The Transition Experiences of Re-Enrolling Student Veterans at a Public Four-Year University

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This dissertation titled
The Transition Experiences of Re-Enrolling Student Veterans at a Public Four-Year University

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Abstract

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The Transition Experiences of Re-Enrolling Student Veterans at a Public Four-Year University

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The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to describe and illuminate the transition experiences of re-enrolling student veterans. This research question guided the study: What are the barriers and strategies for resolution that re-enrolling student veterans face in their pre- and post-service transition experiences? I conducted semi-structured, intensive interviews with seven re-enrolling student veterans attending a public four-year university located in the Midwest region of the US.

The Theory of Transition Experiences of Re-enrolling Student Veterans took shape as a result of the grounded theory methods used. The theory comprises three tenets: experiential maturity (maturity that goes beyond a person’s chronological age); a drive for something more (beyond what they have experienced thus far); and the ability to deal with internal conflict (created either by their desire for simultaneous anonymity and recognition on campus or by their past war selves and current civilian selves).

The theory has implications for higher education administrators, for faculty and staff who work with the student veteran population, and for the student veterans themselves as they work through their significant transitions back to school.
Acknowledgments

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This study would not have happened without the participants, their openness with me, and their desire to help future student veterans. Their experiences moved me very much.

As a new parent, I am reminded every day of the nurture, patience, and encouragement I received (and still receive) from my parents. I am forever grateful to them.

Finally, to my dear wife and partner Krista – there are not enough words to express the love and gratitude I have for you. You stuck by me and unconditionally supported me throughout this journey. Thank you.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Thanks to acts of Congress like the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 and its descendants enacted since, veterans have been attending higher education institutions while serving their country or once they complete their military service. Upon their return from a tour of duty, these veterans transition to their new civilian lives, whether still in the service of their country or as they seek to increase their formal education. Since President Obama ordered home all combat troops from Iraq and other foreign lands in 2010, combat troops are returning in larger numbers following deployments with Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) (Obama, 2010). Of those returning, hundreds of thousands of continuing and former troops are taking advantage of their educational benefits. From 2000 to 2010 the number of veterans and benefit eligible family members who took advantage of different veteran educational benefit programs increased from 205,891 to 800,369. That represents a 388% increase (VA, 2000, 2010). What is not clear from surveying recent studies is the number of students who interrupt their university studies to serve their country and subsequently return to school.

Troops who attended college before deployment, along with their non-military classmates, have experienced mental, financial, and familial pressures when transitioning back to college. Though difficult for all returning students, this re-entry to college is likely much more different for returning veterans. Since serving on one or more deployments, they have been socialized into a way of life that is very different from their pre-service lives, both as citizens and as students (Wheeler, 2011). One of the primary
concerns for veterans and those who support them at institutions of higher education is the extent to which they bring back with them psychological and physical problems. Recent research suggests that many veterans suffer from such psychological and physical problems due to experiences during their military service. According to a recent National Academy of Sciences report (2012), 13-20% of OIF and OEF veterans have or may be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (p. xiii). In this context, I am interested in understanding the transition experiences of veterans who, following service to their country, are re-enrolling in college.

**Statement of the Problem**

Colleges and universities have rekindled their interest in serving student veterans returning from foreign and domestic tours of duty. As early as the first Gulf War in the early 1990s, campuses have been faced with the need to accommodate students who are deployed in the middle of an academic term. To facilitate these premature departures, campuses have had to adopt new policies and processes to support their students being deployed on short notice. Since the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11), the federal government has increased its support for returning veterans in the form of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (2008). This legislation has been touted as the most comprehensive GI Bill since the original Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944). In parallel, institutions have enhanced support services for veterans enrolling in their classes. While they have further developed and implemented services to support student veterans, the lack of research dealing specifically with re-enrolling student veterans served as the impetus for this
study. As the number of re-enrolling student veterans continues to grow, it is vital for institutions to understand the needs of this unique population.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe and illuminate the transition experiences of re-enrolling veterans attending a public four-year university located in the Midwest region of the US. This constructivist grounded theory study was limited to a single institution, to individuals who were veterans, and who were re-enrolled at a public four-year university upon their return from active duty. These student veterans may or may not have re-enrolled at the institution where they initially began their postsecondary experiences. While other studies have focused on the experiences of student veterans at public four-year universities, they have not focused on re-enrolling student veterans. In addition, my 22 years of professional and student experiences at public four-year universities built my affinity for studying this type of institution. This study sought to inform college student services staff about this particular group of students and the transition issues they faced. It also sought to enhance faculty awareness of the issues facing their students who are members of this growing population. Through the use of constructivist grounded theory, it sought to provide another example of studies of this population, thereby enhancing the body of knowledge and resources for institutions as they work with this student population.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study require explanation. First, the study’s scope included the transition experiences of re-enrolling student veterans who attended a public four-
year university in the Midwest region of the US. Within this particular context, this study was further limited by the research method used. Given that grounded theory methods were used, the number of respondents interviewed was limited. It was expected that through the recounting of stories through semi-structured, intensive interviews, and by determining the patterns and themes they contained, I was able to use the collected data to represent the diverse experiences of re-enrolling student veterans at a public, four-year university.

**Delimitations**

This study was delimited by excluding respondents from two-year, for-profit, and private postsecondary institutions. Similarly, the study did not include military veterans who were enrolled in a college or university for the first time, as this study’s intent was to explore the transition experiences of re-enrolling student veterans at a public four-year university.

**Significance of Study**

Many studies have chronicled the experiences of student veterans in higher education (Johnson, 2009; Rudd, Goudling, & Bryan, 2011; DiRamio, et al., 2008; Livingston, 2009; Rumann, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). With the number of recent veterans already back from Iraq and Afghanistan and the expected greater numbers yet to return, higher education institutions must ensure they are prepared to serve the growing population of veterans returning to their institutions. Military veterans attending college is not a new phenomenon. Since the end of World War I, veterans have attended college or received some form of postsecondary training upon their return home.
Overall, 48% of World War II veterans received some type of education or training benefit from the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (Department of Veterans Affairs [VA], n.d.). Since then, subsequent GI Bills following the Korean, Vietnam, and first Gulf wars have provided support to veterans in numerous ways, including education benefits. Each version sought to account for a new generation of war veteran, and each was influenced by specific world events and differing administrative and organizational structures of the current federal administration (i.e., reorganization of White House cabinet positions or administrative reporting lines).

In legal terms, all U.S. veteran benefit programs are housed in Title 38 of the U.S. Code. Beneath Title 38, variations of the GI Bill are detailed within a few of the 85 chapters of the law. Chapter 31, for example, provides specific vocational and rehabilitation benefits to veterans who were injured in the line of duty. Chapter 30, on the other hand, comprises the programs of the Montgomery GI Bill. Passed in 1985, it is the immediate predecessor to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which is detailed separately in Chapter 33 of the bill. It is important to note that each of these chapters of the GI Bill are still in effect. Before August 1, 2009, when the Post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect, the education benefits provided by the original GI Bill were unsurpassed. All of the participants in my study were receiving veteran education benefits through either the Post-9/11 GI Bill or through Chapter 31 of Title 38.

For the institutions that admit and support student veterans, this study sought to provide first-hand accounts of the transition experiences of re-enrolling student veterans at a public four-year university. Based on the study’s findings and resultant theory,
faculty and staff at universities will hopefully become better informed and will apply new knowledge when considering ways to enhance their student veteran support programs. In addition, this study sought to provide an additional perspective to the body of knowledge related to this growing population thanks to its emphasis on re-enrolling students at a public four-year university. Lastly, for the student veterans who can ultimately benefit from the enhanced support programs at colleges and universities, this study seeks to provide a consolidated set of voices that capture their experiences and concerns.

**Research Question**

The research question that follows was guided by the purpose of this study, which was to describe the transition experiences of re-enrolling veterans at a public four-year university. Apart from simply asking student veterans what it was like for them to return to school after serving their country, I instead sought to learn in-depth about the issues they faced as re-enrolling veterans, beginning with their decision to join the military. An interview’s purpose is to learn “what is in and on someone else’s mind” (Patton, 2012, p. 341). Depending on the participant, I learned what issues the student veteran faced early on in his or her return to the university – from initial contact with the institution to attending class for the first time after returning to the US. The participants’ stories diverged and converged frequently as the students related their experiences during the in-depth, intensive interviews. Charmaz (2006) stated that, “intensive interviewing permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience” (p. 25). Six of the seven interviews for this study were held in places free from interruption, and this facilitated my ability to learn in-depth what a participant was sharing. Following a constructivist
grounded theory method in this study, an intensive interview generated new knowledge – a new reality – between the researcher and respondent. It was through these in-depth, intensive interviews that rich descriptions of students’ experiences emerged, which will help college student services staff members best learn how re-enrolling student veterans experience the transitions. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following question:

What are the barriers and strategies for resolution that re-enrolling student veterans face in their pre- and post-service transition experiences?

**Method**

Constructivism relies on the co-creation of knowledge between researcher and participant and “aims toward interpretive understanding of subjects’ meanings” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 250). A more detailed and specific explanation will be provided in the third chapter that addresses my role in this study and constructivist grounded theory method.

Using constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006), semi-structured, intensive interviews were conducted with seven participants and with their help, a broader and deeper perspective on student veteran experiences was compiled and viewed through the lens of the researcher. With its roots in a positivist tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), grounded theory research started as a supplication to quantitative researchers who discredited qualitative methods. By applying rigid structures and procedures to a qualitative research method, the hope was to convince quantitative researchers of the value of the qualitative method. While this method permits access to
“firsthand knowledge of empirical worlds” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510), it is also grounded in the constructivist approach by assuming that there are multiple realities to be discovered.

**Definitions**

For the purposes of this study, there are several key terms and concepts that appear throughout it that must be defined.

**Re-enrolling student:** a student who is returning to a college or university after an absence of one or more academic terms.

**Student veteran:** a student who has served in a combat or non-combat role in one of the five branches of the U.S. armed forces – Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, or Coast Guard.

**GI Bill:** reference to one of any of the pieces of federal legislation that provides education and other benefits to military veterans.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Although the higher education literature on veterans’ transition issues does not specifically discuss the transitions faced by re-enrolling student veterans before the early 1990s, the body of literature does provide an excellent background of the evolution of the issues experienced by different generations of student veterans. Such historical perspectives are important for laying a foundation upon which the reader will build an understanding of the transition issues currently faced by returning veterans. Toward this end, in this review of the literature I will first discuss the different types of transitions veterans face upon their return to society. From financial issues, to the particular issues faced by historically marginalized soldiers – the scholarly and mainstream literature is rich with examples of what veterans have experienced after serving their country. Spanning the Civil War to the Persian Gulf War (1861-1995), the transition experiences vary by era, by gender, and by racial/ethnic background of the veteran.

Following the discussion on the different types of transition issues faced by veterans, the review addresses the different types of transition support programs offered to these former soldiers. Varying by era and by provider, the support programs have evolved over time thanks to changes in veterans’ needs, changes in the perceptions of veterans’ needs, and changes in the societal perceptions of veteran soldiers. The literature review concludes with a focus on how researchers have studied veteran transition issues from the perspective of adult transition theory and compared veteran experiences to those of cross-cultural sojourners, connecting veteran transition issues to research and studies of cross-cultural adjustment theory.
Financial Transition Issues

There are several examples that illustrate how veterans experience financial transition issues upon their return to society. Following World War I, most studies of the financial transitions of World War I veterans focus on the poor compensation for their service (Frydl, 2000; Humes, 2006; Ross, 1969; Spaulding, 2000). By comparison, their civilian counterparts earned better wages by capitalizing on the increased manufacturing and other war-related industries that were born out of the war (Humes, 2006). There was considerable debate in Congress over providing any kind of additional compensation to returning war veterans. Proponents argued the additional compensation was deserved, given the poor prospects of employment and the veterans’ significant sacrifices. Opponents argued the additional compensation was noble, but unnecessary and the cost would put the country into debt. In the end, Congress overrode a presidential veto to approve different packages and programs for these men - mostly in the form of a 20-year insurance policy (Ross, 1969). The World War Adjusted Compensation Act of 1924, also known as the Bonus Bill, provided for this insurance policy. The policies were issued on the veteran’s birthday during all of 1925. They were scheduled to reach maturity in 1945 and payable in full to the veteran or to his estate (Ross, 1969).

With the advent of the great depression in 1929, veterans (along with many other Americans) were trying to eke out a living and demanded the government pay out the value of their insurance plan immediately and not upon it reaching maturity in 1945. Due to protests and marches on the capital and beyond, the government finally relented and passed the Adjusted Compensation Payment Act in 1936, but only after overriding
President Roosevelt’s veto of the same bill. The bill’s passage into law permitted veterans to cash their insurance certificates at any time. In June 1936 alone, 46% of the allocated bonuses had been paid out to veterans. The bonuses served as a de facto stimulus package for the ailing economy (Tesler, 2003) and provided an example for future debates about veteran benefits.

Based on lessons learned after World War I, the U.S. government started preparing in 1942 for the eventual return of millions of servicemen following World War II. Predictions of mass unemployment and poverty bolstered the government’s efforts to prepare properly (White, 2004, p. 83). The GI Bill, formally known as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, prevented economic catastrophe for the US. Instead of attempting (and failing) to join the labor market upon their return, veterans were enticed to utilize financial assistance programs offered by the Bill. At the time, the Veterans Administration offered $500 per year for tuition and up to $50 per month for living expenses. These financial assistance programs for tuition are examples of how the US worked to ease some vocational and educational transition issues experienced by veterans. The next section discusses these types of transition issues in more detail.

**Legislation of Benefits**

During the post-war eras of the 20th century, the U.S. government developed programs to address the vocational and educational transitions experienced by returning soldiers. Some of the earliest literary examples come from the post-World War I era. The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918 was a benefit program started after World War I, and it "introduced vocational rehabilitation training to honorably discharged
veterans with disabilities" (Madaus, Miller, & Vance, 2009, p. 11). This same act also fostered the formation of state-level vocational rehabilitation agencies under the auspices of the Federal Board for Vocational Education. Even so, the vague language of the act made it difficult for all but individuals with the most severe disabilities to take advantage of the rehabilitation services. Education benefits were typically trade-related, while some involved agricultural education. According to the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, any veteran who had already attended college was eligible to receive educational benefits. Although significant at the time, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918 plays a minor role in the history of veteran-related benefit legislation during the 20th and 21st centuries.

You must look to the original GI Bill as the one that changed the face of veteran education benefits. Passed in 1944, its educational programs were unprecedented at the time for their scope. By 1947, student veterans comprised 47% of all admissions to colleges or universities and, in total, 48% of all World War II veterans received some time of educational or vocational training benefit from this legislation (VA, n.d.).

