen, 2010;) as a support mechanism other student veterans would like to see implemented at community colleges. As SPCC already has a veteran center and a veteran coordinator on-site and based on my conclusions drawn from interacting with student veterans, the center and coordinator should continue to be supported, if not draw more support from the institution.

Angela is a one-person department handling all of the roughly 1,100 veterans at SPCC. I would encourage SPCC to look into possibly adding another coordinator to assist with the workload and enhance the experience for the student veterans. Additionally, establish a smaller version of the veteran center on some of the other satellite campuses of SPCC to serve students who are enrolled at other campuses.
3. *Training for staff members across campus/Sensitivity training for faculty and staff.* As displayed in Chapter Four: Findings, some of the student veterans experienced less-than-pleasant situations with staff, faculty, and non-veteran students while at SPCC. These events included situations related to staff not being knowledgeable as it related to veteran processes as well as faculty and staff voicing insensitive comments to the student veterans about their service/military. Some of the student veterans even decided against attending other community colleges in the area due to the lack of knowledge surrounding veteran services. As such, SPCC as well as all community colleges need to provide cross training to student affairs departments on campus that come into contact with student veterans such as admissions, registrar, bursar, etc. The expression of knowledge related to veteran services could be the difference between if a veteran enrolls and/or persists in community college. Additionally, I am a firm believer in freedom of speech. However, due to the situations that the research participants encountered with faculty and non-veteran students, the implementation of sensitivity training for these two groups may not only educate them on veteran experiences but create a more welcoming and comfortable environment for the student veteran population.

4. *Listen.* Just as I attempted to do to the best of ability throughout this entire study and not try to act as if I knew the experiences of the student veterans, practitioners at community colleges need to simply listen. Listen to the experiences of veterans on campus and how their lives changed drastically in
the blink of an eye. Listen to their concerns. Listen to what they are struggling with and brainstorm ways in which institutions can better serve this population. Then, invite student veterans to have a seat at the table when discussing programming and support services. Ask them, do you think this program will benefit you and others in your situation? Simply because a program looks good on paper does not mean that it will have a positive impact and provide adequate support. Administrators need to change their way of thinking from “we know best” to requesting input from the population that their services/programming are going to impact most.

Through conducting this study, I aimed to develop a deeper understanding of veterans and their transition from the military to community college. As an outsider in this study, I knew that I would not be able to truly understand the lived experiences of student veterans, but I would allow my findings and conclusions to give them a voice. As such, the previous section that discussed the implications for practice were all recommendations and areas that the student veteran research participants explicitly cited as areas that they would like to see improved on the community college campus. As the last implication states, maybe if we all decide to listen more, the student veteran population could be better supported and thrive in an environment that they helped to create.

**Relevance to the Literature**

As clearly shown in Chapter Two: Literature Review, there have only been a handful of studies conducted on the transfer experience of veterans from the military to community college. My findings have affirmed some of the findings from previous
studies, but have also built upon previous research and illustrate parallels to the existing body of literature. This section will discuss the following: [1] the transition experience of veterans as it relates to community college as an institution, [2] the experience of veterans inside the classroom, [3] and the role of support systems.

As highlighted in Chapter Two: Literature Review and illustrated in Chapter Four: Findings, student veterans faced roadblocks when transitioning including navigating the institutional bureaucracy of a community college (Jones, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010) and trouble adjusting to the changing environments (Jones, 2017; Parks & Walker, 2014; Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Both of these topics have been previously cited in the limited available literature. However, the pivotal role that an established veteran center plays in the transition was not seen in past studies or mentioned briefly in passing. Most of the literature only mentioned a veteran center when the researcher was making recommendations but did not stress the importance that it actually plays in the transition. Throughout this study, I sought to highlight the importance of a veteran center to the student veterans who viewed it as a refuge and a source of knowledge.

