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A phenomenological study of military veterans with combat trauma enrolled in post-secondary education: Transition, academic performance, and perceptions of support

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MILITARY VETERANS WITH
COMBAT TRAUMA ENROLLED IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION:
TRANSITION, ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE,
AND PERCEPTIONS OF SUPPORT

BY

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THESIS

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This thesis has been examined and approved.

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5/14/2012
Date
DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to the student veterans at the University of New Hampshire who took time from your very busy lives to share your life experiences with me; without you, none of this would have been possible.

* * *

_The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding, go out to meet it._

- Thucydides
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# Table of Contents

Dedication.......................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................... iv

Abstract............................................................................................................................... vii

I. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1

   Combat Veterans Transitioning to Civilian Life.............................................................. 1

   Cognitive & Psychological Sequelae of Military Injuries............................................. 3

   Understanding the role of TBI and PTSD in post-secondary education.................. 7

   Sufficient and Appropriate Academic Supports Lacking............................................. 9

   Self-Regulated Learning................................................................................................. 11

   Research Questions....................................................................................................... 12

II. Methodology ...................................................................................................................... 14

   Research Design........................................................................................................... 14

   Recruitment.................................................................................................................. 14

   Participant Profiles...................................................................................................... 16

   Setting............................................................................................................................. 20

   Rapport and Responsibility.......................................................................................... 21

III. Data .................................................................................................................................. 23

   Data Analysis................................................................................................................ 23

   Validity and Reliability................................................................................................. 24

   Personal Reflections...................................................................................................... 24

IV. Results ............................................................................................................................... 27
ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MILITARY VETERANS WITH COMBAT TRAUMA ENROLLED IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION: TRANSITION, ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, AND PERCEPTIONS OF SUPPORT

by

Maya Rocke

University of New Hampshire, September, 2012

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to explore the academic experience of student veterans who reported cognitive and psychological symptoms following their military service.

Design: Phenomenology, based on a conceptual model of self-regulated learning (SRL).

Participants: Six student veterans enrolled at a large public university who self-reported symptoms consistent with TBI/PTSD, or who were involved in combat operations, or who had an improvised explosive device (IED) detonate nearby.

Results: Despite often having service-related trauma symptoms, the participants did not report a strong connection between those symptoms and their academic performance. However, participants reported challenges with social interactions, low overall engagement in academics, and difficulty transitioning from the highly structured military environment to the low-structure post-secondary environment.

Discussion: Motivation and discipline were important factors for participants during their transition to post-secondary education. Personal attributes seem to attenuate barriers to academic achievement resulting from acquired cognitive and psychological combat trauma.
I.

INTRODUCTION

Reports from the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center reveal that more than 1.6 million American service members were deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as surrounding areas, since 2001. With the conclusion of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) officially declared in December of 2011, and troops starting to withdraw from Afghanistan, thousands of military veterans will be reintegrated into civilian life. Many of these veterans will face reintegration challenges due to the cognitive and psychological impact of combat deployments. This study examines the reintegration experience of military veterans who report symptoms of combat trauma and chose to enroll in post-secondary education following their military service.

COMBAT VETERANS TRANSITIONING TO CIVILIAN LIFE

The transition from military to civilian life has traditionally presented challenges for some veterans. According to Demers (2011), military identity is "infused with the values of duty, honor, loyalty, and commitment to comrades, unit, and nation. It promotes self-sacrifice, discipline, obedience to legitimate authority, and belief in a merit-based awards system" (p. 162). These values are in contrast to more individualistic civic values, "which embrace materialism and excessive individualism" (p. 162). These differences in values, coupled with the "kill or be killed" mindset
that military personnel are taught to develop, create a civil-military cultural
gap. This gap is “further widened by the absence of a national consensus
about war, the lack of validation of soldiers’ efforts, and the general lack of
acknowledgement of soldiers who return from war” (p. 162).

In addition to cultural barriers, combat veterans must also deal
with reintegration challenges arising from cognitive, physical, and
psychological impairments acquired in the battlefield. According to Elliot,
Gonzalez, and Larsen (2011),

...soldiers from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in
Afghanistan and OIF are often met with others’ ambivalent
attitudes towards the wars and may have difficulty relating to
family and friends. They may also have mental and physical
injuries and may experience a sense of loss after parting
from their unit (p. 280).

It has been established combat veterans have disproportionately high
rates of mental health disorders, incidence of substance abuse, marital
problems, and unemployment (Hoge, Auchterlonie, and Milliken, 2006;
Hoge et al., 2008; Demers, 2011; Church, 2009). These reintegration
challenges have frequently been attributed to traumatic experiences
linked to combat. Veterans returning home from combat zones “are at an
increased risk for a wide range of problems when returning to community
life, including marital and financial difficulties, problems with alcohol or
substance abuse, homelessness, and motor vehicle accidents” (Resnik et
al., 2012).
COGNITIVE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SEQUELAE OF MILITARY INJURIES

Service-related experiences may create unique barriers for veterans reintegrating into civilian life, particularly if the veteran was exposed to traumatic events. As a result of the nature of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, which involves the increasing use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in insurgent and terrorist activities, more soldiers have suffered blast-related traumatic brain injury (TBI) in these wars than in any other prior conflict (Kocsis and Tessler, 2009, p. 667). The November 2010 Report on Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan stated that IEDs continue to pose a significant threat to U.S. and Coalition forces in Afghanistan. Moreover, Okie (2005) found that nearly a fourth of all wounds sustained in Iraq and Afghanistan are located in the head, face, or neck (Snell and Halter, 2010). In fact, a recent study found that 47 percent of blast-related injuries in Iraq involved the head (Kocsis & Tessler, 2009). Not only are more soldiers acquiring blast-related TBI than ever before, they are surviving those injuries at higher rates, through the introduction of advanced warfare technologies, soldier mortality from bullets and bomb blasts has decreased. Soldiers are instead sustaining increased head, face, and neck injuries, particularly traumatic brain injuries (Halbauer et al., 2009). According to Lew et al. (2009), advances in battlefield medicine and protective armor for the torso have led to a higher percentage of soldiers surviving physical injuries that
would have been fatal in prior conflicts.

There is a sufficient amount of data to support the fact that mild TBI (mTBI) is a prevalent issue in troops returning from the conflicts in the Middle East; Terrio et al. (2009) found that in a study of nearly 4,000 troops in a combat team serving in Iraq nearly 25% had clinically confirmed TBI, and most of those cases were designated as mild (Snell & Halter, 2010). The President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors stated that between 10% and 20% of seemingly healthy individuals who returned from the Middle East met criteria for mTBI (Snell & Halter, 2010). The Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC) reported that 59% of an 'at risk' group of injured soldiers returning from Afghanistan or Iraq to Walter Reed (2003-2004) suffered at least a mTBI while in combat (Taber, Warden, and Hurley, 2006). Finally, Lew et al. report that despite the fact that considerable attention has been paid to the dramatic nature of severe TBI, the vast majority of military service-members are actually at a much higher risk of sustaining a mTBI (2009).

The symptoms associated with mTBI are both numerous and diverse, effecting the physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial realms of an injured soldier's life. Specifically, physical and cognitive symptoms associated with m-TBI include headache, dizziness, fatigue, impaired balance and coordination, problems with memory retrieval, and impaired executive functions, such as problem solving and decision
making (Snell & Halter, p. 201). Other symptoms may include difficulty participating in conversations in noise or in groups, disorganized verbal expression, difficulty learning new information, dysfluent speech, and word-retrieval problems (Cherney et al., 2010).

Combat-related injuries also result in what the Veterans Administration dubs *polytrauma*, a term which illustrates injuries to more than one physical region or organ system, one of which may be life threatening, resulting in physical, cognitive, psychological or psychosocial impairments and functional disability (Cherney et al., 2010). In light of more pressing injuries, trauma to the head (especially in the case of mTBI) may not get adequate attention until an obvious pattern of symptoms emerges (Cherney et al., 2010). However, even a mild TBI has been shown to adversely effect functional abilities, vocational status, psychological status, cognitive functioning, subjective feelings of well-being, and burden of care/resource needs (Trudel, Nidiffer, and Barth, 2007).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after witnessing or being involved in a traumatic event. According to Windome et al. (2011), PTSD is one of the most frequently occurring mental health problems among OEF/OIF veterans. The prevalence of a lifetime history of PTSD has been reported to be from 4% to 8% in general student populations. The authors found that 15.5% of sampled OEF/OIF veterans had PTSD—up to 7.5-11.5% higher than the
general student population. Symptoms of PTSD may include intrusive memories, images of the traumatic incident, and avoidance behaviors (Snell & Halter, 2010). The functional and behavioral limitations of PTSD often include issues with intimate and family relationships, alcohol and drug problems, and feeling alienated from others (Elliot, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011).

Mild TBI is often hard to distinguish from PTSD as mTBI and PTSD have some symptoms in common, including sleep disturbance, irritability, mood lability, and posttraumatic amnesia (Snell & Halter, 2010). Impaired function from mTBI may make an individual more susceptible to PTSD, as the prefrontal cortex, which is pivotal in tempering the mid-brain's responses to extreme fear, may be damaged and interfere with the individual's ability to effectively regulate fear and anxiety (Snell & Halter). Sorting out the symptoms indicative of mTBI and PTSD is but one of the challenges associated with assessing and diagnosing a mTBI (Kennedy, Krause and Turkstra, 2008). Moreover, OEF/OIF veterans diagnosed with PTSD or traumatic brain injury (TBI) are more likely to be at increased risk for behaviors that compromise their safety such as substance abuse (Windome et al., 2011). When PTSD co-occurs with mTBI, the complexity of overlapping and interactive symptoms can cause a more chronic condition (Cherney et al., 2010).
Understanding the Role of TBI and PTSD in Post-Secondary Education

Making the decision to attend post-secondary education is an important choice for any young person; for a veteran, choosing to go to college means having to navigate a new, profoundly different social environment, as well as perform well academically. There are, however, numerous benefits to obtaining a post-secondary degree. In the state of New Hampshire in 2009, 89.7% of the state's population (aged 18-24) graduated with a high school degree, while 20.2% of the state's population (over the age of 25) had completed a bachelor's degree (IES National Center for Education Statistics). These numbers, which are higher than the national averages (at 84.1% and 17.1%, respectively), reflect New Hampshire's commitment to education. According to the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Science's 2008 report, a high school graduate will have a median annual salary of $27,960, while a graduate of post-secondary education will receive a median annual salary of $48,100 (IES National Center for Education Statistics). A 2002 report from the Census Bureau states that a worker with a high school degree will make approximately 1.2 million dollars over their lifetime, while a worker with a bachelor's degree will make almost twice as much, at 2.1 million dollars (U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).
Success in post-secondary education is important, but often challenging for students with acquired cognitive or psychological disorders, both in terms of academic and social demands. Kennedy et al. (2008) surveyed college students with TBI who reported a variety of cognitive symptoms, including memory impairments, organizational difficulty, problems making decisions, and impaired attention. Participants also reported psychosocial effects, including anger, depression, mood changes, difficulty with relationships and maintaining friendships, and substance or alcohol abuse. Those respondents who reported more injury effects also reported more academic challenges.

Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming (2011) report the results of a qualitative investigation of the student veteran transition to post-secondary education. They identified several factors that influenced social reintegration success for student veterans: military influence, sense of invisibility, seeking support, and campus culture. In terms of military influence, student veterans within this study identified themselves as feeling more mature than their peers, being aware of the age gap between them and their civilian peers, and as having a feeling of self-sufficiency. These participants also found that it was “challenging to transition from the strict military structure to the loose structure of a college campus” (p. 321). With reference to invisibility, student veterans were less likely to live on campus and be involved in campus activities, often reluctant to disclose their military status to peers or faculty, and less likely to seek out
supports. The theme of support showed that veterans were more likely to seek help from other veterans, as well as relying on veteran faculty members. Many of the participants felt that the college culture lent itself to a lack of military appreciation on campus.

Elliot et al. (2011) found that student veterans who had been in combat “tended to have more symptoms of PTSD, and were more alienated on campus. Combat experiences such as shooting and being shot at left many veterans with disturbing memories, difficulty concentrating, and feeling cut off from others” (p. 288). Additionally, these researchers found that over half of the student veterans surveyed “felt they did not fit in on campus, and almost one-third [felt] unfairly judged” (p. 289).

SUFFICIENT AND APPROPRIATE ACADEMIC SUPPORTS LACKING

Understanding the relationship between academic achievement and cognitive and psychological symptoms will contribute to our understanding of how to support student veterans who struggle with post-secondary transitions. Church (2009) suggests that the effects of mTBI can be somewhat allayed by providing veterans with access to good resources: “the availability of a veteran’s personal, family and/or community resources will mitigate their experience with a health problem” (Church, p. 2). Church goes on to assert that in order to provide a supportive environment for veterans in post-secondary education,
Colleges and universities [need to] provide veterans with an opportunity to integrate their experiences and focus on their career goals and adaptation to society. Veterans will face many challenges during their transition and the postsecondary environment can provide them with the resources to achieve their academic goals (p. 9).

Evidence suggests existing supports may not be sufficient for student veterans who struggle with combat-related cognitive-psychological symptoms; additional research is needed to elucidate veterans’ perceptions of needed supports, especially academic and social. Student veterans with combat-related symptoms may be reluctant to utilize existing supports. According to Livingston (2011), student veterans with PTSD may feel that they do not need academic supports:

Because of the maturity and increased emphasis on academics, student veterans often did not utilize, or did not need, academic support. Moreover, pride and self-sufficiency impacted veterans’ utilization of both academic and social support (p. 321).

Current research indicates that college supports and services are not sufficient for supporting non-veterans with TBI and PTSD. In their study Todis and Glang (2008) reported many students with TBI were eligible for services from the campus Disability Services office, but “only half of the students in this sample who went to college used these supports. Some felt that they had no need for the services. Others felt the stigma of being identified as a person with a disability outweighed the advantages of the supports” (2008, p. 259). Similarly, Kennedy et al. found that less than half of student veterans surveyed “used campus
disability supports, and 20% claimed to be unaware of these services" (2008, p. 518). These findings reflect patterns of service under-utilization by veterans with TBI (USGAO, 2008).

**SELF-REGULATED LEARNING**

Cognitive and psychological impairments may hinder academic achievement in post-secondary education since students must negotiate complex learning and social environments. Self-regulated learning (SRL) is a theoretical model that takes an “inclusive perspective on student learning to include not only cognitive, but also motivational and affective factors, as well as social contextual factors” (Pintrich, 2004, p. 386). SRL is a useful concept for understanding the relationship between acquired cognitive and psychological impairments and academic achievement for student veterans. According to Pintrich (2004), SRL proposes that: 1) learners are active participants in the learning process; 2) learners can potentially monitor, control, and regulate certain aspects of their own cognition, motivation, and behavior as well as some features of their environments; 3) there is some type of goal or standard used for comparison to determine if the learning process is working, or if some change should be made; and 4) the learner’s self-regulation of their cognition, motivation, and behavior mediates the relations between the person, context and eventual achievement.

Students who self-regulate their learning, through the use of learning strategies or motivational enhancement are more likely to
succeed in college compared to students who do not (Pintrich, 2004), Reeves & Stich, (2010), Kitsantas et al., (2011). There is no research examining SRL among student veterans; however, since SRL variables are important for academic achievement and combat veterans are at risk for problems self-regulating their behavior, examining student veterans’ post-secondary transition from a SRL perspective may provide useful insights into their experience.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The purpose of this study was to explore the academic experience of student veterans who reported cognitive and psychological symptoms following their military service. Prior research has shown student veterans experience social isolation, alienation, and difficulty accessing appropriate supports while transitioning to post-secondary education, particularly in the presence of combat trauma. This study sought to capture the insiders’ perspective of how these symptoms affected veterans’ transition to post-secondary education, academic achievement, and perception of support services from a SRL perspective. The specific research questions were as follows:
1. What is the post-secondary transition experience for veterans reporting cognitive and psychological symptoms resulting from traumatic military experiences?

2. How do student veterans who experience cognitive and psychological changes describe their academic experiences in post-secondary education?

3. How do student veterans with cognitive and psychological symptoms perceive existing academic and social supports on campus?
II. METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN
For this study, a qualitative research approach was selected, as it provided the best structure for eliciting and reporting data on the exceptional challenges seen in the reintegration experience for returning servicemen and women.

The reintegration barriers are so unique to this population that a record of their experience is needed; a phenomenological research approach based on qualitative interviews allowed the story of reintegration to be told from the perspective of returning OIF/OEF veterans. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that is intended to describe the lived experience of a group of people, based on first-hand data obtained from those people; according to Demers (2011), "qualitative interviews are a key way to learn about other people's feelings and thoughts and achieve new understandings about people's lived experiences" (p. 165).

RECRUITMENT
Participants were initially recruited through an administrator on campus; this person emailed a flyer advertising an online survey to all students who identified themselves as military veterans (n = 244) (see Appendix 1: Survey Flyer). This survey included questions pertaining to demographics, military
experience, history of injury, and TBI-related symptomology (i.e. headaches, difficulty concentrating, mood swings), as well as questions pertaining to supports and services and study habits (see Appendix 2: Survey). Participants who completed the survey were offered the chance to win one of four $25.00 gift cards to Amazon.com (via a raffle).

The questionnaire was used to measure the number of students reporting combat-related TBI, the number of students reporting cognitive deficits after their service, the perceived effect of cognitive deficits on their academics, and their perception of available supports at college. Students who completed the survey were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. I contacted all participants who indicated they were interested in being interviewed and met any of the following inclusion criteria: positive for blast injury; self-identified traumatic brain injury; combat veteran; cluster of symptoms that would likely indicate a TBI, especially self-reported problems with memory, concentration, or difficulty participating in conversations in noise or in groups; improvised explosive device (IED) exploded near the subject; and/or any service-related injury resulting in any of these symptoms: being dazed, confused, or “seeing stars,” not remembering the injury, losing consciousness for any amount of time, or head injury. Consistent with a phenomenological research approach, participants who reported these
attributes on the survey were interviewed because they represented the type of injuries and the type of combat experiences that were important; their experiences represent the lived experience of student veterans with combat trauma. For those participants who indicated interest in taking part in interviews but did not indicate any symptomology or etiology of TBI/PTSD, or who self-reported symptoms without also indicating evidence of a brain injury, I did not contact them to set up an interview.

Eight participants who took the survey and met one of the above requirements indicated that they would be willing to participate in an interview. Of those, six agreed to participate in the interviews. Each participant was contacted by email to set up a mutually-agreed-upon time for the first interview.

**Participant Profiles**

To maintain participants' anonymity, indistinct demographic and military information will be presented below and participants will be referenced using pseudonyms. This information was solicited during the interview and using the online survey.
Davis was in his late twenties, and served several years in the Army. He served fifteen months in combat, and an IED had exploded nearby to him without apparent injury. At the time that I interviewed him, Davis was a junior.

Phil was in his mid-twenties. He had gone through basic training and some additional training exercises with the Army before becoming injured during his training. He was a freshman. On the survey, Phil indicated that he had been hospitalized since returning home, and had experienced the following symptoms in the last year: headache, dizziness, fainting, nausea, fatigue, sleep disturbance, problems concentrating, irritability, mood swings, intrusive memories, and light and sound sensitivity. Throughout the course of the study, Phil disclosed that he was receiving treatment for PTSD.

Jeff, who was in his mid-twenties, had been an active member of the National Guard since high school. He was deployed to Afghanistan for a nine-month period. He had been near an IED that exploded, without apparent injury. On the survey, Jeff indicated that he had been experiencing mood swings and irritability in the last year, as a result of his military service experience. He was a junior. During his first interview, Jeff stated that it was possible that he had PTSD, but that he had passed a TBI screen in the field. He was still in the National Guard when I spoke with him.
Alex was in his late twenties, and had been in the Army for seven years prior to enrolling in college. He had been in combat several times over the course of his military career. He was finishing up graduate school when I spoke with him. He indicated that he had insomnia as a result of his military service.

Steven was in his early twenties, and had been in the Marines since graduating from high school. He was deployed twice to combat situations, and had been exposed to an IED that exploded nearby him, without any reported injury. Steven was a freshman in his first semester when I initially interviewed him. On the survey, Steven had indicated that he had been suffering from the following symptoms as a result of his military experience: sleep disturbance, problems concentrating, irritability, and sensitivity to light and sound.

Maria was in her early thirties. She had been in the Air Force for a number of years prior to enrolling in post-secondary education, and was an active member of the National Guard. She had served in combat operations overseas. Maria was a sophomore when I interviewed her. She was in the reserves at the time that we spoke.

**Approach**
There were two sets of interviews: one set in the late fall of 2011, and one in February and March of 2012. The purpose of the first set of interviews was to obtain phenomenological data related to the answers obtained on the online questionnaire, connected to the following themes: motivation for college, transition from military to college, academics, service, symptoms, and suggestions for supports and services at school. In other words, I wanted to understand what it was like for these student veterans to be students at a college. The initial interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Following Merriam (2009), four main types of open-ended questions were used to elicit responses from the participants during the initial semi-structured interviews: hypothetical questions, devil’s advocate questions, ideal position questions, and interpretive questions. Although the questions were similar for all participants, some were tailored to match responses given by the participants on the online questionnaire, such as those referring to self-reported symptomology or suggestions for improving veterans’ services on campus. The following questions are samples of those used with participants during the initial interviews:

What led up to your decision to go back to school?
Tell me about the transition from military to college.
How does your experience as a veteran impact your experience of being a college student?
Support it were my first day as a student veteran here. What would it be like?
Tell me how you've done in school.
Some people would say that having already served in the military, going to college must be a piece of cake. What would you say to them?
Would you describe what you think the ideal support system for veterans on campus might be like?
Can you tell me a little bit about your experience with different supports on and off campus?
Has your experience in college been what you expected it would be?
You indicated on the survey that you were experiencing a number of different symptoms: sleep disturbance, problems concentrating, irritability, and sensitivity to light and sound. Can you tell me a little more about that?

The follow-up interviews served two purposes: first, to obtain respondent validation that the emergent findings from the research were accurate (i.e., member checking), in order to ascertain that I was not misinterpreting what any of the participants had said. Secondly, I wanted to make sure that I had adequate engagement in data collection, in that the themes that I had identified were sufficiently saturated. During the
second set of interviews, I began to hear the participants repeating key
ideas which validated and refined themes that I had initially identified. The
follow up interviews were digitally recorded but not transcribed for this
study.