Although the first GI Bill established unprecedented educational (and other) benefits for veterans, subsequent GI Bills following the Korean conflict and the Vietnam War did not reach the same levels of benefits. The Vietnam War veterans attending college, however, were the first such group of war veterans to be recognized as a special student population (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Unfortunately, the main reason Vietnam war veterans received so much attention, both positive and negative, was because of the unpopularity of the war and because colleges were busy trying to quell unrest within their campuses. Hascall (1970) provides several examples of how
institutions were trying to exert control over their students, while students were simultaneously rebelling against the lack of power they held within the administration of the institution. Authors like Peterson (1968) noted the struggle for control over policies and procedures that affected students directly. At the same time, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) officials were working hard to help this new kind of veteran successfully return to life stateside (Stephens & Stenger, 1972).

**Transition Issues Since World War II**

Rumann (2010) stated that most of the literature from the World War II era focused on the academic performance of veterans who took advantage of their educational benefits from the GI Bill (formally known as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944). Citing several authors, Rumann reviewed how colleges and universities prepared for the influx of World War II veterans, both in terms of capacity, but also in terms of managing veterans’ expectations. Upon their return, it was anticipated that veterans would seek academic credit for military service, flexible admission standards, and even heavier course loads to make up for lost time.

All the same, Hadley (1945) reported on the *academic* transitions faced by veterans returning to or enrolling for the first time at the Ohio State University. His mixed methods study of 22 student veterans tracked their journeys through an academic success laboratory class designed to rekindle study skills and reaffirm the veteran’s ability to succeed academically. Hadley’s study sought to answer questions like, “What are the problems [the returning veterans] have?” and “Does their added maturity mean anything?” (p. 87). As the description of the class implied, its purpose was to improve
students’ study habits. Hadley detailed several themes from the students interviewed. For example, students reported a desire to do well in college and complete their studies quickly. They set goals for themselves that often exceeded their academic achievements from secondary school. Lastly, they accepted suggestions and assistance from others, which was a surprising finding according to Hadley.

Hadley (1945) also administered the Ohio State Psychological Examination to the students in his academic success laboratory class and sought to categorize the scholastic and social issues they faced most often. These student veterans commonly reported feeling inferior or feeling a lack of confidence when walking around campus out of uniform. They also reported a lack of confidence in their cognitive abilities. Hadley (1945) also found from his study that students often felt out of place and reported difficulties identifying with classmates, given they were typically older and had experienced dramatic, life-changing events while serving in the military. Comparing some of the quotes from Hadley’s (1945) work to those expressed by today’s returning veterans, there are similarities. For example, one of Hadley’s respondents said, “As long as I have on my uniform, everything is O.K., but when I change into [civilian clothes], gosh, I don’t know what to make of it!” (p. 89). This conflict between a student veteran’s military self and civilian self also emerged from my conversations with respondents. What helped this particular student and others among Hadley’s (1945) group of respondents is their appreciation for the one-on-one attention that helped them through the transition. The effect of one-on-one attention was affirmed in a subsequent study of World War II veterans enrolled in a study skills and adjustment class (Kinzer, 1946).
Kinzer explained that thanks to a combination of multiple interviews with a counselor and effective study skills, a veteran’s adjustment to and performance in college was improved.

Edward Humes (2006) is another example of a scholar who studied the post-World War II transitions of its veterans. Using a mix of history, document analysis, and personal interviews, he chronicled the pre- and post-war lives of 10 different World War II veterans, not all of who attended college after serving in the military. Humes described the process these individuals went through when first deciding whether or not they should join the military and followed them through to their return and post-war transitional paths. He interspersed the veterans’ stories with the history of the development and eventual passing of the original GI Bill, and included different perspectives on the efficacy of the bill. His praise for the education and home loan benefits of the original GI Bill were tempered by his frustration with its racial and gender-based inequities. The personal interviews include details about the transition issues the veterans faced, regardless of their path after the military. Here is one way Humes (2006) characterized the transitions of one of his respondents and referenced the original GI Bill in the process:

The GI Bill’s official title included the phrase “servicemen’s readjustment.” That was the euphemism for how [the respondent] and millions of other veterans had to get reacquainted with civilian clothes and not using four-letter words as casual greetings or not ducked and covered every time something dropped or crashed or backfired. (pp. 283-284)
Unlike the massive influx of veterans returning from World War II, the more gradual return of Vietnam War veterans stateside permitted both the VA and other support systems in the US to better prepare.

Stephens and Stenger (1972) sought to spur the higher education community into action by drawing comparisons between college students and returning veterans. Of particular note was their explanation of how student veterans had participated in and/or witnessed acts of war and the resulting emotional conflict within the student veteran. According to Stephens and Stenger (1972), these war acts set them apart from both their generational peers who did not serve, and from their ancestors who served in World War II. Those differences, coupled with the unpopularity of the Vietnam War, proved a strong breeding ground for mistrust between the Vietnam veterans and the institutions designed to support them. Stephens and Stenger (1972) also reported that feelings of alienation were the prevailing sentiment among Vietnam veterans.

Serving in the military, either by voluntary enlistment or entering by conscription was seen as a way to get ahead for those without many (if any) other prospects in life. Egendorf, Kadushin, Laufer, Rothbart, and Sloan (1981) wrote that many Vietnam War veterans were disadvantaged from the start in terms of their educational and other background characteristics. Most came from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or working class backgrounds – places that do not traditionally support further education (p. 138). In addition, Vietnam veterans were far less likely to have an education beyond high school level. Thanks to how educational deferments were broadly distributed to
college-bound, age-eligible men, the socio-economic disparity had the opportunity to increase between the haves and the have-nots.

The next significant educational transition program offered by the U.S. government was the Montgomery GI Bill or the All-Volunteer Force Educational Assistance Program (1985). Detailed in 38 USC Chapter 30, it was named for its U.S. Senate champion, Gillespie “Sonny” Montgomery. Passed in 1984 and made available to men and women who served on active duty after July 30, 1985, it offered more vocational and educational transition assistance than previous bills. However, it required military personnel to opt in by contributing $100 per month from their first year of salary. As noted in the bill, two of its purposes were “to give special emphasis to providing educational assistance benefits to aid in the retention of personnel in the Armed Forces; and to enhance our Nation’s competitiveness through the development of a more highly educated and productive work force” (All-Volunteer Force Educational Assistance Program, 1984, § 3001).

The transitions back to campus for Gulf War veterans have been chronicled in several publications. Johnson (2009) discussed Appalachian State University’s successful work with veterans since the start of the Gulf War. Comprising both Desert Shield and Desert Storm, those military campaigns served as the first time Johnson’s institution had experienced significant numbers of military call-ups and, thus, institutional withdrawals. Appalachian State University quickly implemented policies and practices to minimize the effects on students as they transitioned to become soldiers. At the onset, tuition refunds and non-punitive withdrawals were granted to students who
received orders for deployment. Depending on the course and the point of withdrawal, called-up students worked with faculty to take final exams early, received an incomplete grade, or made arrangements to complete their courses while away from campus. Depending on the situation, Johnson (2009) described e-mail and other Internet-based exchanges between student and faculty as the most common option chosen. Advisors and the institution kept in touch with the students where possible through email messages, newsletters, and notes of encouragement. One goal of these efforts was to maintain the connection between soon-to-be-veterans and *alma mater*. Another goal was to facilitate the one-day return of the student soldier and ease his or her adjustment back to civilian and student life.

What may amount to the most influential GI Bill since the original, especially in terms of vocational and educational opportunities, the Post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect on August 1, 2009. It was touted as “the largest investment in veterans’ education since World War II” (Iraq Afghanistan Veterans of America, 2012, para. 1). With this legislation, veterans who are either discharged from service with a duty-related injury or illness or who have served for 36 cumulative months, may attend any public college or university in their home state, pay no tuition or textbook costs, and receive a monthly living allowance based on their address. In addition, there is a clause that permits a service member to transfer his or her education benefits to a spouse or a child. While there are stipulations to take advantage of this clause, it is a significant benefit for the men and women who serve in the military (Iraq Afghanistan Veterans of America, 2012).
Beyond the vocational and educational transition issues and support systems that veterans encounter, there are certainly mental and physical health issues that they face. This next section discusses the academic and historical literature related to mental and physical issues veterans can face.

**Mental and Physical Health Transition Issues**

Horan (1990) provided a compelling account of how Vietnam veterans needed to overcome much more than academic issues when they entered or returned to college after serving their country. Stephens and Stenger’s (1972) descriptions of beneficial VA programs and outreach efforts do not coincide with their reported lack of efficacy. Horan’s (1990) account of the Vietnam veterans’ transitions to college life is in sharp contrast. Unlike their World War II counterparts, who were lauded upon their return and labeled good warriors, the Vietnam veterans were labeled deviants and baby killers. Horan (1990) contends colleges and universities did not pursue these veterans like they did after World War II. Those who did attend college struggled to succeed and avoid alienation from anti-war classmates, faculty, and staff.

To help prepare a Vietnam veteran for his homecoming, the U.S. government required soldiers to complete an adjustment program before leaving Vietnam. According to Stephens and Stenger (1972), in contrast to earlier service models where the VA would wait for a veteran to approach them, a new service model was deployed in 1967 and it served to *reach out* to the veteran. Programs were launched in Vietnam to prepare the veteran for the return stateside – programs that provided counseling and advice about the resources and benefits available to them upon their return (Stephens & Stenger, 1972).
After returning home, the outreach efforts continued through letters from the VA to the veteran – reminding them of the benefits available and how to take advantage of them.

In the same vein, Horan (1991) explained that college outreach efforts for special populations like the Vietnam War veteran improved in the 1980s. All the same, Camacho (1980) referred to students who had served in the Vietnam War as misfits – people who were treated with disregard or worse, disrespect. Camacho (1980) retold one story of a Vietnam veteran’s experience that epitomized what could occur on a college campus: “…a totally blind veteran, well known to the administration, late for registration, was asked by a secretary in an admonishing tone of voice, ‘Why, didn’t you see the posters all over the campus?’” (p. 271). This was one example of several that Camacho provided to support the notion that Vietnam War veterans were not treated well in colleges and universities up on their return. Horan (1991), a two-tour Vietnam veteran himself, likened a Vietnam veteran’s returnee experience to that of going from a real foxhole in country to a mental foxhole back in the US (p. 30). Little transition assistance was provided – veterans had less than one week in some cases to go from military personnel to civilian life. Regardless of the length of time between leaving service and returning home, support structures and society were slow to reach out to these veterans. They were also ill prepared for the anti-war sentiment upon their return.

Faulkner and McGaw (1977) also characterized a Vietnam veteran’s returning home as devoid of a transition period. In interviews with 20 Vietnam and Vietnam Era veterans attending college, the authors learned about the lack of transition assistance given to veterans. Faulkner and McGaw (1977) also compared the transition experiences
among those who became civilians upon their return to the US and those who entered civilian life after additional service stateside. They also described three stages of homecoming that a Vietnam veteran experiences, equating the homecoming as a status passage (Glaser & Strauss, 1971). The three stages as described by Glaser and Strauss are moving from the war world, moving back into “The World,” and moving toward readintegration. In the first stage, moving from the war world, the veteran attempts to leave a significant aspect of his or her life to date, leaving a realm where violence, hate, and apprehension are the norm. Within the next stage, moving back into The World, the veteran experiences detachment from what used to be familiar thanks to an inability to express what happened overseas, a lack of acceptance by his or her home culture, and the change to a life where war-like behavior is shunned. The final stage, moving toward readintegration, is the stage in which the veteran begins to acknowledge his or her past, while forging new connections, habits, and a life stateside (Faulkner & McGaw, 1977, p. 306).

Although the literature is limited when it comes to describing the transition experiences of military veterans in a vocational or educational setting, it is clear that people serving in the military experienced significant transition issues when returning stateside, including but not limited to various degrees of mental health issues (Bliese & Stuart, 1998; Foster & Vince, 2009; Hammelman, 1995; NIH Technical Assessment, 1994; Spaulding, 2000). These mental health issues likely have an effect on veteran’s ability to readjust to college and campus life. Bliese and Stuart’s (1998) research found that 32% of men and 35% of women in the reserves showed signs of significant distress.
Their study was unique at the time, in that it looked at the long-term effects of activation and service for reservists in Operation Desert Storm (p. 17). Hammelman (1995) also studied the stressor experiences of Gulf War veterans. She concluded that married soldiers suffer more stressors than single soldiers, while lower ranking soldiers and their families suffered fewer stressors than their higher-ranked counterparts.

For those who served in either Operation Desert Shield or Operation Desert Storm, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) concluded that “the complex biological, chemical, physical, and psychological environment of the Persian Gulf” contributed to veterans experiencing a wide range of adverse health issues (1994, p. 18). The NIH Technical Assessment reported that, while no single disease was evident, reported symptoms and illnesses made it clear that more research was needed and that veterans and their families had suffered.

Long before the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, soldiers have had to cope with many types of events that affect their ability to return to civilian life. Authors, researchers, and veterans themselves have chronicled these events. Talbott (1997), for example, details how soldiers from ancient wars to the present day have and do suffer from an affliction with many names, depending on the era: “reenactments,” “flashbacks,” “shellshock,” “post-traumatic stress disorder” (p. 437). During World War I, soldiers dealt with new types of warfare and armaments (trench and chemical warfare, machine guns, tanks, and aerial attacks) and as veterans, they had difficulty adjusting back to civilian life (Spaulding, 2000). The concept of flashbacks rings true in an excerpt from Heinemann’s (1998) fictionalized story of Paco, a permanently disabled soldier from the
Vietnam War. The author explains in vivid detail this veteran’s experiences with flashbacks. Paco is eking out an existence as a dishwasher and cannot sleep through the night thanks to memories of the explosion that disabled him and the atrocities committed by his company in a local village. In the prologue for a separate book, Heinemann (Slabey, 1996) described Vietnam veterans-cum-civilians as people with a “hard, shrunken, hollowed-out look” that “took people aback” (p. 12).

One outcome of the GI Improvement Act of 1977 was a commissioned report that detailed the adjustment experiences of Vietnam War and Vietnam Era veterans (Egendorf et al., 1981). The report provided a much-needed chronicle of the effects on its combat and enlisted soldiers. The authors collected data from interviews with over 1,000 Vietnam War and Vietnam Era veterans and devoted three volumes of the five-volume report to particular adjustment areas: 1) education and careers, 2) social and psychological problems, and 3) long term stress reactions. Overall, the report concluded that Vietnam War veterans were behind in their educational and occupational achievement, suffering from social and psychological problems at a higher rate than their non-serving peers or even higher than Era veterans, and 10-plus years on, they were dealing with post-traumatic stressors that served to exacerbate the other adjustment issues.