Second, the experience of veterans inside the classroom has been discussed in previous studies including their inability to relate to nonveteran peers (Falkey, 2016; Heineman, 2016; Jones, 2017; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012; Zinger & Cohen, 2010) and the role of supportive faculty (Falkey, 2016; Rumann et al., 2011). However, these studies do not delve as deep as this study into the impact that the inability to relate to veteran peers or the role of faculty actually play in a transition. For example, research participants cited insensitive experiences with nonveteran students as well as faculty that
created unwelcoming and hostile environments and made the participants question whether or not to remain in college. On the other hand, the research participants also mentioned positive experiences they had with faculty who aided in their success in community college. Lastly, the area that really stands out and increases the breadth of knowledge related to veterans in the classroom is in relation to their learning. I highlighted multiple experiences where the student veterans struggled to adjust back into student-mode and cited issues related to disabilities impacting their overall learning. Studies focusing on how veterans learn are few and far between and almost nonexistent.

Third, I believe this study shines brightest through highlighting the role of support systems. Previous studies highlight the role of family and friends (Jones, 2017) and how both parties were influential in creating a positive environment. However, as shown, the role of family and friends has not been highlighted in many studies. It is the belief of this researcher that after conducting this case study, the positive and negative influence family and friends can have on a transition is clearly shown in the findings. This is an area that deserves further research. Additionally, the ability to connect and relate to other veterans (Wheeler, 2012) has also been cited in previous literature. However, once again, due to the extremely limited available literature on the topic, I believe that my study further highlights and draws attention to the key role the support from other veterans play in a transition.

The findings of this study clearly connect to and draw parallels with the available literature. Due to the lack of available literature on the topic of veterans transitioning from the military to community college, the findings of this study help to continue the
conversation and increase the trustworthiness of previous studies and their respective findings. However, my study stresses key factors that play a much larger role than previously thought as cited in other research.

**Limitations**

Implementing a case study methodology to develop a deeper understanding of veterans and their transition from the military to community college resulted in rich and descriptive findings. However, all studies have limitations. The following areas will be discussed as limitations to this study which can offer avenues for future research: the scope of the study, the number of research sites, the gender composition of the research participants, and the representation of the branches of the military.

First, the scope of the study was limited per the design of the study. The aim of the study was to understand the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college through their own perceptions and specifically examining institutional and personal aspects. The scope was intentionally limited due to what I, as the researcher chose to examine and formulated the research questions in a manner that would address specific aspects of a transition.

Second, this study was conducted as a single-site case study. The decision to not expand to a multi-site case study was made after data collection and analysis and I, as the researcher, concluded that rich data was retrieved and I was able to triangulate my data through interviews, focus groups, and social media activity. Additionally, I felt I reached a point of saturation in my data as no new responses were being provided by the research participants towards the later stages of data collection and patterns were emerging in the data halfway through the study. Lastly, SPCC is the largest community college server of
veterans in the state at roughly 1,100. As such, the decision was made to focus on this school per the enrollment and having the greatest chance of recruiting quality research participants due to the larger than average population of the region. That being said, this study could easily be replicated and expanded to a multi-site case study at a series of smaller community colleges or across an entire state.

Third, as shown in Chapter Four: Findings, the fifteen research participants all identified as male. With the military being composed of roughly 16% women and 84% men, it was my hope to reflect that composition in the makeup of the research participants. However, through implementing purposive and snowball sampling, I was unable to recruit any female participants. This is an avenue that should be investigated in the future and is a great opportunity to develop a study that focuses exclusively on female military members as opposed to the male-dominated studies available. By examining the transition experiences of women, the world of academia could be exposed to a completely new experience expressed by women of the military that could contrast greatly with the experiences of men. The only way to find out is to do the research.

Lastly, an attempt was made to recruit military members from each of the five branches of the military (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard) to participate in this study. However, due to the geographic location of SPCC, the Coast Guard was not represented. Additionally, it was my aim to recruit a sample that was representative of the actual makeup of the U.S. military as it relates to the percentage that each of the 5 branches accounts for in the military. However, as mentioned in Chapter 4: Findings, the Army was most accurately represented while the Marines were slightly overrepresented, and the Navy and Air Force were slightly underrepresented. As the goal of qualitative
research is not to be representative of a population, I did not feel that the lack of Coast Guard representation or the lack of actual representation of the other four branches hurt the study in anyway. Future studies could focus on the Coast Guard experience transitioning or focus on one branch specifically to capture the lived experiences.