**Setting**

The initial interviews for the participants took place in one of the private
study rooms in the main library at the university campus, with the exception
of Phil's first interview, which took place at his workplace on campus (at his
request). The first interviews lasted an average of 50 minutes, but there was
some individual variation. Jeff's interview went on for two hours, as he
seemed particularly inclined to talk about his experiences. Steven, in
contrast, was guarded and appeared uncomfortable for the duration of the
interview; I was unable to get him to open up about his experience—as a
result, his interview only lasted 25 minutes.

The follow-up interviews all took place in one of the study rooms in the
library, with the exception of Alex's, which took place in a local coffee shop in
a neighboring town (at his request). The follow-up interviews lasted an
average of 40 minutes.

**Rapport and Responsibility**
A key component of interview-based qualitative research is gaining the trust of the participants, so that they will honestly share their experiences with the researcher. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) identified five key points that need to be addressed at the beginning of every interview: 1) the investigator's motives and intentions and the inquiry's purpose; 2) the protections of interviewees through the use of pseudonyms; 3) deciding who has the final say over the content of the study; 4) payment (if any); and finally, 5) logistics with regard to time, place, and number of interviews to be scheduled (Merriam, 2009, p. 106).

To this end, each initial interview followed the same basic format. I began the interview with an explanation of how I became interested in the experiences of student veterans with combat trauma: I spoke about my personal connection to a local veteran's support network, as well as my intellectual interest in TBI. I explained the purpose of the research was to better understand the reintegration experiences of student veterans in post-secondary education, with the goal of providing better supports and services for student veterans at the local, state, or national level.

I provided each participant with an IRB-approved consent letter, which outlined the risks and benefits of participating in the interviews, including the steps I was taking to insure each participant's anonymity,
incorporating the use of pseudonyms. I also provided a list of free mental health resources to each participant, explaining that if the interviews caused any emotional or psychological discomfort, they could seek counseling through one of the local/state organizations listed. Participants were aware of the role my advisor had in guiding me through the research process, and what the final product of the research would be: a Master’s thesis, an oral defense of the thesis, and perhaps a research article. Participants were not paid for their time. Logistics in terms of scheduling the interviews had been discussed prior to the first interview via email communication between each of the participants and myself.
III.

DATA

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis for this project took place at the same time that data were being collected, which helped shape and focus subsequent data collection (in the form of the second set of interviews). The overall process of data analysis followed Merriam (2009), wherein the researcher endeavors to identify segments in the data set that were responsive to the original research questions. Initial data from the first interviews were coded by themes, defined by research interests, and by what the reoccurring regularities were in the data.

 Initially, a system of open coding was used, wherein I listened to the first set of interviews and read through the transcripts from those interviews, making notations in the margins when something stood out from the data as possibly significant. As patterns emerged through open coding, I then moved to a system of axial coding. Axial coding refers to the process of systematically grouping the open codes. Once the list of themes and sub-themes was developed, I sorted all of the evidence for each theme into these groups. Those sub-themes that were not sufficiently saturated with data were eliminated as irrelevant. The last step
of the coding process was microscopic coding, in which the data were examined as a whole and hypotheses were developed to attempt to explain the relationship of one data set to another:

**Validity and Reliability**

Member checking was used to increase the credibility of the findings and to increase the internal validity of the research. Member checking, also called respondent validation, is the process through which the researcher solicits feedback from the participants about emergent findings (Merriam, 2009). This was accomplished during the second set of interviews, wherein participants were asked whether the researcher's interpretation thus far seemed to be an accurate reflection of their experiences.

To ensure the codes accurately reflected data presented in the interviews, steps were taken to bolster the reliability of the findings (Merriam, 2009). Each transcript was read multiple times before coding to ensure familiarity with the data. Also two of the six transcripts were coded separately by the researcher's advisor to assess inter-rater reliability. There was agreement on over 90% of the codes and any incongruence in transcription coding was discussed and resolved.
**PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

As a non-veteran graduate student, I believe that most, if not all, of the participants viewed me as an outsider in terms of social identity. Merriam asks, “Does a researcher need to be a member of the group being investigated to do a credible study? Are people more likely to reveal information to insiders or outsiders?” (p. 109). To this end, I don’t know if the participants would have shared different information with me if I had a more personal connection to the military; I do know that most of them mentioned that they were generally more comfortable speaking to other veterans.

I accounted for the inevitable impact my biases, predispositions, attitudes, and physical characteristics would have on data collection and analysis by keeping a log of all my interactions with the participants, from our first email exchange through the interview process (Merriam, 2009). Directly after each interview, I would sit down and write a few pages about whatever seemed salient and important: emergent themes, factor that could have affected the interview (room temperature, what I was wearing, time of day), attitude and demeanor of the participant, interview strategies that worked or didn’t work, and any reactions I had to the interview.
To illustrate these log entries, I wrote the following about my initial interview with Jeff: “I am wearing jean, top, fleece pull-over. The room is a nice temperature. Jeff is 15 minutes late – tall guy, zip down sweater, jeans, boots, winter hat. Big smile, nervous energy, starts asking right off the bat what the information will be used for. Swears a lot. He seems nervous about me recording the session. He is very talkative, hard to follow at times, defensive, agitated, very open, guarded, conflicted about talking to me – hard to pin down. He seems like he could talk for hours, as it is we talk for almost two hours, but I’m not ever sure what he means half the time. He seems to talk more when I write more, so I keep taking notes. The interview only ends when I turn off the recorder and pack up.”

The log entries were incorporated into my field notes and analyzed with the interview transcripts. I also kept records of all email exchanges between the participants and myself, as well as records of meetings with my advisor and my thesis advisory committee members. As I transcribed each interview and then began to develop coding themes, I had a snapshot of each participant in my mind. I looked back at my field notes and incorporated some of my early observations about emergent themes into my data analysis process. For example, after my first interview with Alex, I identified perspective, role of family and friends, and social
integration barriers as key themes for him; these themes would all later be integrated into the common axial coding system that I used across all participants.
The research questions guiding this investigation dealt with the transition, academic, and support service experience for student veterans who self-reported cognitive and psychological symptoms following military service. Six themes and twenty-six subthemes emerged following qualitative analysis. In this section, each theme is explored in the context of its subthemes. (Of note, certain personal information has been blacked out to maintain the anonymity of the participants.) Segments from the first set of interviews are shared, to give evidence for each theme and sub-theme. (see Appendix C: Amended list of themes and sub-themes for a complete list of themes/sub-themes).

**Theme 1: Motivation for College**

The first theme concerned participants' various motivations for enrolling in college. This theme emerged while discussion participants' transition from military to post-secondary education. The data presented below illustrate important financial and instructional characteristics that lead to participants choosing to enroll. Understanding why participants enrolled following their service is important since students' goals and performance motivations are closely associated with achievement (Pintrich, 2004).
PAID FOR THE BY MILITARY (GI BILL)

Four of the six participants mentioned funding from the GI Bill as one of their major motivations for choosing to attend college following their military service, for choosing to leave military service in favor of an education, or for continuing their education. Maria saw the GI Bill as a strong incentive to leave the military, even after being in for ten years:

And I really, I got stationed for the past 5 overseas, so you know, I could really only do an online school and it wasn't the degree I wanted... and the GI Bill is so amazing, I was like, okay I really want to do this now. It's been great, but I definitely chose to leave after a million people tried to convince me not to leave, 'cause you're in for ten years, retirement is at 20, but I chose to leave anyway.

Alex had started college prior to 9/11, so when the post-9/11 GI Bill came out, he was able to benefit financially: “For me it was convenient because the post 9/11 GI bill came out I think my second or third year, my third year of college, so it unburdened me quite a bit.” Jeff had funding from both the National Guard and the GI Bill that allowed him to attend college at very little personal cost:

I mean I went to school using like... Guard actually has tuition assistance and tuition waiver for – so because I'm a Guard, the state will give me tuition assistance and tuition waiver – federal tuition assistance, then you use your state waiver, which is a benefit to cover the cost of tuition at a public school – must be public. –Jeff

FAMILY AND FRIENDS INFLUENCE

30
Five of the six participants cited family and friends as having a direct influence on their choice to enroll in college. Steven cited his friends as having a major influence on him: he said that they told him some stories about being in college that made him want to try it out for himself:

The guys that I talked to, that I worked with in the Marine Corps, that had been to school—just the stories they were telling about when they went to college—that’s what made me want to go... They just had some funny stories. One guy he was in a frat, he was telling me about some stuff that he was doing, just a bunch of funny stories these guys were telling me... made me want to do it.

Other students, like Alex and Maria, said that they had decided to go to the university so they could be closer to their families, and where they had grown up. They had felt like they missed out on a lot when they were gone, and were eager to come home and see their loved ones. Both of these students had been deployed for more than 5 years. Alex had been stationed in another part of the country for several years, and was excited to come back home:

I grew up in [Redacted]. So it’s like, I don’t know, 25 minutes away or 30 or something. [Redacted] is, you know, a good school, and it’s convenient because it’s so close... But I just, I wanted to get out and do something more, because I love being in New England... I love my family and friends, addictions to sports teams, even the weather. I mean, I lived in [Redacted] for three years, and [Redacted] has beautiful weather, but it’s always the same and it never changes. I like having it be 40 degrees once in awhile...
Maria had originally said that she moved home so she could attend college full-time, but then went on to state that she had missed her family quite a bit while living abroad, and wanted to spend time with them:

It was... that [moving home for school] might honestly have been a bit of an excuse, because I have—I'm the oldest of five, I have four little brothers. And my whole family is here, and I've missed so much already, that I really just wanted to come back before it was too late. Even if... who knows, in a couple years, move away again, who knows? But I just, in all honesty, I just wanted to come back for that.

**College as Career Preparation or the Next Step**

All of the participants mentioned college either in terms of being the logical "next step" in their lives, or as a part of preparing for their career. Many seemed to see it as a means to an end—enroll, earn a useful degree, graduate, and get a better job. The GI Bill stipulates that veterans who enroll in secondary education pursue a degree with a marketable job attached, so most student veterans had this mindset when they began their studies. Phil spoke about what led him to pursue a degree in Financial Analysis:

So when I went – for my VA benefits, they said I had to get a degree with marketable job attached. I chose financial analyst cause I really like analysis – its one of the things I did in the Army. I didn't do financial analysis... but I've had a lot of fun because it's a lot like working on a puzzle or a riddle.

Jeff was open about disliking school and feeling like it was a waste of time, but he was motivated to finish and get a degree so he could move on to a career:
The motivation to keep going is that I know that this college degree I need, it's a requirement for me to be a diplomatic aide. It's a requirement for me to get into a lot of my dream careers, so I know it's... and at this point, it would be the biggest [unintelligible] for me to quit now. You know, this is my sixth semester... three academic years, it's going to be four and half when I'm done. So three academic years... what a waste of time. Yeah I could leave right now, say I'm done, f*ck it, and just work. But I know I would not ever be able to forgive myself, 'cause it was—school is like the most expensive scam you'll ever do, because you need it. It's a requirement.
**Theme 2: Transition**

The second theme, *Transition*, emerged from data describing how the student veterans experienced their transitions from the military life to an educational environment. Data that contributed to this theme included how students experienced both the logistical (e.g., GI Bill paperwork) and social experiences following their military discharge. Additionally, participants endorsed the importance of accessing support services to assist their transition.

**Logistics and Paperwork**

Participants reported frequent logistical difficulties enrolling in classes and navigating the Veteran Affairs system. Steve and Alex referred to the initial confusion they experienced as they tried to enroll.