In a more recent study of a national sample of student veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) or Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Rudd, Goulding, and Bryan (2011) investigated issues such as emotional adjustment and suicide risk. Their findings, while alarming, were not surprising. Findings from the study were
consistent with findings from a previous study conducted by the Department of Defense (2010), with regard to suicide risk and emotional adjustment. Compared to when these young men and women first went off to serve, the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and general psychological symptoms are far above the regular university student and were higher than the veteran population as a whole. Of those who participated in Rudd, Goulding, and Bryan’s study, almost 46% suffered from severe PTSD (2011, p. 354). The authors warned that the expected influx of student veterans on U.S. college campuses could easily overwhelm mental health professionals.

Suicide prevention was the main theme of the Department of Defense (DoD) task force report released in 2010. Spurred by the reauthorization of the National Defense Authorization Act in 2009, the DoD was charged with providing details of what the branches of the military were doing at the time and what they proposed in the future to support service members and prevent suicides. At that time, more than 1.9 million service members had been deployed overseas to serve in OIF or OEF. The report emphasized the psychological and physical demands that any amount of service can place on a person. Thanks to multiple deployments and shorter time periods between deployments, service members were (and are) experiencing even greater demands on their well being. As a result, the rates of suicide and unsuccessful attempts at suicide have increased dramatically since 2002 (Department of Defense [DOD], 2010, p. 15). Within all branches of the military, between 2005 and 2009, over 1,100 service members committed suicide. The Army saw the greatest increase in suicide rates over this period as their rates doubled over the preceding five-year period (DOD, 2010).
Now that several different types of veteran transition issues have been discussed, it is important to ensure the reader understands the diverse make-up of the armed forces and the particular transition issues faced by historically marginalized soldiers.

**Diverse Veteran Populations and Their Experiences**

While most of the literature discussed thus far has covered the generalities of vocational and education transitions, as well as the mental and physical health transitions of veterans, it is important to include experiences of some of the historically marginalized soldiers who have served in the U.S. armed forces.

Dating back to the Revolutionary War, African Americans have served in their nation’s military. In the American Revolution alone, over 5000 black men served in the Continental Army (The Revolutionary War, n.d.). Native Americans also served during this time, and during the War of 1812 (Naval History & Heritage Command, n.d.). Even during the Civil War, freed slaves served the Union Army. Following Union campaigns into Confederate states, freed slaves joined the Union soldiers to fight and gain a chance at freedom. The U.S. Army estimates that 186,000 black soldiers served in the Union Army during the Civil War (African-Americans in the U.S. Army, n.d.). Native Americans also served during the Civil War period and were utilized heavily for their scouting skills (Naval History & Heritage Command, n.d.).

Beginning with the Selective Draft Act in 1917 (Evans, 2003), the diversity of the military increased again, this time thanks to immigrants to the U.S. and Native American draftees. Between 1880 and 1920, the US welcomed 23 million immigrants, 500,000 of whom were drafted to serve in the First World War (Evans, 2003). These immigrant
soldiers served in the most diverse U.S. military to date, along with 12,000 Native Americans (Naval History & Heritage Command, n.d.), and several thousand African Americans (African-Americans in the U.S. Army, n.d.). World War II saw another upsurge in the diversity of soldiers serving in the military: the 99th Pursuit Squadron, better known as the Tuskegee Airmen (a hugely successful, all-African-American fighter squadron); the 6888th Central Postal Battalion (the first all-black, Women’s Army Corps unit to serve overseas) (African-Americans in the U.S. Army, n.d.); the 442nd Infantry Regiment, the largest Japanese-American unit to serve in the European theater (A People at War, n.d.); and the Codetalkers, an uncompromised Marine Corps communication effort using Navajo Indians as radiomen (A People at War, n.d.). All of these earlier wartime examples demonstrate the diversity of the armed forces and provide a glimpse into the camaraderie engendered by serving. Even so, an integrated fighting force was not formally proclaimed until President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948. The order mandated there be “equality of treatment and opportunity for all person in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin” (U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2012, para. 3). It is important to note that Truman’s executive order did not provide for the equal treatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT) soldiers serving their country. The historical literature about GLBT soldiers’ service in the military is often limited to discussions about legislative issues and military policy. Thus, it is not included in this review focused on veteran transitions.
Although the military became integrated in 1948, there has been a heavy price paid by the men and women of color. Studies show that veterans of color experience more psychological trauma and have a much higher incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than white soldiers (Loo, 2007). Analyzing data from the 1990 National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study, Loo (2007) explained that because soldiers of color experienced more war-related stressors in the line of duty than their white counterparts, they were more susceptible to PTSD. In addition, Loo explained that, “race-related stressors and personal experiences of racial prejudice or stigmatization” contribute significantly to a veteran of color’s chance of experiencing PTSD (Loo, 2007, para. 11). As a clinician with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Loo (2007) advocated for more focused recruitment of culturally diverse and culturally sensitive mental health clinicians.

The VA bears responsibility for the transition support of U.S. military veterans. Its programs have evolved over the course of its existence, thanks to lessons learned and the results of many research studies over the years. Since World War II and continuing through today, the VA has provided different support programs to veterans. To help set the stage for the rest of this study focused on the pre- and post-transition experiences of re-enrolling veterans, the next section will discuss the evolution of government and military-provided transition support programs for veterans.

**Transition Support**

In addition to the veteran support legislation previously discussed, the government and VA have implemented other programs over the past 100 years. Just
before the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (the original GI Bill), public law 16 was passed by the 78th congress on March 28, 1943. This law provided services to qualified, disabled World War II veterans to help restore their employability. Administered by the VA, 621,000 disabled veterans took advantage of these services (Crane, Scott, & Davis, 2008). Today, the Vocational, Rehabilitation and Employment arm of the VA has transformed into a comprehensive website, VetSuccess.gov. By providing job listings, an online military skill translator, and a centralized source for injured or permanently disabled veterans, the VA strives to help the men and women who served their country.

As discussed in the previous section, World War I soldiers were more diverse than in previous campaigns, thanks mostly to conscription, which swelled the ranks with a large immigrant population. Evans (2003) explained these immigrant, non-English-speaking, or sometimes functionally illiterate soldiers required additional assistance. Of the 500,000 immigrants who were drafted, nearly 75% lacked English proficiency (Evans, 2003, p. 20). The military developed programs to accommodate this prevalent characteristic, just as it had updated its perspective in wars past when welcoming African Americans and Native Americans to its ranks. In this case, the Foreign-speaking Soldier Subsection was born (Evans, 2003). By combining intensive English instruction with military drills and training, platoons of different ethnic origins were soon fighting along side and interspersed with non-immigrant platoons.

Additional evidence of the evolution of government or military-initiated support systems manifests itself as transition assistance programs. Branches of the military such
as the Army and the Marines have their own named transition program (The Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP) and the Transition Assistant Management Program (TAMP), respectively). The Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard jointly run their transition program, called the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). Regardless of the branch, men and women in the military are required to go through a pre-separation transition process before they leave military service. The basis for this requirement is a Department of Defense policy enacted in 1991 (Transition Assistance for Military Personnel, 2011). Thanks to the National Defense Authorization Act (1991), the armed forces must provide pre-separation counseling to military personnel near the end of their service. Specifically, the process begins 18-24 months before the scheduled separation – 24 months for those retiring from service and 18 months for those simply separating from service. The transition assistance programs of the Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard have five components, not all of which a pre-separating service person seeks or needs:

1. Pre-separation counseling – for deployed service members who seek to retire or simply separate from service. This occurs before a soldier’s return home;
2. The Department of Labor’s own Transition Assistance Program that provides employment workshops for soldiers;
3. Veterans Benefits Briefings (facilitated and conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs);
4. For disabled service members or already-discharged soldiers, there is a disabled transition program (DTAP), also facilitated and sponsored by Department of Veterans Affairs;
5. Personalized coaching throughout the process and through military service installations around the world (DOD, 2012, p. 1).

**Transition Theories and Cultural Adjustment Theories**

Beyond the transition issues described following periods of war and the mental and physical health issues studied, there are two main transition theories that have been used in the research of veterans returning to college and to society. Several studies have used Nancy Schlossberg’s adult transition theory (1984) as a framework for their research on student veterans (examples: DiRamio, et al., 2008; Livingston, 2009; Rumann, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Other researchers have used cross-cultural adjustment theories as a framework for their research on student veterans (examples: American Council on Education, 2008; Branker, 2009; DOD, 2010). Both approaches are valuable and provide different perspectives on the veterans’ experiences as they return to civilian life and to college.

Based on Schlossberg’s theory’s definition of a transition -“any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012, p. 39) - it is appropriate to employ this theory to explore the transition experiences of student veterans. A person's ability to deal with and move through a transition is directly related to the extent of the change and the effects of one or more of Schlossberg’s coping resources – the four S’s: situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012, p. 61).

Rumann (2010) used Schlossberg’s (1984) theory as the basis for work on the transition experiences of student veterans re-enrolling at two community colleges. Both
research sites were large, urban community colleges in the Midwest. Each institution annually enrolled over 22,000 students. Using a qualitative method and working with the veteran affairs certifying official at each institution, Rumann interviewed six student veterans who re-enrolled and had served in combat within the previous eight years. The veterans were National Guard or Reserve service members, represented both genders, and were of mixed ages. Livingston (2009) also used Schlossberg’s theory of adult transitions to formulate his interview questions when speaking with student veterans about their re-enrollment experiences at a public, four-year land-grant university in the southeastern US. He also learned about their experiences working with university staff that served them. In the end, these five categories emerged from Livingston’s (2009) work. The first theme, military influence, highlights the long-term effects of military service on the student veteran’s life. Embedded in the training received and discipline engendered by that training, a student veteran can be conditioned to respond confidently to day-to-day tasks as if he or she were still in the military. Academic success and difficulty relating to classmates also accompanies this theme.

The second theme, invisibility, shows how student veterans are less likely to disclose their past to others and less likely to be involved in campus-based activities. This theme also manifests itself in how a student veteran shies away from receiving focused attention or assistance when working through an issue on or off campus. Pride in their military service set them apart from the campus in one sense. A different set of priorities, when compared to their non-military classmates, provided another division that promoted a desire for invisibility.
Support is the third theme that emerged from Livingston’s research. It comprises both social and academic support that a student veteran uses. In his study, Livingston found that student veterans sought social support structures more easily than academic support structures. Social support came from fellow veterans, family, employment, and student organizations. Pride and individuality negatively affected a student veteran’s willingness to utilize academic support structures.

The fourth theme, campus culture, includes events that promote veteran awareness. It also includes the veterans’ perceptions of faculty members’ helpfulness and campus community members’ perceptions of veterans. In general, faculty members were viewed as helpful and empathetic, while students and staff were seen as unhelpful.

Livingston’s fifth and final theme, navigating re-enrollment, captures the veteran’s adaptation from military to academic life and the financial issues involved. Livingston characterized this theme as a very individual experience. Depending on the veteran, friends from their earlier enrollment in college may have moved on or depending on the program of study, the veteran may need more academic support than expected.

In addition to adult transition theories being used to study the transitions to school and home life for student veterans, cross-cultural adjustment theories are also found in literature related to student veteran transitions. Specifically, the topic of acculturation emerges several times in the literature about veteran transitions (ACE, 2009; Branker, 2009; DOD, 2010). Acculturation can manifest itself in at least two ways for student veterans. Upon entry to the military, a person will adapt to the cultural norms and actions of his or her new cultural home. When this same person returns from service and re-
enrolls in a university, a new phase of acculturation ensues, whereby the student veteran attempts to adapt to the cultural norms and actions of the university, his or her peer group, and home life.

Gudykunst and Kim (2003), for example, discuss cross-cultural adaptation and acculturation synonymously. The process of re-adapting to a home culture after a stint abroad can be difficult. Acculturation processes involve conflict and the experiences will vary in intensity from person to person. Some conflicts emerge thanks to changes that occurred at home while the person was away – changes that often invoke a secondary process called deculturation (p. 359). Deculturation, or the process of unlearning habits and behaviors acquired previously, is intertwined with acculturation. The two processes push and pull at a person during the cross-cultural adaptation process. Theoretically, the process concludes when the person reaches assimilation, or “the highest degree of adaptation” (p. 360). In most cases, people lie somewhere on a cultural adjustment continuum while acculturation and deculturation vie for the stronger foothold.

**Conclusion**

Although some of the issues faced by today’s student veteran are similar to those faced by veterans of past military campaigns, the unique experiences of the respondents in this study added depth and breadth to those earlier perspectives. Authors provided glimpses of the issues faced by veterans in general during past military campaigns. This literature review provided a thematic look at transition issues veterans experience. Whatever financial, vocational, and/or educational transitions they encounter upon their return, or the mental or physical injuries they face during or after service, the transition
issues are clear and can significantly affect a veteran’s ability to return to civilian life. This review continued with a discussion of the service and unique experiences of soldiers from historically marginalized backgrounds. Finally, the literature review concluded with a discussion of current-day transition assistance programs offered by the armed forces, as well as the perspective of adult transition and cultural adjustment theories and how they have been used to study the transition experiences of veterans. The literature review provides the foundation for this study – exploring the transition issues of student veterans re-enrolling at a public four-year university. In the following chapter, I lay out the proposed method for this qualitative study focusing on students re-enrolling at a public, four-year university following a period of service in the military. The reason for studying this type of student at this type of university is a result of little research found that describes the transition experiences of re-enrolling student veterans at this kind of postsecondary institution.
**Chapter 3: Method**

The purpose of this study was to describe and illuminate the transition experiences of veterans re-enrolling at a public four-year university. Included in this study were only those students who were veterans and who re-enrolled in a public four-year institution upon their return. These student veterans may or may not have re-enrolled at their original institution of study. Through semi-structured, intensive interviews with each respondent, the study sought to develop findings that will hopefully be effective in their ability to better inform college student services staff about this particular group of students and the transition issues they faced. It also sought to enhance faculty awareness of the issues that this important student population encounters. The qualitative research also sought to open the door for future studies, enhancing the body of knowledge and resources for institutions as they work with this student population.

As described in Chapter One, the research question for this study was: What are the barriers and strategies for resolution that re-enrolling student veterans face in their pre- and post-service transition experiences?

I employed grounded theory methods to answer this question and to provide future researchers a base from which to launch new inquiries into the needs and issues facing student veterans or to elaborate upon the experiences documented in this study.

**Methods**

This study was founded on the constructivist paradigm – “a long-established worldview” that “has meaning and understanding as its end goals” (Stage & Manning, 2003, p. 20). Through semi-structured, intensive interviews with respondents, this study
followed the constructivist paradigm by attempting to ground the results in the data – that is, in the information gathered during the interviews. The results were also grounded in the research setting – that is, a public, four-year University in the Midwest. In addition to the interview data, the results included my subsequent interpretation of the interview data and in the respondents’ validation and feedback about that interpretation. To help describe in more detail some aspects of a constructivist paradigm and how such research takes place, here are several characteristics that Stage and Manning (2003) assert are evident when approaching research in this way.