**Summary and Final Thoughts**

This qualitative single-site case study sheds light on a topic that has received little attention in the world of research: the transition experience of veterans from the military to community college. The goal was to illustrate the transition experiences through their own perception as well as address the impact of institutional as well as personal aspects. Four themes were developed: [1] motivation to enroll in community college, [2] experiencing community college as an institution during a transition, [3] transitioning into academics, and [4] the role of relationships and systems of support during a transition.

As clearly illustrated in the previous chapter and the beginning of this chapter, the four themes presented help to answer the two research questions posed that guided this study: (1) How do student veterans describe their transition experience from the military to community college? (2) How do student veterans perceive their transition? Institutionally? Personally? This study also operated under the theoretical framework of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory that aided not only in constructing the research questions, but also in formulating the interview protocol, coding, and making sense of the data gathered.

The findings align with the theoretical underpinnings of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory where perception and an individual’s own interpretation is key. Student veterans
in this study described their transition based upon the factors that impacted it, whether it be in a positive or negative manner, grounded in their own perception and interpretation. Institutionally speaking, student veterans mentioned roadblocks that they experienced including difficulty navigating the institutional bureaucracy as well as difficulty acclimating to the new environment but highlighted the positive impact the veteran center has on their everyday and transition experience. Academically speaking, student veterans expressed their struggle transitioning back into the student mindset and expressed trouble relating to their non-veteran peers as well as positive and negative experiences with faculty members. Lastly, personally speaking, the presence, or lack thereof of support from family, friends, and veteran peers and its related impact on a transition of a student veteran was a dominant theme in the data.

The findings of this study builds upon previous research and highlights the pivotal role that support, or lack thereof plays during a transition. Additionally, this study highlights the classroom experience of student veterans from multiple perspectives including their experience as a learner, interacting with faculty, and their interactions with non-veteran students.

So, what do community colleges still not understand about student veterans? What should they know about them in order to implement effective and impactful support services? It is best to go right to the source and ask veterans what they believe, based upon their experiences and from their own perspectives, community colleges do not understand about veterans. Joseph stated the following during his individual interview:

It’s hard transitioning back into civilian life. Colleges don’t get that we are adults and we have other commitments. They just need to be more understanding of
that…we want other opportunities to interact with other vets. We have the vet
center but we want more.

Justin echoed similar sentiments and also touched on his experience inside the classroom
and stated, “We all learn differently. Vets and non-vets. Some of us, like me, learn
slower. Not saying this is due to the military, but it could be. Professors need to get that
when teaching us”. It is important that community colleges, both administration and
faculty, take into consideration that veterans are different than the general student
population. They are nontraditional students who have lives outside of school and are
trying to balance all of their responsibilities. While they are in school, they are thinking
about their responsibilities outside of school. They may learn differently or at a different
pace than traditional students. It is key that community colleges remain cognizant of the
differences that student veterans exhibit.

The research conducted and the themes developed in this study have conclusions
and implications that should be disseminated to community colleges across the nation.
The findings should challenge community colleges to evaluate the ways in which they
serve veterans. They should consider the role of support including the veteran center,
family, friends, and veteran peers and how the presence of those sources of support help
or hinder the transition process. Community colleges should think about the difficulties
student veterans face when transitioning including navigating the institutional
bureaucracy and adjusting to an often completely new environment. Finally, just listen to
the veterans. They have a lot to say and deserve the respect of being heard for risking
their lives for their country.
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APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Demographic Information
   a. Age
   b. Race
   c. Gender
   d. Where are you from?
   e. Where did you enlist? Where were you discharged?
   f. What branch of the military did you serve in?
   g. Military Rank
   h. What type of military job did you have?
   i. Were you a combat servicemember?

2. How long did you serve in the military? What motivated you to join the military?

3. What motivated you to enroll in college after you returned from your service?

4. Why did you choose community college over a 4-year institution?

5. What role, if any, did receiving the G.I. Bill play into your decision to enroll in college, or specifically community college?