Yeah, the paperwork is pretty bad. When I first signed up for the GI Bill, I thought everything was set up, and then a week before I started school I got a letter in the mail telling me that I was getting... different amount of benefits than I should have been getting, 'cause they thought I was still on active duty... so I wouldn't have gotten the housing stipend. So I had to get that straightened out. -Steven

Others cited the lack of an orientation for incoming veteran students, or lack of initial resources, as an impediment to their feeling comfortable on campus initially, and to them knowing where things were, how to solve certain types of problems, and who to ask for help. I asked Davis if he felt like there was information missing when he started
school: "Not information that I needed to succeed academically, but I can't think of a specific example – but I think there were questions that I had about, you know, things like where do you go to get a student ID? Or where do you go to – where can I do when I'm on campus and I want to buy food?"

Maria spoke about the lack of orientation in terms of how she had to seek out resources, including peers, in order to succeed:

I just asked, cause I was going to school with students who have at least done a year here already, I asked them a million questions. You know, I wasn't afraid to ask, so I called a million offices like a million times. But I eventually figured it all out. But I definitely had to be proactive to do that, you know?... It was more like a pain, like oh one more thing I have to figure out, you know?

Phil agreed that the lack of orientation was a challenge to many students. He mentioned that many don't get one until they transfer into an official program: "Which is very unfortunate because you're not likely to know where your classes are. If I hadn't grown up in the area, I wouldn't have been able to find McConnell Hall. Its, you know, far back corner, you don't expect a business building to be back there."

Maria stated that she thought that it would be difficult to succeed in college because veterans just aren't aware of what the resources on campus are, especially in comparison with the military:

There are so many programs [in the military] for people suffering for things, and divorces, financial—there's so much support. If someone's deployed, they'll take care of your family. There's so many options. And as a student, I know that there are programs, but I don't know what they are. Maybe they're just not advertised as importantly, as we're
always told in the military, go see this if you think... if you think someone’s suicidal, go do this—it’s drilled into you, you know, cause that’s so important to them. I know those things exist on the other side, too, I just—I’ve only been here for six months, but I haven’t seen a lot of, this is how we do it, this is the support you have... Yeah I guess with other life things that you might need, I haven’t really seen—where those are. I’m sure they exist though.

**SOCIAL INTERACTIONS**
The data constructing this theme shows how the participants view themselves, how they view their classmates, and what the interactions between student veterans and civilian students typically looks like. This sub-theme had the greatest data saturation of all the themes, with a substantial number of quotes demonstrating that the social component for these student veterans was an important factor in the transition from military to student life. Several of the participants mentioned feelings of loneliness or isolation, especially in contrast to the camaraderie they experienced during their service.

Steven spoke about how he had expected school to be more interesting, and how he wasn’t quite used to the social environment on campus:

Yeah it’s definitely much slower here and... definitely the people are much different. I guess I’m used to dealing with rougher people, I guess? I haven’t been yelled at once, it’s weird. All my friends, they were in the Marine Corps, so it kinda sucks now. It’s like being in high school and moving to another town across the country.
Phil spoke directly about feeling isolated from his peers, and lonely. I asked him if his college experience thus far had been what he had expected: “Honestly, I wasn’t actually expecting it to be this lonely. It really is a lonely place if you don’t seek out people and places. And as a commuter, that really isn’t an option for me. Especially working 2 jobs and... working hard to maintain a good GPA.”

Maria also mentioned isolation as a problem, and went on to say that most people regret leaving the military because they lose that feeling of camaraderie:

...everyone says they miss the camaraderie, which I totally get. You’ve been through something, maybe slightly more traumatic than the average job, average life, even basic you all go through this together, you’re in this elite group in a way, and they really miss that connection with people I think.

Steven and Maria talked quite a bit about how they thought their peers perceived them, both in terms of being older students and because they had a military background. Steven in particular seemed worried that he would fail to do something well, and then in turn that failure would reflect poorly on Marines as a whole; as a result, he preferred not to tell other students that he had been a Marine.

I don’t want to make other people’s opinions of veterans worse because of that... Like I was doing the Judo Club here, I was doing that for awhile. And I gave up with it though, I didn’t really like what I was doing. I didn’t tell anyone there that I was former Marine because I think they’d think about that, they’d think that I’d know everything there is to know, which I don’t, so...
Maria was worried that she'd be "that guy,"—that older student that asks too many questions and wastes the class's time by monopolizing the conversation. As a result, she said that she was really quiet in most of her classes:

...in these situations I feel like—I don't even relate to some of these kids, and I just—I don't want to be that guy. 'Cause I see some of the veterans that are older being that guy, that will just drag up conversations in a huge 200-person class with the professor when no one else cares, cause they have life experiences together.

All of the participants spoke about the way that they perceived their civilian (non-veteran) peers. The common perception among these student veterans seemed to be that their peers who hadn't had military experience were often naïve, entitled, and unable to put things in perspective properly. Steven was frustrated with his roommate for skipping classes:

It's just tough, like my roommate didn't want to like—he skipped class 'cause it was raining. Like, really? Like, it's that bad? Just stuff like, I don't know, he would drink the night before and the next morning wouldn't go to class because he had drank too much. I'd go to class hung-over, it's whatever.

Davis reacted to this difference in perspective by bonding with his teacher over the complaints of his civilian peers:

I think it's funny to hear some of their complaints. I just—I just kind of laugh at it internally... there's a— I think I get along — or I have more in common — with my teacher in that class, for example if we meet in conference to discuss a paper or whatever, as a matter of fact... cause my teacher for [REDACTED] is also a veteran. So, you know, its just interesting sharing common experiences and laughing at people who complain about being up at eight o'clock in the
morning.

Jeff, like Steven, was frustrated with his civilian peers and what he saw as their culture of entitlement. He wished that they could realize that having a college degree did not make them special:

You have no idea. You’re going to get out of college, and you’re going to slave away. And you know what? You’re not going to get that middle level junior or f*cking executive job until you can show that you are worth the paycheck. I mean, are you worth something to somebody? If not, get out. Like, nobody—just—ugh. It’s the entitlement generation that we live in—Occupy this, Occupy that. You know what? Why don’t you occupy your place of work? You want to help this economy—go to work. You want a better job, you want to show that you’re something worth paying, then do a good job. This entitlement is unbelievable. Somebody gets a college degree and thinks, ok now I’m ready—no.

**FREEDOM/INDEPENDENCE**

One of the more consistent themes dealing with the transition from military to school life was that of freedom and independence. Several of the participants mentioned the challenge that came from transitioning from a very structured military environment, one in which every part of their life was dictated and regulated, to an educational environment with very little structure. Within the military, the participants described their choices as limited: they ate what was offered, dressed in the uniform they were given, did the jobs they were assigned, and lived in the towns and countries they were sent to; in return for sacrificing those freedoms, everything essential was taken care of—food, shelter, income, health care.
While most of the student veterans seemed to appreciate the freedom that came with not being in active military service (as Jeff put it, not having to tell someone he was going to use the bathroom), many also seemed disconcerted about having to make so many choices within the educational environment. Davis explained how many veterans felt when they got to college: “I think that it could be said that some veterans expect a degree of structure, and maybe a degree of guidance, and at school—as you know—you’re really kind of on your own.”

Jeff said that he appreciated not having to make choices on a daily basis while in the military:

All I had to worry about, waking up, putting my uniform—I didn’t have to worry about... It’s all these little things. It’s going to sound very arbitrary, but I don’t have to worry about what I’m going to wear. Whether its footwear, or whatever... I’m going to wear the same exact thing... I don’t have to worry about spending money. Nobody can call me. You know? I don’t have to decide if I’m going to go drinking tonight, you know what I’m saying?... You just did your job, and you just kinda fit into it.

Maria also struggled with these choices, and often compared herself to her female civilian peers. She said she had been initially surprised at how much time they spent thinking about their appearance:

To me, that really wasn’t a part of normal life, even for girls that were more feminine in the military. It’s still—everyone wore the same thing every day, and it’s very—you know you couldn’t do much without being out of regulation. So nobody ever really looked super gorgeous all the time. So now I’m like, oh my god, should I like make myself up to go to school in my pajamas like all these girls? I don’t know.
Maria went on to say that she wasn't sure if she would like to pursue a career in the military or as a civilian. She was appreciative of all the benefits she got from being in the military, but also realized that not being on active duty gave her a lot more personal freedom: “So I’m definitely going to consider it when it’s over, but I guess the question is, have I adapted to this new life so much that I don’t want to let it go? Freedom to live where I want, you know.”

Steven saw being a student as less of an opportunity for personal freedom, and more as a constant demand on his time. While he was in the Marines, he would either be working or not working. At school: “Here it’s like, when you’re out of class you still have to work, like, I don’t know, I just kinda liked it the other way. You have to work more, but once you’re done, you’re done.”

ACCESSING SUPPORTS

Accessing supports was an important topic across different themes. In terms of accessing supports related to the transition from military to education life, participants viewed supports as significant. One of the recurring ideas was that in order to figure out how to succeed at this campus, the participants had to be proactive in seeking out help. Alex agreed that being proactive and seeking out assistance were keys to success. When I asked him what advice he would give a student veteran
that was new on campus, he said the following:

...Don't be afraid to ask questions and know people that can help you. You can't know the answers by yourself, and you should never assume that possibility, but if you don't know who to ask, don't be afraid to ask them... Writing papers and stuff is just—you gotta get through it, so know of your support services, know how to use them, but know that plenty of people have blazed the trail for you... So... I would just say, know your goals, know who can help you reach those goals, and don't let the day-to-day stuff get you.

In the previous statement, Alex described himself as "self-reliant," but also mentioned that he wasn't afraid to seek out help when he needed it. This was not the case for all the participants. Phil, who himself worked with veterans, described feeling reluctant to ask anyone for help, explaining that he thought it would look weak if he admitted to needing support:

I do use some of the supports on campus. Not many of them. I know I have trouble asking for help, and it's fairly common among veterans. Asking for help is... I don't know... felt as a sign of weakness... I don't like asking for help unless I feel I really, really need it.

Finally, some of the veterans felt comfortable asking for help in figuring out their benefits or other logistical details, but were reluctant to ask for academic assistance. Maria described feeling "very overwhelmed" academically during her first semester, but said she hadn't yet asked anyone for help:

Again, I know that the school has resources for like helping studying and stuff, and I didn't use them... I think if I find—depending on my final grades—if I find that I ended up—I changed my strategy a little bit, you know, more calculated—if that still didn't work, I would definitely go there next semester.
Theme 3: Academics

Another important theme emerged from the interviews addressing academic achievement. The academic theme developed from questions seeking to elucidate the college academic experience for student veterans. The results revolve around topics pertaining to student motivation and desire to succeed, study skills, and perceived academic achievement. The data reflect an abundance of both constructive self-regulatory skills but also less-constructive perceptions, especially concerning peer relations.

Motivation and Desire to Succeed

The motivation and desire to succeed was mentioned by all six of the participants, in terms of their academic performance. Many of the participants spoke about how they did not find it difficult to motivate themselves to get their work done. They appeared to have internal motivation, and did not need to depend on external motivators. Phil explained that in a combat situation, being unmotivated could cost a soldier his or her life:

You're used to getting your work done because the only other option is not good. I mean, you can be reprimanded for anything you don't get done. In the combat zone, it's life threatening to not do your job. So, they have that. They have the motivation to get their job done.
I asked Davis the same question. He was confident that he could handle the academic aspect of college, and suggested that having been in war, school seemed relatively easy by comparison:

From my perspective, having served in combat, I haven’t really found any aspect of college yet, and obviously I have limited experience, but I haven’t found anything particularly challenging... I think probably the advanced math requirements for any engineering degree would be a challenge, but I think it’s something I can handle, if I put the work in.