One of Stage and Manning’s (2003) characteristics of a constructivist paradigm is that there are multiple possible realities that may result from the research. For each respondent in this study of re-enrolling student veterans, there was a unique combination of past life experiences that affected not only how he or she made the transition from the military back to school, but also what he or she said about that experience. Further, those re-told experiences were filtered through my interpretation and were coupled with my own unique background and life experiences. As a result, the respondents and I co-constructed a new reality of what occurred for each student veteran.

A second characteristic that Stage and Manning (2003) observe in their book is the inquirer-respondent relationship. Here, it is important to note that my personal perspective had an effect on the final outcome of the research, given my interpretive influence on the final write-up of the research and the interactions I had with the respondents.
A final example of Stage and Manning’s (2003) characteristics of a constructivist paradigm is the role that values play in the study. Because a human component was at the core of this study and was interwoven with the research, my values played a significant role throughout it. Beyond their effect on the interpretation and write-up of study, my values affected things such as respondent selection (did I show favoritism toward a person who responded quickly to my invitation to participate in the study?) and my reactions during the interview when a respondent shared very painful and personal memories of his or her service.

Although there is little research on the transition experiences of re-enrolling veterans at a college or university, there have been several studies about different aspects related to veterans attending postsecondary institutions. Bauman (2009) and DiRamio et al. (2008) conducted their respective studies of more recent student veterans across multiple college and university campuses. In contrast, Livingston (2009) and Ruman (2010) studied student veterans at single institutions. Horan (1990), Joanning (1975), and Teachman (2005) each studied the experiences of Vietnam War veterans. In some cases (e.g., Bauman, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Horan, 1990; Livingston, 2009), researchers have used qualitative methods to get at details available only through interviews or by corresponding with select respondents. In his study of student veterans attending two community colleges in the Midwest, Rumann (2010) conducted in-depth interviews with six student veterans and learned more about their transition experiences. Livingston (2009) used grounded theory methods to discover the academic and social experiences of student veterans at a public, land grant, four-year university in the southeastern US. In
the end of his study, Livingston lays out five themes that described and played a role in a student veteran’s re-enrollment: military influence, support, campus culture, and navigating re-enrollment (p. 169).

Qualitative Strategy

Grounded theory was employed as the qualitative strategy for this study. Grounded theory’s rich history started with sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. Their work, The Discovery of Grounded Theory (1967), set the stage for future qualitative researchers, giving these researchers guidance and support to use this strategy. The basis for their discovery of Grounded Theory lies in Glaser and Strauss’ “systematic methodological strategies” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 4) developed while researching the experiences of dying hospital patients. Those strategies, although based in qualitative analysis, were used to great effect to produce new theory and they permitted social scientists after them to do the same.

Grounded theory methods have appeal for a quantitative researcher, thanks to their structure such as, “constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses,” “advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis,” and “conducting the literature review after developing an independent analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 5-6). Critics of qualitative strategies can identify with these facets. At the same time, the flexible framework of grounded theory methods permits many different types of data to be collected, interpreted, and analyzed by the ardent qualitative researcher. These data types include intensive interviews, ethnography, and textual analysis.
I used grounded theory methods in this study and took advantage of their benefits when compared with other qualitative methods. First, by using grounded theory, I enhanced an already flexible methodological framework for this study. Compared to quantitative methods, a key feature of qualitative studies is their ability to adjust with the uniqueness of respondents or documents or artifacts being studied. Grounded theory extends that flexibility, while permitting the researcher to focus on the most important aspects of the subject being studied (Charmaz, 2006).

Using grounded theory in this study permitted me to have “simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5). In this study, interviews were analyzed upon transcription, instead of waiting until all interviews were conducted. In this way, I was able to adjust the foci of the study as it progressed and in time for follow-up exchanges with the same respondent, or an interview with a new respondent.

As Charmaz (2006) points out, “grounded theory serves as a way to learn about the worlds we study and a method for developing theories to understand them” (p. 10). For instance, in his study of re-enrolling student veterans at two community colleges, Livingston (2009) conducted single, in-depth interviews with 15 student veterans and proposed the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model to explain the issues they faced with the transition from military service back to live in the US and back to higher education. Another qualitative study that used grounded theory methods for this important population was by DiRamio et al. (2008). Conducting single interviews with a purposeful sample of 25 students from three research institutions from across the
US, the authors focused on speaking with students who had more recently returned from active duty. Their analysis produced a conceptual framework that invoked an adult transition model by Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering called “Moving in, Moving through, Moving out” (1989). The study concluded that student veterans need a holistic approach when it came to helping them through the many different transitions they were experiencing. Although the studies of Livingston (2009) and DiRamio et al. (2008) differed in terms of the number of respondents interviewed, both studies provided practical guidance for institutions seeking to best serve student veterans.

**Sampling Methods**

The specific selection criteria required for this study’s participants warranted the use of criterion sampling. Criterion sampling involves choosing participants based on specific criteria (in this case, military veterans who re-enrolled at a public four-year university) (Patton, 2012). As determined by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, a student’s veteran status is not deemed public information by the institution. Thus, alternative participant recruitment efforts were used. After Institutional Review Board approval, a full time staff member responsible for supporting student veteran initiatives sent an email message of introduction to the over 550 veteran benefit eligible students enrolled during the fall 2012-13 academic term. The introductory message included a brief synopsis of the study and its purpose, and it asked some initial screening questions to confirm the recipient’s eligibility. That is, the prospective participants were asked if they were military veterans and not simply student members of the organization and whether they were attending a university before being deployed.
(thus, they re-enrolled upon their return). These screening questions were important, as not all veteran benefit-eligible students are military veterans or members of the military. Some receive their education benefits by virtue of being the son or daughter of a parent who served in the military. In addition to collecting information about potential participants’ service records, gender, age, and year in school were also collected. Collecting such information was intended to ensure a diverse sample. Lastly, the introductory message tried to appeal to the student veteran’s sense of duty to assist me with this research and hopefully help student veterans that followed them. There were over 550 veteran benefit-eligible undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at the institution (G.I. Jobs, 2012). Even though not all met the selection criteria for the study, this population provided a substantial pool from which to recruit participants. Thirteen students initially responded to the invitation. Of those, six either did not meet the participation criteria or chose not to participate. The remaining seven agreed to participate and were glad to do so for two main reasons. One was their sense of altruism toward student veterans who are coming after them. The introductory message’s content succeeded in this regard. The second reason for their involvement was more personal – they sought to have their story heard and they believed that my invitation was sincere.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through a semi-structured, intensive interview with each participant. The interview questions were based on the research question for this study: What are the barriers and strategies for resolution that re-enrolling student veterans face in their pre- and post-service transition experiences? The original set of
interview questions can be found in Appendix D. Each interview was scheduled for one hour and lasted anywhere from 50 minutes to 1:45 minutes. Qualitative interviewing is a powerful tool for researchers to gather a respondent’s worldview. Using qualitative interviews in grounded theory is especially useful in devising subsequent questions as the interviews proceed. Because of its emergent style, interviews in grounded theory build on one another. As new themes come out of one interview, they are pursued or asked about in either a subsequent interview with the same respondent, or addressed directly with a new respondent. Each interview was audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Intensive interviews, as the name implies, go beyond a structured or semi-structured interview protocol thanks to several key qualities.

First, intensive interviews are in-depth and extend beyond the conversational level by letting the researcher ask about “the participant’s thoughts, feelings, and actions” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 26). In addition, intensive interviews allow participants to openly “reflect on earlier events” and share their own story freely and to the extent they choose (Charmaz, 2006, p. 27). To begin the process, broad-based interview questions were used. Then as interview transcript analysis occurred, the flexible and emergent nature of grounded theory followed, and the interview questions were adjusted accordingly. All the same, the questions sought to elicit the most meaningful information from the student veteran respondents.

I maintained a journal and used it as yet another data collection tool. Following each interview, my thoughts and reflections of that interview were maintained through written memos. In grounded theory in particular, writing memos is a common tool to
help a researcher collect his or her thoughts and keep track of ideas as they occur. These memos added depth to the eventual data analysis by including my impressions of the interview setting, as well as the tone, body language, and demeanor of the participants. These additional details could not all be gleaned from an audio recording. The memos, together with the recording, informed subsequent interviews. Memos were also used to help me maintain reflexivity during the analysis. Because grounded theory can rely heavily on the interactions between researcher and participant, an ongoing evaluation of my perspective was key to the quality of the findings. See the Researcher’s Perspective section for more details.

Data Analysis

Data for this study were collected primarily through recorded, semi-structured, intensive interviews with student veterans who fit the selection criteria and who were interested in the prospect of helping future student veterans who would follow. Additional data were generated during the memo writing that occurred following each interview and during the actual analysis phases of the research process. Grounded theory, as Charmaz (2006) points out, can permit a structured but flexible approach when it comes to the analysis phase.

In this study, I completed the initial coding on a line-by-line or segment-by-segment basis, depending on what the participant was describing, and did so shortly after each interview was transcribed. With these initial codes in place, I could use them in subsequent interviews either to change or enhance a line of questions with a subsequent respondent or to keep in mind during future analysis.
Where possible, I utilized one of three types of *in vivo* codes, as described by Charmaz (2006). One type incorporates common words or phrases shared and understood by many and that still hold significance. Such codes in this study include ‘culture shock’ and ‘homecoming.’ Another type of *in vivo* code from Charmaz (2006) is “a participant’s innovative term that captures meanings or experience” (p. 55). Representative codes from this study include ‘administrivia’ and ‘suffer with purpose.’ Finally, Charmaz’s (2006) third kind of *in vivo* code is “insider shorthand” (p. 55) used by the respondents and is indicative of their unique experiences. This third type of *in vivo* code appears in my study as ‘military mode’ and ‘interfacing with non-vets.’

After the initial coding was completed, I supplemented the initial codes with information from the post-interview memos I had written, filling in details of respondents’ facial expressions and voice inflections heard during the interviews. Details from these memos also provided more descriptive context for the physical setting of each interview. For example, an interview conducted in a private study room in the library had a different feel to an interview conducted in a far corner of a coffee shop’s outdoor patio. These types of physical contexts supplemented the initial codes generated. Lastly, the memos permitted me to group and re-group the initial codes into categories and laid the foundation for the next stage in a study using grounded theory methods.

The next phase of coding in a study using grounded theory methods is called focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). The purpose of focused coding is to “synthesize and explain larger segments” (p. 57) of the gathered information. As the name implies, the process of developing more focused codes involves collapsing and condensing the initial
codes into groups or categories that fit together. Beyond fitting together, these focused codes can have a broader purpose and can reveal additional insights that connect the respondents’ experiences to each other. A preliminary effort of grouping and re-grouping the initial codes and combining them with the memos I had written resulted in a set of focused codes that were eventually discarded. These were: Administrivia; The University; Navigating Transitions and Coping; Military versus Civilian Ways; Family; Physical and Emotional Effects. After reviewing the initial codes and memos again, a more descriptive, action-oriented set of focused codes emerged. They were: Navigating Cross-cultural Transitions; Coping and Thriving; Making Plans; and Reconnecting. The Cross-case Analysis section of Chapter Four elaborates on both the preliminary and final set of focused codes.

**Researcher’s Perspective**

The nature of grounded theory methods required intensive interaction between seven student veterans and me. It was expected, even preferred that this interaction occur, to gather the rich, in-depth information available from within each participant. From Stage and Manning (2003), these types of interactions can result in “high-quality data [and] findings” (p. 21).

Values also play a role in qualitative research and must be considered from different perspectives. My values lie in ensuring, to the extent possible, the success and wellbeing of students at the institution for which I work. I value peaceful resolution of conflict. While I do not agree that war and violence are the solution to the multitude of issues faced in the Middle East, I value the effort, commitment, courage, and loyalty
demonstrated by the men and women who serve our country in the many branches of the military.

As a qualitative researcher, it was vital for me to acknowledge these perspectives from the onset – not only to openly admit to their presence, but also to ensure they were understood throughout the research process. I needed to be open to the perspectives presented by the student veteran respondents and seek to build trust with them along the way. As we established mutual trust and rapport, the richness and depth of information collected was much improved.

In addition to values, researcher’s presuppositions are also important to acknowledge at the onset. Because of my professional position at a higher education institution, it could be inferred that I had a vested interest in how higher education institutions were portrayed in the study. I could have been predisposed to speak exclusively with students who experienced the smoothest transitions from military life back to higher education or I could have chosen to exclude excerpts about bad things that happened to student veterans upon their return or the administrative difficulties that they may have experienced at the research site.

At the same time, my presuppositions guided me during the interview process and throughout my interactions with each respondent. Being familiar with college campuses and with college students helped considerably when it came to making interview arrangements and during the interviews themselves. I could infer meaning from a combination of facial expressions and spoken words that might otherwise have been lost in the research process.
Other presuppositions to acknowledge include my work as an academic advisor and my professional interests to help students succeed. From the time I was an undergraduate para-professional in a residence hall, through today as an upper level administrator, I have served in an academic support role. That is, the purpose of my work has been to complement or enhance a student’s path toward academic success. Because those experiences span two countries, four states, and five different higher education institutions, they comprise interactions with many different types of students seeking different types of assistance. For this study, however, I needed to listen intently to the respondents’ stories and suppress the urge to put my academic support experiences to work and seek to help the student veterans with the dilemmas being described. The purpose of this research was to describe and illuminate the transition experiences of re-enrolling student veterans at a public four-year university, not solve problems for the individual students interviewed. I still listened, exhibited sincere empathy, but did not become a problem-solver for the student veterans.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I outlined the theoretical framework and the grounded theory methodology that I employed in this study. Sampling methods and data collection were detailed to provide the practicalities of how the research was conducted. The study’s limitations were also noted to provide a clear understanding of the boundaries of this study, to help the reader understand who and what the study comprised. Lastly, a discussion of my perspective and biases were provided. It was through these perspectives that the research was conducted. It is important for the reader to know these perspectives
before they read the subsequent chapters of the study. Ideally, the study was richer for them.
Chapter 4: Findings

Through the course of a single semi-structured, intensive interview, the respondents graciously shared their transition experiences as a re-enrolling student veteran at a public, four-year university. I say graciously because in most interviews, the respondent expressed deep emotion when recounting particular experiences. Specific examples will appear in subsequent sections of this chapter and in Chapter Five. With the exception of the interview with Papa, all other interviews occurred in a private, group study room in the institution’s library. The interview with Papa occurred on the secluded patio of a coffee shop. All respondents were in their late 20s to early 30s at the time of the interview and all interviews occurred during the fall of 2012.