6. What expectations about higher education, or community college, did you have before enrolling in college?
   a. How were your expectations met or not met?
7. Please describe what the transition was like for you enrolling in college after your military service. What difficulties did you face at community college?
   a. How was the transition in regard to academics? What was your experience being in the classroom?
      i. Briefly describe your academic performance in high school.
   b. How was your transition experience related to your social relationships?
      What role did your family or peers play?
   c. How has your daily life schedule changed since enrolling in community college?
   d. How was your experience transitioning back to civilian life?
8. What have been sources of support during your transition? (e.g. family support, peers, college services)
9. What roles did various community college offices play during your transition back to college life?
   a. Were there any offices that you can recall were helpful?
   b. Were there any offices that you can recall were not very helpful in your transition?
10. When working with a department on campus, how important was it for you to deal with another veteran staff member as compared to a non-veteran?
    a. What characteristics were you looking for in a non-veteran staff member when you were seeking out assistance on campus?
11. What resources were available to you?
    a. What financial resources were available to you?
b. What social resources were available to you? Networking opportunities?

c. Did you utilize any of the resources that the military offered to you?
   i. Counseling?

12. What was your experience accessing and utilizing these resources?
   a. If yes to 12c, how did community college resources compare to the resources provided by the military?

13. How did you learn about campus resources?

14. What type of resources do you wish were available to you when you were transitioning to community college?

15. Did you participate in any military-based education programs while in service?
   a. If yes, how was it different from your community college experience?

16. What do you think institutions of higher education do not understand about veterans?

17. Do you recall expressing any of your transition experiences through social media?
   a. If yes, will you approve me “friending” you on social media so I can review your posts?
APPENDIX B – ORIGINAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How long did you service in the military? What motivated you to join the military?

2. What made you decide to enroll in college after you returned?

3. Why did you choose community college over a 4-year institution?

4. Please describe what the transition was like for you coming back to college after your military service in a war zone (i.e. academically, socially, relationships).

5. What have been sources of support? (e.g. family support, peers, college services)

6. How did you learn about campus resources?

7. What roles did various community college offices play during your transition back to college life?

8. What resources were available to you?

9. What was your experience accessing and utilizing these resources?

10. What type of resources do you wish were available to you when you were transitioning to community college?
APPENDIX C – LETTER OF INTENT TO PARTICIPATE

SOLDIER TO STUDENT: UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES OF VETERANS FROM THE MILITARY TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Dear Participant,

My name is Alexander Jordan. I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policies Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in higher education administration, and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying the transition experiences of veterans from the military to community college. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet with me for an interview about your experiences transitioning from the military to community college. The aim of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of the potential barriers and/or support mechanisms that are present, or should be present, during the transition of a veteran from the military to community college. Through conducting this study, focus will be shifted to a topic that is deserving of additional attention and research. More knowledge surrounding veterans transition to community colleges is desperately needed to better support this population of students throughout their transition. This study will shed light on a topic that is under-researched and provide empirical evidence for community colleges to create new programming or enhance their existing support services.

In particular, you will be asked questions about various experiences of your transition including personal and institutional aspects as well as resources that were available to you. You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about 60-90 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded so that I can accurately transcribe what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by members of the research team and destroyed upon completion of the study. A follow-up interview may be requested upon mutual agreement of both parties. Additionally, as social media plays an ever-increasing role in today’s society, Twitter, Facebook, and/or Instagram have become the new “diary” where individuals express their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. Social media is another core component of my study where, with participant approval, I will review your social media posts, if applicable, to supplement my research examining any posts related to your transition from the military to community college.
Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location at the University of South Carolina. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed. So, please do not write your name or other identifying information on any of the study materials. In addition, participation is completely optional and you are not under any obligation to participate and there will be no negative consequences if you choose to withdraw from the study.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 216-310-8324 or atjordan@mailbox.sc.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Douglas Smith (803-777-4269; smithdo@mailbox.sc.edu).

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please contact me at the number listed below to discuss participating and sign below indicating that you agree to be interviewed and accept the terms of this study. For any additional questions regarding research conducted through the University of South Carolina or about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 803-777-7095.

With kind regards,

Alexander Jordan

Alexander Jordan
216-310-8324
atjordan@mailbox.sc.edu

_______________________________________________________________________________

(Signature of Research Participant)