Davis went on to cite the desire to succeed as a major factor in the academic success of student veterans: “I think that for the most part people who are here may have – have the desire to succeed.”

**STUDY SKILLS**

Time management was mentioned by four out of six of the participants in the context of finding time to study. Steven described managing his time and finding a specific time to do homework as a challenge:

It’s been a challenge. I get it done every time, I’ve never not done any work, but it’s just... Yeah, just not having a specific time set aside to do it, having to decide on my own when to do it, I don’t know. And then weekends, every Sunday, I have to go in and I’ll do the rest of the stuff for Monday, it’s like I don’t like doing that on my weekends. I’m used to just having them off completely, not having to worry until Monday.

In contrast, Alex spoke at length about how being in the military actually improved his ability to manage his time and balance work, school, and
a social life. He admitted that it could be a burden, but that he generally enjoyed being busy:

Yeah, and it gave me time to know, you know, this is when you can do the social things, this is when you can do the non-social things, you gotta make time for both, but you have to know when you can do each, I guess. You know, even with the military experience that's challenging at time, cause college is, you know, it's not always demanding, sometimes is much, much more demanding than others. But you know, I think my GPA was as an undergrad, like a 3.3 or 3.4, if I hadn't had the military background, it would have been at least a point lower, at least. 'Cause I wouldn't have had the time management skills, I wouldn't have had the discipline just to sit down and do the stuff I needed to do... I mean if you look in my car right now I have like a 3 inch folder of papers I gotta correct, I have to design a test for Friday on Africa, and you know, I'm a pretty socially active guy, so it's just, it's just a balancing act.

When asked about specific study skills, Davis said he hadn't yet felt the need to study, but would instead just show up and take the tests and get decent grades. He was confident that if he had to find time to study, he would be able to, but hadn't needed to so far. I asked him how his grades were:

B plus, A minus – so I haven't found the need to put any effort into studying, so its pretty much just a matter of showing up and taking tests at this point, and I'm sure that will change at some point in the future, but now I'm just kind-of shooting from the hip, and not having too much difficulty with my school... I have plenty of time if I thought I would need to study. But again, its just not – I haven't identified that need yet.
Steven reported that he was also getting good grades, but couldn't quite figure out why. He felt like he was not particularly good at studying, but that didn’t seem to matter when it came to taking the tests.

I pretty much got Bs in all my classes, and the psychology class, I thought I was going to fail the first test and I got like an 86 on it, I don't know how that happened... I don't feel like, like when I'm actually doing it, I don't feel like I'm doing a very good job at it, but then as I'm taking the tests I'm doing decent on them. I don't understand how that happens.

Maria also expressed some concern that she didn't really know how to study, and wasn't doing as well as she had hoped in her classes. She thought that her classmates were much more prepared for exams than she was, in part because they were able to use each other as resources, and she didn't have those same kinds of social connections.

I found it harder than the average student. I don't know if it's cause these kids were coming right out of high school, cause I'd been doing college, but online, at night... But these—I compared myself to them, and when it came to labs and homework, I had all A's, but when it came to test grades, I was slightly below the average grade. And I don't know if they're using more of each other to study, or if they're using maybe programs at the school to help them, which is no break in school so they're used to it... I don't know what it is, but they were definitely more prepared for these tests than I was. And it took until the end of the semester to figure that out—how much I would have to dedicate to be on that level... I don't know if it's cause because I don't know what to study so I'm studying everything, or I—I also feel like the students talk to each other, so they know what each professor is already like, and what they test on, and what their tests were like previous years. I don't have any of that information! I don't have any ins... so just kinda going at it blind.

Engagement in Academics
The theme of engagement as it relates to academics was a consistent one; all of the participants had something to say about how they were doing in their classes. Davis, Jeff, and Steven all spoke about not liking their classes, despite getting decent grades. Davis had hoped for more discussion in his classes, but wasn't seeing much of it:

But as far as the students and interacting with people, it's been a little bit different because – I think the classes I take, the people are so young – but that will probably change as I get into my major... I think that probably the thing that I expected more of was the discussion in classes. I imagine that'll happen if I just find the right classes.

Steven stated that he felt disinterested in his classes. He had expected to be more invested when he started college, but hadn't found anything he liked: “I was expecting to get to college, and really get into it a lot. That hasn’t really been the case though. As I said, most of the classes I don’t really care that much for.”

Jeff found class and school boring, and wanted to be re-deployed to Afghanistan or be working full-time. He was biding his time until he finished his degree and could leave school behind.

It was very depressing because now I’m in school, and school is just...absolutely boring, and I look at it like all b*llsh*t. I really don’t like school. I tell people that all the time—I just don’t like school... I’m just done with it. I want to move on. I really like to work, work and go home, work and go home. You know, like... you know, go traveling. Whereas school just nails me down, you know. Don’t get me wrong, probably when I get out I’ll be like, school was probably better than I thought, but... last semester was just depressing. I used to show people pictures, I was like, yeah I got pictures of my time overseas, so I show it to them, and I’d just be like—I’d just sigh.
Jeff also said that he put less effort into the classes that he disliked, but was able to get good grades when wanted to. He felt that the grades he received were appropriate given the amount of effort he put in:

Yeah, my grades are what I deserve. So I think my C or B-in Finance is what I deserve, since I didn't really put a lot of effort into it. Versus like other classes that I actually put a lot of effort in and I'll get As in both of them. It's hard for me to learn something that I'm not interested in.

Many of the participants, like Steven, expressed surprise that their classes were easier than they had expected them to be:

I thought that, especially with that freshmen class, writing papers, in the first week of that class I wrote more than I had written the entire time I was in the Marine Corps. I thought that was going to be really challenging, writing, but it really wasn't that hard.

Davis found his classes to be easy, especially after having taken several classes while in the Army:

But it hasn’t really been difficult; I haven’t found it difficult personally. It’s a later start to the morning than I’m accustomed to, which is decent, and you know, my classes aren’t particularly demanding at the 401 level. I haven’t had any difficulty with it. It’s not a totally foreign experience because while I was in the Army I also took a lot of classes and I also did a lot of Army training, which involves somebody else teaching the way that I would frequently teach. So I was pretty accustomed to it.

**CLASSMATES**

The last sub-theme of *Academics* that was consistently mentioned by the participants was the way that their civilian classmates approached academics. Steven was frustrated by what he perceived as many of his
peers' lack of a work ethic; he suggested that a class just for veterans would be nice, because they would be more likely to do their work and attend class regularly: "Like I look at most of the freshmen in that freshman English class, and most of them will miss like at least one day every week for the class... which it's not that hard to wake up early just to go to class."

Davis had been frustrated that he was the only one participating in discussions, and hoped that as he took more advanced classes, his civilian peers would feel more motivated to actively participate: "I think that getting into higher-level classes is going to filter out the people who aren't interested in being there. I think it will encourage people who want to participate and be productive."

Both Phil and Maria spoke about taking on leadership roles during group projects. Phil was most comfortable being in charge of his group members, whereas Maria was generally reticent about being a leader, but was willing to step up in order to protect her grades.

I feel like—knowledge-wise for these classes—some of them I'm on the same level as them [classmates], and some of them I feel better because I've had more experience with those types of subjects. But in both situations, I've found myself just kinda being in the group and just kinda doing my piece and contributing my piece, and not much of a leader... But however, contradicting-wise, in my chemistry class I did find—cause I was in a group of people who didn't know anything of what was going on, like I got thrown into this group, but for the entire semester it's the same people—and I was like, I'm going to fail this lab if we get these things wrong. So I did every lab report, I did everything, because—basically because my grades were on the line, theirs were
as well... but ultimately I was going to make sure that I didn’t suffer because it wasn’t done right.

Many of the participants also mentioned that they maintained different relationships with their professors than their classmates did. Davis mentioned that in his early morning classes, he and the professor would end up chatting because the rest of the class didn’t appear interested in participating. Maria stated that she felt like her interactions with the instructors were more professional, compared with her civilian peers. She described how she would typically compose an email to a professor:

Well I was usually starting it with like Sir or Ma’am, but now I think that’s inappropriate, so it’s usually like Professor whatever. If I need something or if I’m confused about something... and then at the end I’m always thanking them for their time, Very Respectfully, all that stuff—I just have a feeling that’s not the kind of emails that they’re getting from other students. They’re probably like, who is this suck up?
THEME 4: SERVICE

The next theme is dubbed Service since it included participants' perception of how being in the military directly affected the academic performance in terms of discipline, perspective, college preparation, and career benefits (travel, money, cultural experiences) gained as a result of being in the military.

DISCIPLINE

All of the participants spoke about the way in which the military made them more disciplined, and how this directly impacted their ability to get their schoolwork done, get to classes on time, and generally act in a professional manner. For these student veterans, it appears that they view college as a job—they show up to each class, get work done on time, and meet the requirements—rather than some kind of growth or social experience. Many of them spoke about feeling more mature than their classmates and about feeling self-reliant. This idea of maturity and self-reliance is evident in this sub-theme, as well as in the sub-theme Perspective.

Phil spoke about how his training in the Army affected him. He saw being disciplined as a way of life that soldiers are taught in order to survive and succeed:

Well, one thing that the military does that nothing else does, in my experience, is the idea of self-discipline. You have to
be able to motivate yourself in order to achieve anything in the military... My... the first time I ever met my drill sergeant in training, he told my platoon that the only things we would need to succeed are discipline and motivation... Again, motivating yourself to getting your work done is easy. You're used to getting your work done because the only other option is not good. I mean, you can be reprimanded for anything you don't get done. In the combat zone, it's life threatening to not do your job. So, they have that. They have the motivation to get their job done.

Steven spoke about discipline in terms of meeting what he considered to be the basic requirements for college—including showing up for class and getting work done on time. He hadn't considered himself to be a disciplined person while in the Marines, but developed a new perspective when he started college. I asked Steven how he thought being a veteran impacted his experience as a college student:

I think that it gives me much more discipline, as far as what I was saying... just going to classes and discipline to like set-up time to study and all that, just get my work done... But I never... while I was in, I never considered myself disciplined, but then I got here and it shows more, I think. I haven't missed a single class. It's just not that hard for me to go into a class.

Alex and Davis both mentioned how the military had taught them discipline, something that they had lacked prior to entering the service. Alex stated that he would have had a hard time in college if he hadn't been in the military for a number of years:

I have much more discipline. I don't know how kids do it, how 18, 19, 20 year olds do it. You know, it seems like it's just so easy to go out and party and be stupid every day. Being in the military, I mean, I guess you're still able to do college-type things, but it gives you more of a, it allows you to prioritize better. So you're never gunna be behind the
curve, and you know that even if you really don't want to go to that class, you have to do it. It just kinda gives you a better set of world values, and you see different ways of getting to the finish line, besides just hassling the professor all day. I know for me specifically, I would have a much more challenging time of going to college if I had not joined first, because I just got the structure, the juggling, all that is difficult for a young person.