Each respondent was given the opportunity to review and provide amendments and enhancements to their respective interview transcript. For the synopses that follow, each was also given the opportunity to provide a pseudonym to enhance their anonymity, though I prompted them to consider one of the letters from NATO’s phonetic alphabet (Aeronautical Telecommunication, 2001). Each respondent also had the opportunity to review and enhance the analyses and conclusions that follow. Table 1 identifies each student veteran by pseudonym, along with their class and the branch of the military in which they served or are still serving.
Table 1

*Student Veteran Respondents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Branch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papa</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Marines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zulu</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Echo</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Marines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romeo</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Navy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bravo</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Synopses**

**Charlie** – *long service record, driven to move on.*

As Charlie tends bar by night and is a full-time student by day, he came dressed ready for work the evening we met – baseball cap, t-shirt with the bar’s logo, and comfortable jeans. Although the formality of a recorded interview was not lost on him, Charlie spoke freely and openly, using informal language while responding to questions about what he experienced. He was confident and relaxed in our conversation, but such age- and experience-based maturity contradicted his sophomore status at the university.

Starting out as a part-time reservist during his first year of college, Charlie went on to serve a total of nine years as an active duty service member. He was honorably discharged in April 2012 and started back to school in the fall. From the moment he
returned to school, Charlie knew that completing a college degree was the right path for him. He said, “…it’s got to be done. It’s going to be done right. And that’s all I worry about now.” In the following paragraphs, Charlie discussed his progress toward the goal of degree attainment.

Charlie’s journey back to school covered many miles and many experiences. He received military training in different places all over the country because, as he said, “with the Army, you have to go to school when you want to get promoted.” Working first as a small arms repairperson for several years, he eventually became a recruiter for three of his nine years in the service. From there, Charlie was tasked to a 28-person, Combat Advisory Team (CAT) deployed to Afghanistan – his first and only wartime deployment.

The CAT provided Charlie with a new perspective on military service. He said, “We [were] not just your conventional forces rolling down the street, pushing people out of the way.” Instead, Charlie and his team lived with the Afghan army and mingled with the Afghan locals, trying to facilitate dialogue and positive interactions between U.S. forces and Afghans. Preparing for this deployment required more training for Charlie and his team, especially in terms of cross-cultural interaction. He explained, “Twenty-eight of us, we had to be friends with these people in the middle of nowhere.” To get ready, he added, “…we had a lot of culture classes. [We had] a lot to learn about Afghan culture.” Such training and experiences contributed to Charlie’s experiential maturity and sets him apart from his classmates back home.
Before his 15-month tour of duty on a Combat Advisory Team, Charlie had family and friends to support his departure preparations, which included drawing up power of attorney documents and taking care of banking matters. After several years of service without a deployment, family members were initially worried for him. Charlie said they were thinking, “…heck, he’s been in this long, he may never deploy. He’s just going to have a great job the rest of his career.” Since a deployment was inevitable at this point, Charlie also took some available military leave to visit with family and friends before his departure. His out-of-state mother made a special trip back home to visit as well. After his deployment, the Army helped Charlie prepare for his return stateside and once he arrived, his family and friends helped him get settled back into his new life.

While still in Afghanistan, Charlie learned about his options to remain in the Army after the 15-month deployment concluded. Because of his longer service record, Charlie had achieved a higher rank and thus, more responsibilities were available to him stateside. In the end, Charlie decided to leave the Army and restart his career as a college student in the fall of 2012. Family and friends in his hometown helped again, this time by providing short-term accommodation while Charlie found his own place to live. He said, “They’ve known I was in the military for this long and then, boom, I had to leave [on a deployment] for this long. They were going to take care of me when I got back and so they did.”

In addition to the assistance of family and friends, Charlie’s self-reliance helped him prepare mentally and emotionally for the return to school as a 28-year-old, first-year student. He expressed conflicting perspectives when talking about his decision to go
back to school. One option he considered and rejected was heading straight into the
civilian workforce, as he describes here:

You know, nine years of experience in the Army, in my book, if somebody came
to work for me in a company and looked at my track record and reviews, I’d say,
“You’re hired!” on the spot. However, not many companies are looking for
somebody who just got done being a gunner in Afghanistan. They want to see a
college degree - your college education. So, I knew I had to come back. I knew I
had to finish that up.

Not only does Charlie want to complete his undergraduate degree (tuition-free,
thanks to being a retired university employee’s son), he eventually wants to become a
history professor. Unfortunately, his return to school was hindered by an academic
dismissal on his record, stemming from his original “call up” to active duty nine years
earlier. He explained, “I didn’t know about the failing grades that I got when I left [in the
middle of the term]. I was academically dropped, so there was a lot of paperwork I had
[to complete] to get re-enrolled.” That paperwork went smoothly enough from Charlie’s
perspective, but the timeliness of his veteran benefits was another matter. He explained
that his experiences were like those of other veterans at the university – processing delays
prevented the timely submission of benefit applications to the VA for processing. In
addition, the VA was behind schedule as well. Charlie said, “I submitted my paperwork
to [the school] in July and then, at the beginning of the semester [in late August], they
were sitting on it. …it took a call from a congressman to get it done.” As of our October
2012 interview, Charlie had yet to receive any VA benefits, but he will not incur any late
fees because the university knows of the delays it and the VA have caused. Besides paying for school, Charlie needed to reacquaint himself with being a student.

As a re-enrolling student veteran, Charlie described his experience back in the classroom simply as weird, “It was really weird. Coming from the kind of stuff that I’ve been doing in the Army to spending all day writing papers now and reading…” Charlie described his classmates’ worldview to be narrower than his own when he said, “It’s also funny to hear some of the opinions during discussions and [the 18-year-old kids’] opinions on the Middle East and stuff like that.” He is not outright critical of their worldview. Instead, he received strange looks after providing his own perspective in these types of classes. Charlie said, “When it comes to me, I’ll say, ‘this is my opinion. This is why. I’ve met these people.’ So yeah, I get a lot of weird looks.”

Charlie’s worldview also comes out in his attitude toward being back in school and getting things done. He explained that although it was difficult to get back into “pure academic mode,” as he called it, Charlie is enjoying it. He said, “I tell my roommates all the time, ‘look, it’s still better than what I used to do. I’ll sit here in front of this computer all night and it’s still better.’” He expressed gratitude at having his own life back when he said, “I don’t ever have to worry about someone plucking me on the back and saying, ‘come on, you’re going.’ It’s nice to have a home base.” Besides getting back into academic mode, Charlie uses his life and military experiences to ensure things get done, whether it is schoolwork or administrative processes he must endure. Here, he shares what those years of experience have taught him:
A mindset I have coming into [this kind of situation], being 28 years old, I’m not an 18-year-old kid out of high school that’s never lived alone. When it came to problems I was having with my benefits and stuff like that, I wasn’t just going to sit there and let it happen.

Instead, Charlie would explain to the staff member that he was not going to tolerate inaction when it came to processing his benefit paperwork. He put himself in a younger classmate’s shoes by saying, “Maybe if I was 18 years old, I would’ve just sat back and said, ‘oh, it’ll come eventually.’ I found out you got to make calls.” If those initial calls failed to get the necessary action, Charlie would escalate things and call the staff member’s superiors. He concluded, “It helps to know that stuff. You have to find ways to get the wheels turning sometimes.”

In addition to the administrative barriers Charlie experienced upon his return to school, he talked about financial barriers as well. He lamented, “I went from making a really good salary to [now] I’m working in a bar, waiting on GI Bill benefits.” Living paycheck to paycheck to cover academic fees and book costs was difficult. He said his “biggest barrier [to return to school] was financial.”

Charlie still characterizes his transition back to school as a success, despite the barriers described earlier. As for factors that contributed to Charlie’s successful transition to school, family support gets the most credit. Upon entering the military, his father was happy to have an independent son who was making his own money. By returning to school, Charlie gave all of that up, as he describes:
At first, [my father] was kind of like, “What?” But then, he kind of got the point where, “Hey, we don’t have to worry about him going overseas anymore.” [My parents] realized I was a lot happier here, so the support I got from them was a big success.

Another successful aspect of Charlie’s transition back to school lies in his lower stress level. He shared, “[Life is] so much more relaxed now [versus] somebody’s always in charge of me, even when I’m sitting on my couch at home. I’m my own person. I just go to school.”

At the time of the interview, Charlie already had plans to take care of the financial tasks necessary for the coming term. These included completing applications for the upcoming financial aid year, following-up with his veteran services representative at the university, and connecting with his retired mother for the tuition waiver paperwork. Charlie demonstrated that he is one to learn lessons very easily and will do whatever he can to avoid a repeat of what happened before his first term back at school.

**Oscar – purpose and self-worth.**

What began as a witty email exchange with a medical student turned out to be a most moving interview with an insightful, self-reflective, and purposeful man. The 30-something student named Oscar received my request to participate in an in-depth interview and, in his affirming reply to participate in the study, offered to bring his own set of probes from a set of medical supplies. Given the strict and appropriate protocols I needed to follow for human subject research, I laughed and at the same time was taken aback by his response. My reply was to the point in that we agreed on a date and time to
meet, but it also played into his suggestion when I assured him no such probes would be necessary. I was intrigued and torn by the exchange. At once I looked forward to our conversation, yet I worried about where it would lead. In the end, my worries were unfounded.

Oscar participated in the interview because of the prospect to help future student veterans. He was candid and forthright about both his re-enrolling student experiences, as well as his journey so far. Oscar had already spent the day in class or studying – his daily routine for the past 14 months. His drive and purposeful nature today is the direct product of the past seven years of triumph, heartache, failures, and successes since leaving the U.S. Army after four years in Iraq as a medic.

Oscar enlisted in the Army at a particularly low point in his life, shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001. He contemplated a return to school following academic dismissal and instead sought to serve his country and change his level of self-worth in the process. While in the Army, he witnessed friends being killed by snipers and sought solace in the prospect of becoming a Special Forces team member. After another friend was killed in action, Oscar withdrew to himself and no longer wanted any part of the Army. He was discharged for medical reasons in 2006.

Oscar’s quest for a purpose and self-worth continued after he returned to the US. With the ultimate goal of becoming a medical doctor, he completed his undergraduate degree in great form. Inside, however, he was still deeply affected by his experiences in the military and the impact they had on his civilian life. After his return, Oscar overcame several more obstacles on the way to becoming a medical student in the fall of 2011.
These included unresolved sleep issues and stopping his alcohol consumption. Oscar explained, “I realized I wasn't sleeping well, so I had to try to find ways to sleep. So, I got real big into sleep hygiene. I went from sleeping two-to-three hours a night to about six or seven.” The issues also included working through diminished sense of self-worth, due in part to a dissolved marriage. From Oscar’s perspective, “If you're not contributing value, if you have negative value, then, you have no worth.” From Oscar’s perspective, his contributions to this study and to his country have significant positive value.

Oscar came to the interview with a small stack of medical books in tow – study material for the medical board exams he will sit for in two-years’ time. When he is caught-up on his readings and research on current coursework, a board-related book is always at the ready. His day-to-day academic regimen and lifestyle stems from his struggles to get to this point in his life. From his beginnings in the Army after academic dismissal from an excellent, public four-year university, Oscar has been through many difficult experiences to get where he is today.

Upon his return to the US in the fall of 2006, Oscar’s sister, a student trustee with contacts throughout the institution, aided Oscar’s transition back to the same university from which he was dropped. Veteran services and transition assistance were minimal at the time, but Oscar used his contacts through his sister to get student veterans recognized on campus. Even so, Oscar mostly succeeded by himself. The VA was nowhere to be found. He explained, “The VA just let me go. I never talked to the VA about my problems, never got help with the meds. I had pretty severe sleep disorders. I was a mess [and] had to address that on my own.” Through self-taught sleep hygiene
techniques and workouts in the gym, Oscar built himself up again emotionally and physically so he succeeded in school. He described the change, “I was such a bad student [before]. I mean, I went from a 2.7 [GPA] and I was constantly getting 3.8s, 3.9s.” In addition to being disciplined and focused on his own changes, Oscar had help along the way.

Here, Oscar describes how his family also played a significant role in his successful transition back to school – especially compared to some members of his unit:

My family was whatever I needed. I think that’s the biggest difference between me and the guys in my unit. I have friends [from my unit] who grew up homeless in cars in Seattle, biker gangs. One was a [gang member] from San Diego.

School was never something they considered. They were all smart enough – they just didn’t have family support.

Once Oscar completed his undergraduate degree, his transition experiences from military life to academic life continued. He had a keen interest in the medical profession, thanks to his years as an Army medic. Just out of college, he took the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) and did poorly. That night was not a good one, but he remembers it vividly, “I remember the night I got the news. I was going to shoot myself in the head.” Oscar’s dream of going to medical school was initially dashed. He called his pregnant wife with the intent of saying goodbye, only to realize that he wanted to see his son born. He chose not to end his life, but instead went his own path to success. He did so without VA support, despite them knowing about his contemplation of suicide. Oscar’s drive told him he could be doing more to succeed academically and succeed on
the MCATs. He put down the video game controller or, he added, “whatever else people
do to waste time,” and he focused on preparing for another try at the MCAT. He picked
up a medical book and just started reading. Over the next several weeks, Oscar prepared
for and ultimately retook the MCAT. His much higher score meant that his dream of
medical school was one step closer to becoming a reality.

After two years on different institutions’ wait lists and a dissolved marriage, the
medical school of the site institution admitted Oscar into their class of 2015. Family
again played a significant role in this transitional time for Oscar. In preparing for the
medical school interview, he enlisted the help of his younger, now-doctoral student sister.
Here, he describes his preparations with her: “I sat down with my sister, who is an
impressive woman, and I said, ‘I need to look good.’ And we worked on it, one
[potential interview] question every night.” His sister would pick apart every word of the
responses he gave, all with the intent of preparing him for the upcoming interview. Oscar
confidently went to the interview and talked about what it was like afterward, “When I
left that [medical school interview] room, they were dumfounded. I don’t think there was
any doubt that they knew I was going to get in [to medical school].” As he predicted,
Oscar was finally going to medical school.

After being accepted into medical school, Oscar started to feel better about
himself again and reconnected with members of his unit from Iraq. He shared, “I started
talking to people again, [telling them] ‘Hey, I got into med school!’” During one of those
conversations with a member of his unit, Oscar was reminded of the disability rating he
received upon discharge and was told to try getting VA benefits under chapter 31.
Chapter 31 is housed under Title 38 of the U.S. Code and provides disabled veterans with opportunities for vocational and occupational rehabilitation. Because of his disability rating upon discharge, he was eligible for counseling, medical, and educational support programs. After several years without VA support and feeling disdain for the entity that is the VA, his assigned caseworker asked, “‘Well, who have you talked to about your depressive disorder? What about your sleep problems?’” To all questions, Oscar responded that he had spoken with nobody about these issues. That all changed when Oscar started to take advantage of the medical benefits he had earned.