Davis agreed, and said moreover that when he was graduating from high school he was pretty unmotivated as a student. Being in the military gave him the drive to get his work done:

I would say that there's a lot of life-skill transfer probably... as far as the importance of punctuality and the discipline to do my work without somebody looking over my shoulder... I'd say I probably benefited from being in the army in that regard, because in high school, towards the end, I just lost all interest in being in school really.

*CAREER BENEFITS*

The benefits of being in the military, which were described as travel, cultural experiences, monetary compensation, and general benefits (housing, food, health insurance, etc.), were mentioned by many of the participants as motivators for both joining the arming and staying in it. Maria spoke about travel as one of the reasons it was so difficult for her to make the decision to leave the Air Force and pursue a post-secondary degree:

You know, you keep thinking, I'm just going to do four [years], I'm just going to do two more, and it kept going, and I kept getting amazing opportunities...So I put in for Korea and a lot of people who do that usually get it, and I got it two months later. So I went to Korea and then finished up
in England for five years... And that was hard to let go after that. The second half was amazing... [Leaving the Air Force was] totally 100% by choice, and that was a hard choice. It was very difficult. I still struggle.

Alex was able to teach while in the military, and thereby figured out what he wanted to do for a career. He credited that experience with putting him on his career path and eventual retirement from the military:

I had a lot of teaching roles. I was a nurse and medic and I had been in various field training exercises and I was deployed to Iraq in 2003. And throughout, really, began in my deployment because we had some fresh recruits that you had to really bring up to speed, and it's nice seeing them get confidence in what they're doing and you know, it started there and it continued throughout my time in [blank], just seeing new people become accustomed with the expectations and being comfortable and just—yeah, I realized I wanted to do that. Didn't realize what I wanted to do that in, I mean I picked history, but that came like three or four years later. So, I just realized I want to teach at some level, at some point, and everything else fell into place later on.

Davis took advantage of the fact that the Army paid for him to take classes: once he had exhausted all of the educational benefits while in the service, he decided to transition to being a full-time student:

...while you're in the Army, there are a few educational incentives that they offer... Tuition assistance while you're enlisted, and certain units allow you to re-enlist for staying in that unit and they'll give you some time off the following semester to take classes and stuff. I pretty much exhausted what the Army offered me while I was in, to pursue education, and I really came to the point where I accomplished my goals, my career-oriented goals in the Army, and I thought I was really ready to do full-time student — to be a full-time student.

**PERSPECTIVE**
Each of the participants referenced perspective as an important part of their service experience and in adjusting to being a college student. Davis described his academic experience in contrast to combat: "From my perspective, having served in combat, I haven't really found any aspect of college yet, and obviously I have limited experience, but I haven't found anything particularly challenging." Alex had a similar viewpoint:

A lot of these challenges that you go through in college, you know, so what you gotta write a 40-page paper, it's not like, it's nothing you can... all that stuff is pretty secondary compared to things you go through... my most difficult times were when I was actually in... you know, I saw a lot of death and things... my most difficult times were just the separation, just being away from my friends and family. Nothing that I'd go through as a college student could be as difficult as being away from my friends and family for months and years at a time.

When I asked Alex if he had any advice to give a freshman student veteran, he suggested that they keep things in perspective: "Don't worry, you know, you can't go anything in college that's as challenging as your first week at basic training as a 17 year old, or your first couple months of deployment, or that first 25 mile road march you gotta go on."

Jeff described perspective in terms of experiencing another culture and learning about himself. He spoke about a particular time when he was pulling security in Afghanistan, and a local man greeted him:

I had some experiences that I think about now, and those are some of the other experiences that really defined my time overseas...One of them, I remember I was—it was my first air assault... This old man, he looked really old, some would say like maybe 60, probably like 45, comes
out and I look behind me ‘cause I hear somebody coming. And he holds his hand out, he’s got like this shovel over his shoulder, and he holds his hand to shake my hand, it’s rude to shake hands with gloves on, so I just pull my gloves off, I put my hand and I shake his hand... So then he shook my hand, and I looked at him right in the face and he smiled, and he’s like missing a bunch of teeth, and it was really like—yup, I’m in Asia, I’m you know, like, just another wake up call. Where I could stop and say, never in a million years did I think I’d be standing, straddling over this ditch, looking at this little like pond, if you will, with these houses made of mud, and I’m going to watch this guy. This guy is going to willingly walk in front of my field of fire to work on his fields. Like if you saw somebody outside with a machine gun in America you wouldn’t go outside... this guy’s just like, whatever, it’s business as usual.

**COLLEGE PREPARATION**

Many of the participants saw the military as a step between high school and college, in terms of preparing to go back to school. Alex described why he decided to stay in the military for so long, and what led up to his retirement:

I mean, the reason that I enlisted, one of the main reasons I enlisted in the first place, cause I didn’t really know what I wanted to go to school for, I didn’t feel like, you know, wasting time, money, and effort to get a degree that my heart wasn’t really set on. So you know, through experiences in the Army I realized that I did want to teach. Basically... I reenlisted when I was in my second or third year and that was because... I didn’t know, why get out if you didn’t know what you wanted to do. So until I was able to answer that question I stayed in, and once I was able to answer the question, I got out.
Davis described a similar experience: he attended college for a semester at another school and found that it wasn’t a good fit, so he joined the Army with the idea that he would eventually be ready to go back to school:

I had taken a semester at [Redacted] before I joined and it wasn’t really the right fit for me at that time in my life, but I thought that it probably would be someday. I thought that joining the Army would be able to get a couple of goals accomplished and it would be able to line me up for education when I got out.

**Theme 5: Symptoms**

The *Symptoms* theme emerged from data gleaned from participants’ statements addressing the specific symptoms they were experiencing, how those symptoms affected their academic performance, and what methods they used to cope. This theme addresses both the nature of processes that may hinder self-regulation as well as strategies participants used to deal with physical, cognitive, and psychological barriers to learning.

**Sensory**

Phil, Steven, and Jeff mentioned sensory issues, including hearing loss, sensitivity to light and sound, and pain. The evidence for this particular sub-theme was not extensive, but it does show that half of the participants were dealing with sensory issues connected to their military experience. Jeff spoke about having tinnitus (ringing in the ears) as a
result of not wearing hearing protection during a firefight:

I only hurt my ears once, that's during a firefight when I was firing back... Well, every—very infrequently, and this happens to everybody actually, you don't even have to shoot guns for this, I'll just be like talking and my ear will feel like it's clogged and it will ring. But everybody's ears ring at some point.

He did not see this as something to be concerned about.

**COGNITIVE**

Steven and Phil both mentioned problems concentrating, maintaining focus, and paying attention. Steven stated that he would be sitting in a lecture, and at some point realize that several minutes had gone by where he would have no idea what had happened: “Definitely in the lecture classes I'll just start thinking about something else and I'll just realize, crap, I just missed ten minutes of lecture.” When I asked him how he dealt with that, he stated “Usually I just pick up wherever they are in the lecture from there. I mean, usually by the time the test comes around, I'm trying to study and I'll look at the stuff and I don't remember most of it. But somehow I do decent on the tests.”

Phil mentioned that usually he was able to pay attention to the task at hand, but he often had trouble focusing: “So... putting aside distractions is the easiest thing in the world for me... unless it's not, in which case I'm focusing on everything.”

**SLEEP**
Sleep disturbance was the symptom mentioned the most by the participants. Steven stated that he had had nightmares (one of the signature symptoms of PTSD) after returning from deployment, but that those had decreased and now he just had general trouble sleeping. He found that the lack of sleep impacted how present he was in class:

As far as the sleep disturbance—I got nightmares when I first came back, then I—I don’t know, they don’t happen as often anymore. Still, like, I don’t sleep too much at night I guess, so when I wake up—the class that I had this morning, I’m a completely different person in that class than I would be at like six o’clock at night, I guess because I’m not rested enough.

Alex found that he had trouble keeping a regular sleep schedule and getting enough sleep overall, ever since the end of his deployment: “I’ve had insomnia since the last couple months of my deployment. It is not PTSD-related. It was just too friggin hot, and even since then my whole sleep cycle has just been weird…”

EMOTIONAL

The participants’ comments concerning emotional symptoms were difficult to interpret as most were quick to say that they did not have PTSD, but then would then describe symptoms that would indicate the likelihood of such a condition. Phil, in the second interview, stated that he was currently being treated for PTSD. However, during the first interview, he described his symptoms, including feeling anxious constantly, doing threat analysis while in crowds, and reacting to loud sounds by dropping
So it’s sometimes – you find yourself reacting to situations in a way no one else does. You’ll hear a car backfire and your immediate reaction is to duck and cover. Sometimes it can be really, really stressful – a lot of noise and action around you makes you nervous… And for anyone who has been trained to react to situations like that its stressful, cause it’s like part of your brain is looking and doing threat analysis. But, you know, people rush by you, does anyone look like they’re armed, it’s just – ridiculous.

Steven mentioned that his mother was worried about him, and wondered how he would react to hearing fireworks on the Fourth of July: “…it’s just been kinda awkward, like my mother thinks… like she thinks… I have problems or something like that. She’s always asking about it. It’s like on the fourth of July she was asking me if the fireworks were scaring me and remind me of gun shots. It’s just… yeah.”

Jeff described a number of emotional symptoms, including wanting to go back to Afghanistan, not being able to get an adrenaline rush without hearing a helicopter or explosion, being more easily angered, and having mood swings. He also mentioned that he had heard from a friend that a symptom of PTSD was the desire to return to the war:

I think I just get like angry more easily? I wouldn’t say—well, my friend actually told me that when he went to the VA, you know they were asking about his service and they were like, well do you think you have PTSD, and he said no. And like, I’d say I don’t. But apparently a symptom, a mild symptom, of PTSD is wanting to go back. Not being able to hit that adrenaline high, not being able to, like you know put your ass on the line again, like you miss it. It’s a mild form of PTSD. I don’t think anybody ever walks away from a war zone or anything like that without it affecting them, whether for better or for worse. Yeah, I have some… much more prominent mood swings now than I ever did. I’d say I can
be touched off pretty easily. Sometimes I'll be real happy, sometimes I'll be pretty pissed off... Sometimes it feels like a rollercoaster. For the most part, if things are going well in my life, I'm pretty happy. But if things are not, then I get pretty sh*tty.

**ROLE IN ACADEMICS**

Despite the number and types of symptoms discussed in the four previous sections, none of the participants stated that they thought that those symptoms had any effect on their academic performance. They did not report a connection between schoolwork and sensory, cognitive, sleep, or emotional symptomology. I asked Jeff how his mood swings affected his academic performance, and he discounted any impact: “I'd say schoolwork-wise, it doesn't really affect my ability to do assignments.” Similarly, Steven denied that his sleep disturbances or trouble concentrating had any affect on his schoolwork.

**COPING**

All of the participants who admitted to having some service-related symptomology (Davis, Phil, Jeff, and Alex) also spoke about the way in which they coped with those symptoms. Phil dealt with his anxiety and hyper-alertness by staying away from crowds and finding a quiet place:

The best way I can find it [how to deal with symptoms] – is find a quiet place and just stay there. I mean, some things, you know, are fun to do. Maybe go to the gym, but that thing, the gym here is always packed... I go to the library – you can always find a corner. Or the third floor of the MUB is usually less populated than the rest of it.
Similarly, Jeff found that finding time to be alone was an effective way to deal with his frustrations towards other students: "I just withdraw from people. I don’t really talk to people. But uh, yeah I just withdraw from people..." However, Jeff also mentioned that he would take out his anger on the people around him:

...like sometimes I... it’s really bad, I like take it out on people that don’t deserve it... At least I admit it. Um... just people that are usually nice to me, I’ll just like... I don’t know, kinda piss them off... Yeah, just to take out my frustration and anger on people that don’t deserve it. You know, I’ll feel bad about it, but it’s just the way I am. Nobody’s perfect.