In addition, Oscar reconnected with his military unit via Facebook and continued preparing for medical school. The preparations included finding a compatible roommate, who would share his drive to succeed in medical school. After several years of transition since the military, Oscar knew he “needed a very controlled environment” and he continued, “…at this point I had only been successful in one or two classes in my life. So I was really diligent in trying to find a roommate.”

Oscar and his roommate do not own a television or a radio and the two engage in studying more than anyone else in their class. Both are older than their classmates by several years and instead of going out to the bars with everyone, they stay on campus or in their apartment and study. Oscar’s drive and discipline has paid off, as he describes:

I’m largely considered the top [student] in our class. It has been a long journey to go for a guy with a 2.7 GPA [in undergraduate work] to number one in med school. I really have an idea now what it takes to succeed.
Oscar’s self-worth and purpose were clear in our interview and in email communications afterward. His journey is not complete, but he described feeling considerably happier now than before – both in terms of his progress from the past and in terms of his future.

**Papa – making peace with war.**

It took several tries to set an interview date and time with Papa. Throughout several weeks of back and forth email and telephone exchanges, I attributed the lack of a scheduled interview to a respondent’s busy schedule. Throughout the exchanges, it was clear he wanted to or even felt compelled to participate in the study. At the time, I did not know why. After our moving and telling interview concluded, I had my answer and I suspected there were other forces at play in our initial inability to set an interview date and time. Those will come out later in this synopsis. For the interview, Papa and I met at a coffee shop near his residence. We sat in the secluded corner of an outdoor patio and sipped on our coffees with the digital recorder between us. It was a Sunday evening in the fall and Papa had just finished moving some friends from one home to another. Ever the helpful friend, family member, colleague, or fellow Marine, Papa’s journey from his freshman fall term to the start of his second term 20 months later was a fast and arduous one.

In that time, Papa became a Marine private and served a seven-month tour of duty in an active war zone of Iraq. Papa originally made the decision to become a Marine while still in high school, becoming a reservist right after graduation. As he described it,
I signed up when I was still in high school for the Marine Corps reserves. At the
time, I think I envisioned in being a pilot in the Marine Corps. I knew you got a
four-year degree. I always had planned to go to college.

Following a summer of basic training, Papa went to college to start his freshman
year. Rumors were swirling in Papa’s platoon that a deployment to Iraq could be
imminent. He said, “[We] started to find out that we were potentially getting activated
and deploying right away.” Throughout the fall term as a reservist, Papa had monthly
drill responsibilities to the Marine Corps. These proved to be Papa’s first experiences
with the internal conflict of being in the military world and the civilian world
simultaneously and it was not easy. He explained, “…it was stressful. The transition
between-, as a student on campus, being a civilian and being around everyone that's like
that, to being in the Marine Corps and on base.” Regarding his school work and the
effect weekend drill had, Papa added, “you sometimes have a three or four-day weekend
where you're not able to work on any of school work and any of that.” The rumors to
deploy were calling to Papa – it is why he joined the Marines. If he did not leave his first
term of school early, Papa would lose a window of opportunity to deploy because of the
scheduled deployment readiness training he needed. Papa decided to forego his
education and withdrew from that first term in college. He was worried about the effect
on his studies, since he withdrew after most of the term was complete. He recalled,
“Obviously, I didn't get any credit for any of the time I was in those classes. I had to
retake [them] when I came back.” He completed the deployment readiness training and
joined his company for a March deployment.
Less than 10 months after his high school graduation, Papa was en route to Iraq and what eventually would be a life changing and an internal conflict-inducing experience. He said, “I really went from high school, boot camp, to college, to the Marines, to Iraq. Like that [snapping his fingers].” The compressed timeline since his high school graduation seemed to be a blessing and a curse, based on our conversation. Papa was eager to serve and was properly trained according to Marine standards, but in his words, “you train for stuff and there's stuff that's just… you can't recreate… I don't know how anyone can really prepare for some stuff.” Papa went on to describe some of those experiences.

The interview included several graphic examples of what he meant by not being able to recreate certain things in preparation for going to war. In one such example, Papa told a story from his first day in a patrolling convoy. He was sitting in an open-bed Humvee (High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle) while it went down the main street of a city. He continued, “This orange flash came right by here [Papa held a hand at shoulder height, one foot from his face].” At first, he thought it was an accidental firing from roof-mounted gun in the convoy.

I looked back and the thing skips and bounces up in the air and explodes. It was an RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] and it went right by my head, like right there. Someone shot an RPG down the length of the convoy and missed us all. [It] went right past my head, bounced about 20 feet ahead of me, straight up in the air, and exploded. Yeah.

Yeah, indeed. So started Papa’s deployment.
Marine Corps combat units spend seven months on a deployment. This was true for Papa’s unit as well. Of those seven months, Papa was on an actual military base for two weeks. The other weeks were spent in the field, or as he says:

The rest of the time was sleeping either out in the desert, just outside of the city, [or] in a city that we'd been clearing through. [After clearing through], you then firm up in a building or something for the night and do your security, basically. So, it was pretty nonstop. Some 40 days with one shower. My camis [combat uniform] could stand up on their own because of the salt in them.

At just 19, Papa had many near-death experiences during his deployment. Looking astonished, he shared, “[I] counted many times where it's like knowing I should be dead. There's no reason why I'm alive. I should be dead. Not just like, oh, this happened once. Like no, like 10 times that I know of.” He continued, “I'm 19 years old and I accepted death for sure.” He needed to, as his life and the lives of his fellow Marines depended on it. Suppressing the fear of death “allowed you to go through the rest of your deployment.”

Suppressing that fear worked fine until Papa had a confirmed departure date. He started to see light at the end of the tunnel and fear started to be on his mind a little more, as he said, “It [Fear] starts to cloud your judgment.” In essence, he started to open up again as a person, albeit a significantly changed person. As his platoon was attempting to load-up their helicopters for the flight to Baghdad, mortar fire kept coming in from the enemy all day long. Papa continues the story:
They’re trying to get us, as we’re flying out on helicopters. Now, you're like, okay, I made it that far. I'm not fucking dying today, you know? And you're in a position where it's like, this mortar's just coming. You can't do anything about it. And then, we get to the air base.

Papa’s young age at the time were overshadowed by his life-changing experiences while overseas. The vigilance he needed to maintain while deployed – vigilance that helped keep he and his fellow Marines alive – contributed to issues he experienced when he returned home. Whether it was his near-death experiences or the deaths or injuries of his fellow Marines, Papa was deeply affected by his experiences.

Coming back to civilian life was a challenge. Papa was still a Marine and was still finely tuned to the Marine way of live. He explained, “The fact is you’re on guard, you’re alert [when you come home].” Papa knew inside that he needed to wait to return to school – he was not ready for campus life. He returned from Iraq late in the fall and spent the next nine months in different jobs to pass the time and keep busy. Papa just “wanted to do something,” as he described it.

Papa was connected to the VA soon after his return. He had “an awesome doctor assigned” and made his way back to campus in the fall. Back on campus, Papa felt a void after getting to spend some of the past nine months staying connected with fellow platoon members. He felt frustrated by the immature attitudes of his classmates, even though they were only a year younger than he. As he explained it to me, “You know sometimes, immature younger kids and stuff – like they have no idea about what the rest of the world's really like.” Such feelings were the impetus to work with other veterans to form
a student organization on campus and to become an advocate for student veterans at the institution overall. Papa explained that the student organization was designed to give veterans “a place to kind of meet and at least just relate. [We] don't really need to talk anything specific, but just to be [from a] similar background or come from the same type of experiences” is what he and fellow student veterans needed. Beyond that, Papa shared his hope for better transition support services at his institution.

Papa would like to help future student veterans avoid things he experienced in his transition, saying, “I feel fortunate that I’ve got to where I am, but I’ve had a rough time of it.” He also wants student veterans to avoid things his Marine friends have experienced, like drug use and abuse. For himself, Papa simply wants “to be happy in life” and he is working toward it. His insight and passion were clear throughout our conversation – passion both for the good found in people and in the acts of war he witnessed and committed. Papa’s participation in this study is merely one more way he has worked to help current and future student veterans at the institution.

**Zulu – looking for adventure wherever possible.**

Zulu’s path to and from the Army was non-traditional when compared to his fellow respondents. I had the opportunity to learn more about Zulu’s path to and from the military and college one evening in the fall of 2012. After starting college right out of high school, Zulu decided that the time for college was not right. He explained, “I left for a number of reasons. [Zulu’s first school] is terrifically expensive. “I had gone to study the classics. There is not an active job market for that type of thing.” So, Zulu stopped after the first year of college and worked as a waiter for a year and took some time to
think about what he wanted to do. During that time away from college, he spoke with a
friend who was in the Army and Zulu decided to enlist himself. In addition to the friends
influence, ancient and recent history played a role in his decision to join the Army.
Regarding the ancient history that he studied during his first year in college, Zulu said:

I had this running theory that all great men in history were either in prison or the
military. Not that I consider myself a great person, but if you are going to model
your life after someone, you know, you should do that.

Regarding more recent history, the attacks of September 11, 2001, occurred while
Zulu was at his first college. He believed the war in Afghanistan was a justified one, in
that it sought justice for the perpetrators of the attacks. He said, “I enlisted before we
started the war in Iraq, at this point it was only the war in Afghanistan. Keeping politics
out of it, I feel it was a much more justified conflict to be in, because at the time anyway,
we were actively hunting down people who had attacked us.” Both of these historical
perspectives contributed to Zulu’s wish to enlist and serve his country. Final factors for
him were his innate sense of adventure and his desire to do something difficult, as
evidenced by this commentary:

It was a way to get [away from home], and be paid to do it. Not that [home] is a
bad place, but when you are 18, you want to get out and see the world. And I
wanted to do something difficult, which is why I ended up choosing the Infantry.
Zulu’s choice of the infantry came despite achieving the highest score possible on the
standardized test given to all enlistees. The score meant he could choose any job the
Army had available. Zulu explained, “The recruiter, he says, ‘My recommendation is a
nuclear arms monitoring technician.’’ With his adventurous streak, Zulu could not see himself sitting on a base somewhere monitoring nuclear weapons. In response, Zulu told the recruiter, “Aah, I want something with a little more adventure. Let’s go Airborne Infantry!” Although Zulu did not regret his job choice, he remarked, “I remember about two weeks into basic training, doing pushups and sweating…you should have been a nuclear technician. This kind of sucks!”

Zulu prepared for the enlistment as best he knew how: by reading. Zulu said, “I read as much as I could about things, and honestly, it helped a little bit, but nothing can really prepare you for that.” He continued, “you go from living a fairly carefree life, haircut, things like that, to like shaved head bald, with 30 other guys running around like maniacs.” Besides reading as much as possible, he also exercised a lot to get ready for what he described as a life-long endeavor. Mentally, he was ready for the adventure and the escape from hometown life, saying, “I’m doing this for life – it’s going to be awesome!”

Zulu’s taste for adventure was sated somewhat in the coming months thanks to the locations for required training programs. He explained, “Basic training and airborne school were in Fort Benning, Georgia.” From there, he was off to the opposite corner of the 50 states in November, adding, “I was [in Alaska] for about a month, getting ready before strangely enough, I had to go back to Fort Benning” for pre-deployment training.

In all, Zulu would remain in the Airborne Infantry for five years, despite having signed-up initially for a four-year contract. He was sent to Afghanistan for one tour of duty. There, Zulu “was primarily a Humvee driver and a radio operator for a major in [t]
unit.” After his deployment, he returned to the US and served in various roles. Before he was allowed to let his contract with the Army expire, Zulu explained, “I was stop-lossed to go to Iraq. If your unit gets activated to deploy, they can keep you until the end of the deployment [regardless of the end date on a soldier’s contract].” Zulu accepted his assignment, but was worried.

During the first part of the deployment to Iraq, Zulu experienced a bit more wartime action. “I was a driver in a 50-caliber machine gunner.” During a mid-tour leave, his unit learned their time in Iraq was being extended by an additional three months. Zulu’s superiors realized this and the additional risk he faced by being such a “long timer” on a tour. Zulu recalled thankfully, “They said, ‘Oh man, this guy is getting doubly screwed!’ So, they gave me an office job [on a base] for the remaining four or five months of my deployment.”

When asked about those last few months and his preparations for the return home, Zulu explained:

I knew I wanted to get out [of the Army] and knew I was going to college. I had no idea in what [field of study]. When I got that office job, towards the end of Iraq, I read a ton. I would read about a book a day, honestly.

After his first tour in Afghanistan, he returned to the United States flush with unspent salary and “blew it all on a car and on drinking.” He knew he wanted to take a different path after the extended deployment to Iraq and started to research how to save for retirement. While reading about investing strategies, Zulu explained, “[I researched how]
mutual funds pick what they invest in, which segued into how would I pick, so why not do it on my own!” This research ultimately led to his current business-related major.

Zulu’s unique path back to college continued after he returned from Iraq. Instead of investing his most recent deployment earnings, he “blew it on a trip backpacking around the world with [his] girlfriend at the time” then returned to Alaska for two years. After his relationship ended, he and a friend drove from Alaska to the lower 48 states and stopped off in the town where he is currently a student. Zulu describes what he did upon arrival:

I worked at [a local restaurant] for two years and I remember I wanted to apply to well-known schools. One day, I was waiting tables and I was just talking to the guest and I’m like, “Oh, I’m two years to a finance degree and trying to look at colleges.”

The guest recommended his current college and the rest was history, as Zulu transferred his earlier college credits and enrolled in his current finance program.

As the second oldest respondent in this study, Zulu had an interesting transition back to the classroom. He is approximately 10 years older than most classmates and told a story of sitting in an introductory Sociology class: “There is this conversation going on that is just, not to be insulting, but it was very much like a culture shock. I am among people with different, slightly limited worldviews.” Having the military background and having spent time in many different countries, Zulu remarked that all of his classmates want to “…go out and get wasted on the weekends.” Once he had fulfilled his general education requirements, Zulu had a much more engaging experience with peers in his
major classes. As Zulu described it, “I like a lot of my classmates, so now that I’m in the College of Business with like-minded individuals.”

When asked about the type of advice he would give to future returning student veterans, Zulu said, “I would read everything you can get your hands on, because it will allow you to see and you learn a lot and then transitioning to something like this will be a lot easier.” Zulu did read much before he returned home and his transition experiences are a testament to his own advice. He also shared this about a series of difficult, but required classes in his college, “I am the only person I know who got an A” and his military experience receives the credit for that success and other successes he has experienced in college. According to Zulu, “One of the things that I took from the military that I have applied to school is the ability to suffer with purpose.” Zulu went on to explain what he meant: “When you deploy, your life sucks. You are spending really long days in the sun, it’s miserable, people are shooting at you. When you come back, you have overcome that.” So, instead of being concerned about his performance in the series of difficult but required classes, Zulu’s perspective is this, “Things could be a lot worse and this hard work is actually worth it. …there is a sense of discipline because you actually have to get up and go do these things.”

Zulu has applied his discipline with great success and expects to graduate this academic year. At the same time, he nurtured his desire for travel and adventure and looks forward to more of the same.
Echo – lifelong ambition to be a Marine.

Echo and I spoke in the fall of 2012 after he responded to the email invitation sent to student veterans at the institution. In our initial email exchange, I was addressed formally as Mr. Beatty and he apologized for not having ready access to a scanner to send me his signed participation consent form ahead of time. Echo was the only respondent to address me this way. As a result, different questions ran through my head at the time. Was I too formal in my introductory email message? Was he merely well-mannered and always addressed unknown people by Mr. and Ms.? Given the subject matter of the study, did he click into a military frame of mind and make assumptions of his own about my “level” in some pecking order, compared to him? More worrisome to me was the possibility that our conversation would be stifled by the formality.

I appreciated Echo’s diligence ahead of time, but to put him at ease, I sent him a friendly reminder message about our upcoming conversation and tried to convey my sincere interest in what he had to say. I encouraged him to come “as is” and shared the semi-structured interview questions I anticipated asking.

Just before the appointed date and time, Echo arrived and was actually waiting for me by the agreed-upon meeting place. The interview began shortly thereafter and I learned first how Echo became interested in the military. Although no close family member had served in the military, Echo’s father had a love of history - especially military history. Echo explained how his interest in the military was born, “When I was a little kid, my dad always loved to read and he passed that on to me, and especially the military history. So I was always interested in military history from a very young age.”
Since then, Echo remembers always wanting to be in the military. One memorable story occurred when Echo was 10 years old, on September 11, 2001:

I was in fifth grade and my dad [and I] were sitting there watching the news and, you know, I was actually thinking about going to the Naval Academy at that time and my dad just looked at me and he said, “Well, if you’re serious about joining the military, you’ll probably end up in Afghanistan” and I thought he was crazy, you know.

At the time, the two argued about how the US could still be in Afghanistan eight-plus years later. Echo thought, “we’re going to be done with them a year, tops.” In a letter to his father while serving as a Marine infantryman in Afghanistan about eight years later, Echo asked if his father remembered the “prophetic statement.” Father responded, “‘Yup, I told you!’”

As a junior in high school, Echo finally started to make his childhood dream a reality by enlisting in the Marine’s delayed entry program – a program designed for college-bound individuals. Echo told me some more about the program, when he said, “It’s basically where you can join [before high school graduation] and lock in your job once you [officially] joined the military.” He decided then to be an infantryman – a member of a Marine Corps Rifle squad, whose mission is “to locate, close with, and destroy the enemies,” according to Echo. Basic training started for Echo a few days after his high school graduation and concluded one week before his first year in college.

Strangely similar to Papa, Echo heard rumblings about the possibility of a deployment in the before his basic training occurred. Echo shared his excitement about
the prospect of deployment when he said, “That’s what I joined the Marine Corps to do. So, I kind of had the idea we were going to get deployed.” Without a firm deployment date and on the advice of his company commander, Echo continued on his college-bound path and enrolled for his first fall term. He also enrolled in winter term, but soon after is when things changed for Echo. Two weeks into winter term, he and his company-mates received letters of intent from the Marines. Echo explained it was “not quite a deployment order, but it’s kind of like, ‘Hey, you guys need to mentally and physically prepare yourself to get deployed, because the official order is coming down the pipe pretty soon.’”

Echo described how he went into a planning mode: “As soon as I got that I was like, okay, so I need to drop out of school and sort of get myself ready ‘cause I still had to go do [my job training].” Echo successfully withdrew from college in early February and had no complaints about the process when he said, “[University administrators] walked me through the process…I had to sign [a form], fill it out a little bit, kind of write a paragraph explaining why I needed [to leave].” After attaching a copy of his orders, Echo’s withdrawal was processed and at no penalty to him. He then started what would be a 16-month journey from pre-deployment training through to the end of his active service in June of the following year.

Beyond taking care of the withdrawal from school, Echo initially shared little in the way of other special preparations for his deployment. He said, “I’d always wanted to be in the infantry. So, I had kind of been preparing my whole life for that moment, I guess.” He later offered, “I kind of started mentally preparing myself. I kind of told my
mom, ‘Hey, you know, if anything happens to me, I want you to use my life insurance to pay for my brother and sister’s college.’” Echo also started to get into a military frame of mind, just as other respondents talked about, when he said, “I kind of went in my military mode, I guess, I like to call it. [I was] mentally preparing myself for what I have to do and kind of pushing away other thoughts of what’s going on back here.” Also like other respondents, a military frame of mind was necessary while serving on a tour of duty.

Just as he was certain of his future in the military during his childhood, Echo knew he would return to college after military service. Family members were initially concerned after first learning of the deployment. “What about school?” they asked. During his deployment though, Echo shared that he had a good amount of time to reflect on what he wanted to do after the service and toward the end of his deployment. He said, “I enrolled in classes while I was actually still on orders, started getting that taken care of. Signed-up for the Post-9/11/ GI Bill.” He went on to describe the difficulty in transitioning to civilian life: “That’s kind of one of the things that’s weird. There’s not really a way to get back into civilian mode. You can’t, like… I can almost snap my fingers and go into Marine mode, you know?” Despite having spent nearly 18 years as a civilian, “I find myself unable to flip that switch and go back to civilian mode.”

Echo approached his transition to being a civilian into military terms. He explained, “Although they [Marine Corps] try but there’s not really any training or anything like that you can give somebody to do, like, ‘Okay, this is how to be a civilian again.’” All the same, Echo described how the Marines do not want to give that kind of
training, “They don’t want to turn you back into a civilian if they might need you again. I don’t want to be completely civilian again if I need to go get the job done again.”

Echo’s Marine training has helped with his transition to being a civilian and more importantly, helped in his transition back to the classroom. He explained how it has also given him an unfavorable impression of his classmates:

When I look around at my other fellow students, they kind of seem lazy to me, even though I know obviously if you’re in a college, if you’ve made it to college you’re probably not a lazy person, but to me with Marine Corps training, you know, we get stuff done, you know? You’re not resting until the job is done.

Upon returning, Echo lived off campus and roomed with a friend with whom he had deployed, “which was kind of good…we kind of had that nucleus or that solidarity that we were both going through the same things at the same time.” Being roommates also gave them both opportunities to talk about their experiences, which Echo also characterized as good.

Even with a fellow veteran to talk to, the transition back to school had its pitfalls. Echo described how he was chronologically younger than his experiences, “when you get back home you kind of feel like an old man in a young man’s body. I feel a lot older than people that are the same age as me.” Those feelings come to a head as he tells the story of an interaction with a non-veteran classmate about their plans for the future. “I ask people [juniors and seniors] what they plan on doing. They’re like, ‘Oh, I don’t know. I’ll just try to find a job somewhere.’” Like, you don’t know about this? This is why you
are going to college?” Echo admits that, if he wants to find like-minded people, “maybe I just need to get new friends.”

Despite feeling frustrated with more narrow-minded or unfocused classmates, Echo focuses on the task at hand, such as this description of how he maintains good grades, “My GPA when I left school was like a 2.4, now I’m up to a 3.0 overall.” He also focuses on the things that are important to him and does not worry about the same (little) things as his classmates. He shared, “I just don’t really feel a connection with civilians, I guess. They take a lot of stuff for granted.” He also shook his head at an obvious comment made by one of his instructors that fall:

One of my professors mentioned in class the other day that we are extremely lucky to be here in college where only two percent of the world’s population has a chance of getting a college education and people looked around, shocked. I’m like, well, duh.

Maintaining his perspective should continue to serve Echo well as he completes his degree and moves on to the next chapter of his life. His transition is not over, as evidenced by the conversation we had. Even so, he is putting his helpful past experiences to work in his favor and working to diminish the effects of the unhelpful experiences.

**Romeo – adjusting to different worldviews.**

Like Echo, Romeo responded quickly to the request for participants in this study. From the start, Romeo made it clear he was willing to set aside time to talk about his transition experiences and would do so in the interest of future student veterans. Our
evening schedules were easily matched for a midweek conversation during the fall of 2012.

Although in a different branch of the military, Romeo mimicked Echo’s early path to the military when he signed on with the Navy before graduating from high school. He said, “I actually signed my contract when I was 17, still [a senior] in high school. My mom came in with me, because she had to sign it too.” Romeo continued, “I turned 18 in May, graduated in June, and then left for boot camp two weeks later.” He characterized it sarcastically as an “interesting transition. Straight out of high school, two weeks of fun, and then off to boot camp.”

The military was something Romeo had always considered from both a financial perspective and a service perspective. He said, “I was [always] planning to go to college. I wanted a supplement of money and I had always thought about the military as a service to the country.” He described how he was good at structured things: “I had always been pretty good at following rules and doing what I was told, so I thought that would be good.” Romeo had always wanted to go to college, but he explained that his parents would not be able to afford tuition and fees when the time came, when he said, “I knew my parents couldn’t afford [my school]. Together they made, you know, enough to get by…not enough to send me to college.”

Boot camp was followed by three months of job training for his eventual naval assignment. Romeo said, “I actually chose that route because it was the most efficient out of high school. Five months gone, and then I could make it back [for the winter term at college].” Following basic training, he enrolled in school one term after his peers and
seemed to have little trouble returning to the civilian world. He elaborated, “When I got back, that transition was easy. I was only gone for five months and a lot of it was [Navy] school. So, I really had no break in school.”

After 14 months as a college student and a Navy reservist, working one weekend per month on a drill, Romeo finally received his deployment orders in March of his sophomore year. Romeo described how he learned of the deployment:

I went on a field training exercise and there had been rumors [of deployments] at that point. We found out for real on that training exercise that we were preparing for deployment in August of that year, so four months ahead of time.

Only the study participant Bravo received more notice for his deployment (see his synopsis in the next section). Romeo took advantage of the time and said, “That was perfect. I came home [from the weekend exercise], caught up in spring term, finished out the school year, then had a summer job lined up as well.” The advanced notice also permitted Romeo to spend time with family and friends before his departure.

Academically, he simply did not enroll for the upcoming fall term. He “told the university [about the deployment]” and thankfully, they said, “Just don’t sign up for fall, you’ll still be a member of [the school] and when you come home, you can just re-register.”

By August, it was time for three months of pre-deployment training as a unit. When asked how he was preparing emotionally and mentally for the departure he said, “[Emotionally], it seemed like [waiting for the deployment] took forever, because it was like I didn’t want to go yet, but I was ready for it. It was like okay, ‘Come on August!’”
At the same time, he was reluctant to talk about it with family members as evidenced by these comments: “I do better when I’m by myself, really, as far as mental focus, because when other people are around I don’t want to upset them or especially, like my mom, she didn’t deal with [the deployment news] very well.” Mentally, he said, “It was kind of like a looming thing that I didn’t really want to focus upon, so I let it slip to the back of my mind.” Even so, it was always weighing on Romeo’s mind. Fast forwarding to one week before his departure, Romeo said, “I didn’t really think about it a whole lot until it was like the week before.” Up until the time he got to his pre-deployment training he was calm about the situation and “always tried to be like it’s not that big of a deal and I’ll be alright.” Then, once Romeo got to pre-deployment training, he said, “it really set in, like shit, I’m going to Afghanistan, you know?” In early November, Romeo and his unit shipped out for their seven-month deployment to Afghanistan.

Romeo experienced several harrowing experiences at a forward operating base (FOB) in Afghanistan. Part of his job included accompanying convoys of supplies from Kandahar to his FOB. Here he begins a story about one of those convoys:

The scariest night basically of my life was, we were supposed to leave Kandahar at 5:00 [in the evening]. That got pushed back to seven, which got pushed back to almost 10 o’clock. We got within an hour of [my FOB] and there were IEDs [improvised explosive devices] on the road. It took an EOD [explosive ordnance disposal] team like an hour and a half to get there. Then began the series of planned detonations required to clear the path of IEDs. He said, “We literally spent the night parked on the highway in the middle of Afghanistan.”
Because of the extended delay, communication batteries were dead and few of the vehicles in the convoy had night vision capabilities. He added, “So, we can’t see, we can’t talk, and we’re just sitting blind and waiting on the highway.” Thankfully, nobody attacked the convoy.

Romeo was very ready to come home at the end of his seven-month tour of duty. Originally, the tour was supposed to last only six months, into May of the next year. His team was extended by a month and so did not come back to the US until June. When asked how he was preparing for the return home, Romeo explained how he needed a few simple things, “I just wanted to get home and get drunk and hang out.” School was the last thing on his mind at the time. When he finally returned stateside, he followed a typical route for military personnel after a deployment. Those first two weeks were spent turning in equipment and learning about opportunities offered by the military and by the VA – they dragged on for Romeo. He expressed how he wanted nothing more with the military when he said, “get me the hell out of here, I don’t want to be here anymore, I want to go home and hang out with my friends.”

All the same, Romeo still had responsibilities as a reservist and served his monthly duties to the Navy over the summer, while getting ready for fall term classes and a return to college. He arrived at school with a new major and a much broader worldview than his classmates. He had few positive things to say about them, “At first it really wasn’t even the classes [that were difficult], it was the people that annoyed me most.” He continued, “I came home and these people were just like blowing their parents’ money and not caring about school whatsoever, just caring about what they were going to
do that night.” Although only behind his age-group peers by one academic year, Romeo made it clear he was annoyed by the lackadaisical attitude and immature behavior exhibited by those peers.

People also annoyed Romeo when they asked questions about his service. He explained, “When people asked about like the war, or ‘You’re in the military’ or ‘Do you kill people?’ I think that’s dumb.” In hindsight, Romeo would have gone the route of active duty instead of the Navy Reserves. He described his struggles to balance his schoolwork with his newfound responsibilities as someone in charge of other reservists: “Now I’m actually in charge of people. I’ve worked my way up in rank…so I’ve got to make sure that they get their orders in.” At the same time, “I have real, like school stuff to worry about.” It is clear Romeo is taking his schoolwork seriously, given how he answers the next questions about transition successes.

When asked about his transition successes, Romeo said, “No matter what the project or assignment, I can perform it. You get assigned a task, no matter how much it sucks or how dangerous it is.” He longs to be out of school and working a full-time job, but, as he put it, “I know I can’t give up, so I think that my determination and commitment to school or duty has really improved with deployment and military life.” His teachers, especially in smaller classes, know of his veteran status thanks to an indicator on their class rosters. He said, “One other professor has even brought it up, but [the professors] can just tell [I am a veteran] by the way that I carry myself, that I’m always on time, that I always have stuff done, and I never complain.”
Although he did not complain about the services at his institution, he did share suggestions for improvement:

If a student is leaving on a deployment and they know when they are going to be back at school, [it would be nice to] have that procedure where they get automatic email letters, saying if he, you’re home, come back, we’ll get you hooked up, here’s what to do.