Alex had been dealing with his insomnia for several years, and had developed ways of coping with it. He would take naps during the day after teaching, avoided scheduling morning classes, and would take time to relax whenever possible:

You know, I think my body works more of time that it doesn’t need like nightly sleep, it needs more weekly or monthly sleep. So there will be days where I’ll get, you know, one or two hours of sleep for a couple days in a row. That’s a struggle if that happens in the classroom, because I don’t want, never come off as the tired teacher. And I don’t use caffeine, you know I’m not a coffee or tea drinker. So, sometimes you just gotta crash and rest up. I mean, it’s interesting, I don’t have normal hours. Some nights I’ll be asleep at 3 o’clock in the morning and I’ll be awake at 5 o’clock when I decide to wake up. Other nights, you know, a lot of days, right when I’m done teaching, regardless of what I have planned for the rest of the day, I just go home and sleep for like 2 hours... you know, let it all figure itself out.

Alex also mentioned that he didn’t tell most of his professors about his insomnia, or go through Disability Services to get extra help or any kind of services. He felt that it was his problem to handle, and he didn’t want
to draw attention to himself: "I haven't used Student Disability Services, I haven't—if I told a professor, it was more of a personal thing than a hey, cater to me kinda thing, cause I don't want that happening. I mean I said earlier, I'm not really a big one for calling out attention to yourself."
Theme 6: Suggestions

The sixth and final theme, Suggestions, describes how the participants felt that a university could provide better support and services for student veterans. The suggestions put forth by the participants were grouped in the following sub-themes: Orientation, Mentoring, Support Staff, Classes, and Campus Space.

Orientation

The idea of a veteran-only orientation was broached by several of the participants. Many the student veterans take classes prior to entering college, so they may not be categorized as “freshman” by the University, which means that they don’t get any orientation. Looking back at the theme of Transition, the sub-theme of Logistics and Paperwork was an important one, in that many of the student veterans reported feeling lost initially when they enrolled in college. Davis suggested that a veteran orientation would empower student veterans to succeed by giving them the initial tools and information that they needed, as well as enable them to make connections with other student veterans:

I would say that if the administration is interested in helping out, then proving veterans with those initial resources, like the orientation for example, would be very beneficial. I think once veterans are so empowered, they are very capable for the most part of achieving their goals on their own. If they need help, I think that they can find that support with veterans, I think that they just need to get sort of oriented in the right direction from the beginning.
Steven agreed with this, and hoped that a veteran orientation would also include information about the GI Bill and benefits for student veterans:

I'd like to see the beginning of the year; I know they did like—I had freshman orientation at the beginning, they had the transfer student survival day or something like that... I'd like to see something set aside just for veterans at the beginning of the year... We just—we can learn about what we're going to need to do as far as the GI Bill.

MENTORING

The idea of setting up a veteran-to-veteran mentoring system was mentioned on the initial online survey. Alex and Maria both thought that such a system would be beneficial to new students, in terms of sharing information, explaining benefits, and helping create social connections. Maria described how she thought the diversity of the veteran population on campus would lend itself to such a system:

I think that could be beneficial. They really do have like—for the veterans that are going here, it really seems like we have all age ranges. And there's a lot of them still in the military, and a lot of them are retired, and I think they have a lot of good information to guide maybe the younger people who only did four years or who are in the reserves only and then going to school. That'd be so beneficial to some people I think. There's just such a wide variety of different ones of us, you know?

Alex agreed that a mentoring program would be helpful, especially in terms of taking some of the pressure off of the few veteran support staff working at the university and enabling older veterans to do some teaching:
With the way it is now, it would alleviate a lot, well not a lot of things, probably many of the things Lonn and his support staff have to go through. At the same time it would, I'm sure it would establish friendships. Plus it would just, you know, put one person in a position where they're able to teach another person, where they're able to alleviate their concerns... I think that's something that should seek to implement. Even if you just have one thing in late August, where you have freshmen vets and junior and senior or graduate vets, that are able to be there for each other... But I'm sure it'd be extremely beneficial to people—that have questions that could be answered, or just you know, the way of life kinda things. How do I get this, and—I think that'd be a really good idea.

**SUPPORT STAFF**

Alex, in particular, felt that the veteran support staff on campus, while always helpful, they were unable to meet the demand for services and information from prospective and current student veterans. He suggested that adding one or two additional staff members might alleviate some of the initial anxiety that incoming veterans felt when they started college, in that those veterans would be able to get their questions answered more promptly.

**CLASSES**

The suggestion of a veteran-only class was made both on the online survey and during the interviews. Many of the participants felt that such a class would be appropriate because it would allow the student veterans to interact freely with each other, without risk of offending a civilian peers. Phil suggested that a philosophy class designed specifically
for veterans could be therapeutic:

Veterans more... have a... have to have a separate view on reality than most other people. They were trained for a while that if necessary, they would have to kill. And that forces them into a different mind – and they don't feel comfortable talking openly about their ideas and philosophies around civilians cause they're afraid people will look at them... like they're crazy.

Steven agreed that a veteran-only class would be a good idea because he felt that the student veterans would be able to relate to each other, but would also attend class regularly and participate. When I asked him what the class might look like, he said: “Just guys that can relate to each other, taking a class... guys that are actually going to show up, do the work.”

**CAMPUS SPACE**

The idea of having a campus space especially for student veterans was brought up by many of the participants, as well as on the online survey. Many suggested that such a space would allow veterans to seek assistance from other veterans; the idea that a veteran is more likely to ask for help from another veteran was a consistent one. Davis spoke about the benefits of having a lounge, with that veteran-to-veteran dynamic in mind:

I think that it's just – veterans relate to each other pretty well based on their shared experiences. And I think that it's not that they don't get along with other people, it's not the case, I just think that they would maybe benefit from a veteran-only lounge. If the school was going to designate a lounge for that – for veterans.
Maria also mentioned the need for a veteran-only space, and said that it might help her feel more connected to the school as a veteran. She mentioned how the USO has special lounges in every airport, and how student veterans would welcome such a resource on campus:

I guess we’re just used to—when there’s a lot of veterans, in any situation, like travelling through major airports like the USO things, and there’s always lots of veterans around—we’re so used to having a space like that, that’s special for us, I think that’s why maybe a lot of people were surprised that there wasn’t one. Overall, I’d say we feel a little—I personally feel honestly like just another older transfer student, really. Even though I still have my military life a little bit, I feel like the military has nothing to do with me here, other than I won’t have huge debts when I leave.
V.

DISCUSSION

As veterans return from Iraq and Afghanistan, many choose to use their GI Bill educational benefits to enroll in post-secondary education. As a result, college campuses must prepare and administer services that are relevant and appropriate for the unique needs of student veterans. Many of these student veterans are dealing with service-related experiences that affect how well they can transition into post-secondary education and perform well academically. Combat trauma, in the form of TBI and/or PTSD, can produce chronic cognitive and psychological impairments, including deficits in memory, attention, executive functions, reasoning, mood regulation, and psychosocial behavior. These impairments may prevent student veterans from attaining high levels of academic achievement within the post-secondary environment because students need to navigate complicated learning and social situations.

The purpose of this study was to obtain the perspective of six participants, each a student veteran who indicated that he or she was experiencing symptoms of either PTSD or TBI, through phenomenological inquiry. The three research questions guiding this project concerned assessing the impact of cognitive and psychological symptoms on the transition experience, academic achievement, and service utilization. The data revealed several distinct themes that represent a shared experience
Academics and Symptoms

A SRL model was adopted to conceptualize how TBI and PTSD symptoms affect academic achievement for student veterans. SRL elucidates academic achievement as the result of interacting cognitive, motivational, affective, and social contextual factors (Pintrich, 2004). Many of the veterans in this study reported a variety of cognitive and psychological symptoms related to their military experience that could contribute to problems with SRL: difficulty concentrating, sensitivity to light and sound, sleep disturbance, intrusive nightmares, mood swings, social isolation, and a desire to return to battle. This, in itself, is not surprising; in fact, the symptomology is consistent with findings from other studies involving student veterans (Elliot et al., 2011; Trudel et al., 2007; Windome et al., 2011; Kennedy et al., 2008). The key finding in this study was that despite often having one or more of the aforementioned service-related symptoms, the participants did not report a strong connection between those symptoms and their academic performance. In fact, when asked directly if those symptoms had an effect on how well they were able to do specific academic tasks, such as studying, being organized, or getting work done on time, the participants entirely discounted any negative effects. Additionally, participants did not report any evidence of
academic difficulty or distress, which suggests that the overall perception of performance was sufficient.

It seems participants were able to compensate for symptoms through the use of strategies and personal attributes. From a SRL perspective, motivation is a strong predictor of academic outcome. Students derive motivation from a variety of variables, usually related to knowledge acquisition of quantitative outcomes: a desire to master a certain topic/skill, a desire to achieve high grades, and a desire not to be perceived as a poor student (Wolters and Yu, 1996). It is clear participants in this study were motivated to succeed academically, and both intrinsic and extrinsic factors emerged as important motivators. For example, Steven felt motivated to succeed academically in order to positively represent the Marines as a whole, while Jeff wanted to earn a degree and move onto a career as soon as possible. Maria wanted to prove to her family that she had made the right decision by leaving the Air Force to be a full-time student.

The participants distinguished themselves from their non-military peers in terms of determination and discipline, both of which seemed to be enhanced through military service. This is consistent with SRL literature, which demonstrates students who are motivated and possess achievement goals are more productive in their studies (e.g., Wolters, 2003). For example, Steven reported that he hadn't missed a single class during his first semester, and was doing much better in his classes
than he had expected. Phil and Maria stated that they were willing to take on leadership roles during group assignments in order to assure that they would get good grades on those assignments. Based on these findings, it is evident that the cognitive and emotional symptoms these students experienced were not severe enough to eclipse other powerful learning attributes consistent with SRL. Of note, overall engagement with academics seems to be low; while the participants did not directly attribute their dissatisfaction or disinterest in school to their symptoms, it may be possible that there is a connection.

TRANSITION

It was clear Social Interactions was important an important factor in the participants' academic experience as the greatest proportion of interview transcripts was dedicated to this theme. Many of the participants in this study spoke about the social distance between them and their civilian peers; they felt more mature, more disciplined, and more responsible than their peers as a result of their military training and experiences. The student veterans also tended to be critical of non-military peers, feeling frustrated (Jeff and Steven) or amused (Maria and Davis) with their seemingly casual attitude towards academics.

These findings are consistent with those of Livingston et al. (2011) who reported veterans with PTSD had difficulty understanding and relating to non-military peers. In view of Livingston et al. (2011) and findings
from this study, it seems that veterans in post-secondary education are at risk for difficult social transitions for two reasons. First, veterans experience an age and life experience gap between their student peers and themselves. Second, veterans may be experiencing cognitive and psychological symptoms (e.g., fear, sleep deprivation, anxiety) resulting from mTBI and/or PTSD that exacerbate social isolation (Livingston et al., 2011). While social integration may not be a significant issue for some students, others may experience academic failure as a result. From a SRL perspective, students who self-regulate their learning identify gaps in their own knowledge or capabilities (Pintrich, 2004). As a result, one effective strategy is to seek information from a social source (i.e., a fellow student or instructor) (Pons & Zimmerman, 1986). Veterans at risk for academic failure may not be able to use this strategy due to problems with social integration.

The participants also spoke about the challenge of transitioning from a very structured environment within the military to one in which they had a lot more personal freedom (see Freedom/Independence). The student veterans had a lot of ambivalence about this dichotomy; on the one hand, they appreciated being able to go where they wanted to go, eat what they wanted to eat, and live where they wanted to live, but on the other hand, they seemed overwhelmed about how to deal with so much free time and abundance of personal choices. This transitional challenge was also observed by Livingston et al., (2011). Many of the participants
responded to this by carefully scheduling their time, with classes, multiple jobs, internships, and commitments on and off campus. This finding provides further evidence that these participants used effective strategies for managing the logistical demands of post-secondary education. As reported in other themes, discipline and order are important attributes for these students, and this manifests in how they manage daily activities. Highly organized daily activities could also be seen as a SRL skill that moderated the effects of acquired cognitive-emotional symptoms.

The participants were able to successfully manage transitional barriers despite cognitive and psychological symptoms acquired following military service. According to Agaibi and Wilson (2005), the capacity to adapt and cope successfully following traumatic events is referred to as resilience. This study provides a snapshot of certain features that may explain why some student veterans succeed in post-secondary education despite the effects of combat trauma. Determination, motivation, and a positive attitude are all known to promote resilience and were evidenced among the student veteran participants in this study (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Almedom & Glandon, 2007).

SUPPORTING STUDENT VETERANS: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Eliot et al. (2011) suggest that "institutes of higher learning have an opportunity to help veterans succeed in college by meeting their financial, health, and social needs, and by making campuses a place where
veterans feel a sense of safety and belonging” (p. 290). Developing a greater understanding of student veterans’ needs within the SRL model allows college campuses to better support their veteran populations’ unique learning and social needs. Evidence, such as that offered by Kennedy et al. (2008), Glang et al. (2008), Ewing-Cobb et al. (2006), Church (2009), and Todis and Glang (2008) suggest that existing supports and services are not currently meeting the cognitive and psychological needs of students and student veterans with TBI and/or PTSD. Demers (2011) suggests that veterans simply need a way to transition from the military culture into civilian culture: “Although boot camp provides the necessary transition rites to become part of military culture, there is not an equivalent civilian camp to assist veterans with successful reintegration once they leave military settings” (p. 176).

Results from this study suggest logistical supports are needed for dealing with course registration, campus navigation, and navigating the Veterans Administration for GI Bill benefits. Specific suggestions included a veteran-only orientation at the beginning of the school year, a meeting/lounge/advising space on campus, and more specific information about what supports exist on campus and how to access them. Many of the student veterans mentioned that veterans are usually more comfortable seeking out help from other veterans; by enabling this population to make social connections on campus and giving them a place to meet, much of the responsibility that currently lies with veteran support staff on campus
could be transferred to the veterans themselves. The participants in this study frequently referred to themselves as “self-reliant” or “independent”; appropriate supports and services on campus would encourage student veterans to continue to be independent, while allowing them to use all possible resources (including each other) to succeed academically and emotionally.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The participants in this study represented themselves as highly motivated, mature, and self-reliant students who take pride in their ability to independently solve problems, handle stress, and negotiate logistical barriers both in and out of a post-secondary educational setting. They dealt with an amalgamation of cognitive, physical, and emotional symptoms related to their military experience, but these symptoms did not prevent successful transitioning to post-secondary education. It was clear participants utilized personal attributes and learning strategies to compensate for any symptoms of combat trauma they experienced.

While this study may inform educational decisions for supporting student veterans, there are limitations the reader should consider. First, the sample was derived from respondents to an online questionnaire, and it is possible respondents may have systematically differed from non-respondents. For example, those student veterans who chose to participate may have had some agenda for agreeing to be interviewed, or
perhaps just more able to handle another complication in their schedule; those who chose not to participate may have worried about compromising their anonymity or funding if they spoke poorly about the military or the university, or may not have been able to incorporate the interviews into their schedules.

This study was cross-sectional in nature, sampling a small group of student veterans at one university. Additional research such as a longitudinal analysis of enrollment and academic achievement, would provide valuable information about the long-term effects of combat trauma on academic achievement, post-secondary transition, and psychosocial behavior.

**Summary**

As more veterans return home from Iraq and Afghanistan and choose to enroll in post-secondary education, our educational institutions need to take the initiative to support these students as much as possible. These institutions can work to lessen the psychosocial and logistical issues that may arise from the transition from the military to an educational environment by offering access to veteran-specific resources and information. They can support academic performance by making student veterans aware of what academic services are offered and how to
access them. Finally, they can also encourage social reintegration by implementing a mentoring system or by making the veteran presence on campus more visible. For student veterans with psychological and emotional impairments secondary to their military experience, providing them with increased support and information and empowering them to use those resources will better allow them to succeed in the post-secondary environment.
REFERENCES


A. RECRUITMENT FLYER

Be a part of a Research Study on the Experiences of Student Veterans!

Are you a veteran?

Are you currently a student at UNH?

I want to know what your academic experience has been like, as a veteran. Are your needs being met? Do you have the supports and services that you need? What could be done to improve your academic life?

The results of this research will be used to understand how universities can better support student veterans.

For participating in the survey, you can enter a raffle to win one of four $25 gift cards to Amazon.com!

This study is not related to the VA and will not impact any benefits from the VA or UNH.
B. Online Survey

1) Age

2) Gender
   ○ Male
   ○ Female

3) Year in college
   - Freshman

4) If you answered "other" in the previous question, please explain.

5) GPA (approximate)

6) Major

7) Marital Status
   - single

8) If you answered "other" in the previous question, please explain.

9) Branch of the Military
   - Army

10) If you answered "other" in the previous question, please explain.

11) Rank
   - Junior Enlisted (E1-E4)

12) If you answered "other" in the previous question, please explain.
13) During your deployment, were you involved in combat operations?
   [ ] Yes

14) Number of Deployments
   [ ] 1

15) Total length of months deployed.

16) Were you injured during your deployment?
   [ ] Yes

17) What was the mechanism of the injury?
   [ ] Blast or explosion (e.g. improvised explosive device, rocket-propelled grenade, land mine, grenade)
   [ ] Bullet
   [ ] Fragment or shrapnel
   [ ] Vehicular (e.g. any type of vehicle, including airplane)
   [ ] Other
   [ ] Was not injured

18) Did any injury received while you were deployed result in any of the following? (Check all that apply)
   [ ] Being dazed, confused, or "seeing stars"
   [ ] Not remembering the injury
   [ ] Losing consciousness (e.g. knocked out) for less than a minute
   [ ] Losing consciousness for 1 to 20 minutes
   [ ] Losing consciousness for more than 20 minutes
   [ ] Head injury
   [ ] None of the above
   [ ] Was not injured

19) Did an improvised explosive device explode near you (with or without injury)?
   [ ] Yes

20) Were you ever hospitalized while deployed?
   [ ] Yes

21) Have you been hospitalized since returning home from your deployment?
   [ ] Yes
25) How important is accessing supports and services at this campus to your academic success?

Very Important 3

26) Do you feel that you are getting the supports and services that you need at this campus? Please explain:

27) What would you like to see on this campus to better support your academic achievement?

Describe your experience in the classroom:

28) I attend class regularly.

Strongly Disagree 3

29) I have trouble paying attention in class.

Strongly Disagree 3

30) I am not able to take adequate notes.

Strongly Disagree 3

31) I feel comfortable interacting with my professors.

Strongly Disagree 3

32) I am able to recall lectures.

Strongly Disagree 3
Describe your experience studying for exams:

33) I am able to pay attention while studying for exams.
   [Strongly Disagree]

34) I am able to use my class notes adequately while studying for exams.
   [Strongly Disagree]

35) I have a hard time finding time to study.
   [Strongly Disagree]

36) After studying, I am able to remember the information I have learned.
   [Strongly Disagree]

37) When something is unclear to me, I seek alternate sources of information to gain clarity.
   [Strongly Disagree]

Describe your experience writing papers/lab reports/essays:

38) While writing, I am able to pay attention to what I am doing.
   [Strongly Disagree]

39) I am not able to find the necessary time to write my assignments.
   [Strongly Disagree]

40) I pass in my papers on time.
   [Strongly Disagree]

Describe your experience managing assignments:

41) While managing assignments, I am able to pay attention to what I am doing.
   [Strongly Disagree]

42) I am not able to pass in my assignments on time.
   [Strongly Disagree]

43) I design a study schedule for myself and am able to stick to it.
   [Strongly Disagree]
44) I have trouble being well-organized and keeping track of my assignments.

Strongly Disagree

45) If you are interested in participating in an interview about your experiences as a student volunteer, please leave your name and email address in the box below, and the researcher will contact you. If you are not interested in further participation, leave the box blank.
C. CODING THEMES AND SUB-THEMES, AMENDED

1. Motivation for college
   A-Paid for by military
   C-Family/friends influence
   D-Career preparation/next step

2. Transition
   E-Logistics and paperwork
   F/G-Social Interactions
   H-Freedom/independence
   I-Accessing supports

3. Academics
   K-Motivation/desire to succeed
   M-Study skills
   N-Engagement in Academics
   O-Classmates – leadership, other students, class size

4. Service
   P-Discipline
   Q-Career benefits – salary, travel, education, teaching
   R-Perspective
   S-College preparation

5. Symptoms
   T-Sensory – headache, hearing, pain, etc.
   U-Cognitive – problems concentrating
   V-Sleep
   W-Emotional – Irritability, anger, wanting to go back
   X-Role in academics
   Y-Coping

6. Suggestions
   Z-Orientation
   AA-Mentoring
   BB-Support staff
   CC-Classes
   DD-Campus space
D. IRB APPROVAL LETTERS

University of New Hampshire
Research Integrity Services, Service Building
51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585
Fax: 603-862-3564

19-Sep-2011

Rocke, Maya
Communication Sciences and Disorders, Hewitt Hall
177 Concord Way
Portsmouth, NH 03801

IRB #: 5239
Study: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Military Veteran College Students with Traumatic Brain Injuries
Approval Date: 10-Aug-2011

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study.

Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol for one year from the approval date above. At the end of the approval period you will be asked to submit a report with regard to the involvement of human subjects in this study. If your study is still active, you may request an extension of IRB approval.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects. (This document is also available at http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Julie F. Simpson
Director

cc: File
    Ness, Bryan
University of New Hampshire
Research Integrity Services, Service Building
51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585
Fax: 603-862-3564

04-Oct-2011

Rocke, Maya
Communication Sciences and Disorders, Hewitt Hall
177 Concord Way
Portsmouth, NH 03801

IRB #: 5239
Study: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Military Veteran College Students with Traumatic Brain Injuries
Approval Expiration Date: 10-Aug-2012
Modification Approval Date: 30-Sep-2011
Modification: Addition of incentive

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved your modification to this study, as indicated above. Further changes in your study must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to implementation.

Approval for this protocol expires on the date indicated above. At the end of the approval period you will be asked to submit a report with regard to the involvement of human subjects in this study. If your study is still active, you may request an extension of IRB approval.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects. This document is available at http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources or from me.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Julie F. Simpson
Director

cc: File
Ness, Bryan