From Romeo’s perspective, he was fine because, “I was, you know, a self-starter.” However, other student veterans coming back could arrive home and the school would miss an opportunity to show its care and concern for the student’s safe return. Being a self-starter has served Romeo well in his transition back to school. His last words for me solidified the statements about commitment and duty that he made earlier in our interview, “You get that degree, then figure out what else you want to do, but at least you’ve got that degree… You’re in the military. Don’t ever give up on anything.” Based on our conversation, I suspect Romeo will never give up.

**Bravo – atypical path, successful conclusion.**

I had the opportunity to speak with Bravo less than 10 months after he returned to school, having served a tour of duty in Afghanistan with the Air National Guard. The conversation also occurred three months before his graduation, so it took time to schedule the interview. Bravo was in a full-fledged job search in addition to completing his final series of college courses. In the end, we met on a weekday evening during the fall of 2012.
In contrast to respondents like Papa or Romeo, Bravo did not join the Air National Guard until his first year in college. Initially, Bravo talked about joining for financial reasons: “It’s kind of one of those things they pay for your school, so you jump on that opportunity. It’s helped me out a lot, I’ll tell you that much.” Beyond the financial benefits, Bravo has idolized people in uniform for as long as he can remember. He explained, “Growing up, you see movies, or you know, you see someone in uniform and you kind of look up to them as an idol.” Another reason he decided to join the military was because of his father’s service in the Army during the Vietnam Era. Bravo continued, “He served over in Japan, so you know, he loved the military, and he’s taken me to military events and ceremonies.” As told to him by his father, Bravo’s first impressions with the military were formed at the age of two when he attended an uncle’s wedding in Japan. While in Japan, Bravo was taken to his father’s former military base and so began his idolization of the military.

After signing on during the spring of his first year in college, Bravo completed monthly drills with them until the middle of his sophomore year. From there, he stopped attending college to complete five months of basic and training, or as he called it, “[learning to be the] the jack-of-all-trades when it comes to building.” At the end of his training, it was in October and Bravo had two months before the next term of school began. Still being a reservist, Bravo had obligations to participate in monthly drills. He said, “Right when I returned [from training], I think I went back to drill the following week.” This continued for another 15 months until he was deployed to Afghanistan for a six-month tour.
In contrast to all other respondents, Bravo received almost 10 months’ notice before his deployment. As he described it, “I was in Hawaii the summer prior [to my deployment] when I got the call. Which is really nice to be able to structure your life, and figure out what you are going to do for those 10 months.” He did plan out the next several months before deployment and said, “A, I need to get this schoolwork done. B, I need to do this by this point to be able to set myself up before I get deployed…”

Bravo returned to college for fall and winter terms, all the time making progress toward his degree and fulfilling his monthly Guard duties. When asked about his mental and emotional preparations, Bravo explained, “It’s kind of a weird experience. I kind of had this goal of doing my six years and getting out. [By] joining the Guard…the chances of me getting deployed wasn’t that great, but that obviously isn’t true.” After his training, Bravo spoke almost romantically about his mindset at the time, “you kind of feel this desire, you kind of want to get deployed, you feel that pride – you’re with your buddies, you’re working with them every weekend…” How he prepared the most was from listening to stories told by his fellow guardsmen, learning about the experiences they had overseas. He added, “[I] was just trying to take in as much knowledge from those guys as I possibly could and trying to get my skills as good as I could get.”

After winter term, Bravo had time off until May and did not return until the following winter term due to pre-deployment training and his actual six-month deployment. When asked about his preparations for the return home, he said, “my down time was making sure that all my classes were lined up. I’m already late as it is [due to the service interruptions]. Luckily, I had some good advisors that helped me out getting
some schedules.” Beyond that, his preparations simply included stayed in touch with family via the Internet. He shared, “[My] being able to talk to my family and you know, hear about it, how everything’s going back home…it makes you feel good, you know, like they’re doing well.” Bravo empathized with fellow soldiers who did not have those types of contacts back home when he said, “If you’re over there by yourself and you have no one to contact back home, it can be a rough deployment. I know people in those situations where they haven’t been able to reach to someone back home.” He also worried about his family, saying, “You kind of have this sense of you know, helplessness, you can’t help them out if anything goes wrong, it’s like you know, what can I do?”

Thankfully, nothing happened to warrant an emergency trip home and Bravo’s unit was sent home as scheduled.

The return home was a whirlwind for Bravo. He arrived home just before the Christmas holiday and school started on January 3. Here, Bravo provided more detail on the schedule:

I got back on the 23rd, we went to New York for Christmas, [we] came back I think the 26th, I think I had a coming-home party on the 27th, I had to check into the base around that time period for a couple of days, so I’m on base for a couple of days, New Year’s Eve hits, and then you’re starting school!

Bravo remarked that he barely had time to take a breath, much less change gears from a military perspective to a civilian one. The speed of the return contributed to some initial struggles for him, based on this explanation: “I think I kind of struggled a little bit, because everyone wants to do something for you, everyone’s ‘oh, Bravo you’re home,
you’re home!” Bravo also remarked at the lifestyle change he experienced in very short order:

I mean for these six months, you know, you’re doing the same thing every day, you’re seeing the same people, you’re talking to the same people, you know. I was on [an air field]; I didn’t leave that area, a couple square miles, for six months. Then you come back to this and it’s just overwhelming.

In spite of his long civilian life before the Air National Guard, with family and friends, he did not find the immediate comfort he expected. He shared, “You think it’s going to be one way, and then it turns out to be completely different.” What helped him cope was moving back to college, in an off-campus apartment with one of his college friends from before his deployment.

Once back in school, the negative aspects of the transition continued. This time, returning to the classroom presented some challenges. He said, “It was a transition into the academic world which I wasn’t used to doing, you know reading or writing, studying for tests, doing projects, working in groups, things like that…this is going to be a piece of cake.” Bravo did not have any Friday classes, so he had large amounts of time to fill from Thursday night until Monday morning and he talked about what that meant: “…the expectation, especially when you come home from deployment, is that you are drinking.” So, for the first couple of months, Bravo indulged during those long weekends. After some time, he realized a change was needed and explained, “I can’t say that I just stopped, because I kept drinking. But at the same time you kind of took a little more
responsibility about yourself, you didn’t drink as hard.” While wanting to be part of the group that went out drinking, Bravo described the other part of him:

I felt like I grew a lot over there, and I think I learned a lot - things that maybe someone that didn’t get deployed that was my age, that they necessarily didn’t learn. I kind of felt like maybe I should be more mature than I was acting.

Along with not drinking as hard, Bravo also turned his attention to schoolwork. When asked about the successful aspects of his transition back to school, Bravo talks about his classes in this way: “I did a pretty good job of managing my schoolwork [and] got a lot of things done. I think a big reason for that was because I was deployed and because of my work ethic over there.” He credits his advisor for helping him weather the transition administratively, by saying, “We actually had a lot of trouble getting me scheduled. I guess they took me out of enrollment or something, so they’re over there trying to type in the classes and they wouldn’t work.” He was grateful for his advisor’s assistance, but added, “I kind of felt bad, but I had her running around all day trying to figure out why I couldn’t sign up for classes.”

Bravo reflected on how he felt upon returning home when he said, “it’s kind of a shock. It’s not really depression, but you almost go through that depression period because sometimes you don’t know how to act. How do you react to people?” Because of that, his best advice to future student veterans was for them to be themselves, saying, “[Veterans] shouldn’t have to act a certain way just because they got deployed. There’s no outline for people that get deployed.” On the other hand, in the military, there are strict rules and structure that override individuality. Bravo struggled with the freedoms
upon his return, but found an appropriate balance in the end. He recently graduated with his double major and has a full-time, non-military job.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

After proofing and initially coding the interview transcripts, I reviewed the codes and distilled them into broader categories of codes through a process called focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). In Grounded Theory, focused coding is used “to synthesize and explain larger segments of data” (p. 57). It provides an opportunity to group families of similar codes together into an overarching core category or a farther-reaching super code. Simultaneously, because Grounded Theory methods are iterative and reflexive, I grouped the initial codes in different ways to determine the focused codes that made the most sense. I also performed member checks with each respondent by providing them with both their interview transcript and their respondent synopsis found earlier in this chapter. In the end, the focused codes also helped me work through large amounts of interview data and glean the essence of the emergent themes from across all of the conversations with participants.

Beyond determining the focused codes, I engaged in memo writing following each interview. Memo writing provided me with an opportunity to journal my own experiences with each respondent and reflect on potential paths of analysis. From Charmaz (2006), memo writing “prompts [the researcher] to analyze your data and codes early in the research process” (p. 72). These memos went beyond the interview transcripts and provided an outlet for the thoughts running through my head before, during, or after an interview. These memos incorporate more of my personal narrative
and reflections on what I heard and learned in the course of the interviews, combined with the codes found during the initial coding process. Depending on the content of the interview, the memos also served as an outlet for me to express my reactions to what I had learned. In other cases, the memos provide a more complete picture of the physical context of the interview, including the appearance and demeanor of the respondent, and the setting in which the interview occurred.

The cross-case analysis is organized around the focused codes or themes distilled from the initial codes and analysis of the interview transcripts. The intensive, semi-structured interviews used questions organized around the research question for this study, which is: What are the barriers and strategies for resolution that re-enrolling student veterans face in their pre- and post-service transition experiences?

The initial analysis of the 129 original codes yielded the following themes: Administrivia; The University; Navigating Transitions and Coping; Military versus Civilian Ways; Family; Physical and Emotional Effects. The theme of Administrivia comprised logistics and administrative processes and procedures the student veterans worked through either stateside or while still serving overseas. More specifically, this theme sought to incorporate such things as the student veteran’s efforts to plan ahead, his or her working through the logistics of being a departing service member and a re-enrolling student, and the student veteran achieving an unexpected end result after following the rules. Continuing with the initial analysis, the theme of The University comprised several areas for the re-enrolling student veteran. These included academic, financial, and interpersonal aspects of the student’s return to school, and respondent
advice to incoming student veterans about these topics. The third theme from the original analysis, Navigating Transitions and Coping, comprised examples of self-reliance, a sense of moving on from one thing or another on the part of the student veteran, and a change in the student veteran’s worldview thanks to their experiences. The fourth theme, Military versus Civilian Ways, comprised several areas and described how the student veteran navigated the military and civilian worlds they straddled at different times in their service and student lives. Specifically, its intent was to incorporate a student veteran’s sense of belonging in either world and includes references to their encounters with classmates who have experienced life differently to date. The fifth theme, Family, comprised depictions of family support given to the student veteran and included student veteran reflections on what it might have been like for their family as the student moved into and out of school and the military. The sixth and final theme from the original analysis, Physical and Emotional Effects, comprised student veteran’s experiences of service-related physical and psychological trauma. This theme also included a student veteran’s experiences of loss.

Consistent with grounded theory methods and their constant comparative style, the initial codes, transcripts, and memos were analyzed again. A new set of focused codes or themes emerged from the additional review, replacing the original themes. The new themes are action-oriented and better reflect the data collected and the respondents’ stories in their entirety. In the next sections, I will define these focused codes and describe how they connect to the respondents’ experiences. The new set of emergent
themes that came from the distillation of the 129 original codes are: Navigating Cross-cultural Transitions; Coping and Thriving; Making Plans; and Reconnecting.

**Navigating Cross-cultural Transitions.**

The theme of Navigating Cross-cultural Transitions comprises the successes and struggles of the student veterans as they move through and engage in military, civilian, and university student cultures. It also depicts changes in the student veteran’s worldview as a result of their experiences. The respondents’ stories provide several examples of how this theme emerged from our conversations.

Bravo, for example, shared the difficulties he experienced coming back to a more civilian life after deployment. He was planning on one set of experiences with his friends and former classmates, but got something else. Bravo explained, “I pictured things one way [socially], and you know, they just kind of turned out the other way.” Once Bravo’s tour was complete and he arrived stateside, the initial time at home was a whirlwind of military-related activities before he could see his family. He expressed being caught between two worlds when he explained, “I wasn’t even home for 24 hours [and] I had to be [back on base] the next morning for a couple days of in-processing.” The whirlwind continued with brief, but meaningful visits with family and friends over the Christmas holidays and just days before winter term was to begin at school. He expressed mixed feelings about the visits when he said, “You love to see your family and friends, but at the same time, especially around the holidays, I think, it kind of made it even tougher, because everyone was there and everyone wanted to talk to you.” These family and
friends welcomed him back with open arms, but the sentiment was overwhelming for Bravo.

Bravo talked about the struggles he had moving from his military way of life to his former civilian way of life in other ways. Despite having years of practice with his civilian way of life, the training and discipline he received sometimes overshadowed his efforts to adjust at home. Bravo explained, “You’ve been doing the same thing for six months [on a deployment] and you know, you come back, how do you react to people? How do I not know how to act because I’ve been acting this way for my whole entire life, you know?” In hindsight, Bravo seemed to long for some procedure manual he could follow upon his return, much like his military life had been structured as a set of procedures. Instead, he lamented, “There’s no outline for people that get deployed and come back to do certain things like a, b, and c, there’s nothing of that sort.”

Charlie shared several stories about his transitions from the military to being a student. He remarked at how his day-to-day work life changed, saying, “[I went from] the kind of stuff that I'd been doing in the Army to I spend all day writing papers now and reading.” Charlie also reflected on how strange it was to be a student again when he said, “It's weird. It was really weird.” He added that, “it's also funny to hear some of the opinions during discussions of 18-year-old kids and their opinions on the Middle East and stuff like that.”

A transition issue noted by Oscar was his different worldview after military service. In this case, Oscar’s worldview contradicted some gay classmates’ stereotypes of veteran service members. Here is how Oscar described one such encounter:
We have a lot of openly gay people in [my] class. And they thought, ‘you are in the military [so you must be homophobic].’ Like I got to be honest, I don’t know for sure because there's still sort of a veiled thing about [being gay in the military], but I know just based on the number of guys that I served with, one of them is gay.

In response to the statement about him being in the military, Oscar asked his skeptical classmate metaphorically, “What am I going to do? This [gay] guy that, you know, would've died for me?” Oscar felt compelled to explain his worldview to his classmates to help them understand the concept of teamwork and camaraderie engendered by the military. For Oscar, members of his military unit relied on each other and that mutual dependence overrode any personal differences they shared. He continued. “The guys in the military are pretty understanding of just about anything. I may not agree with it, but I accept them.”

Like Oscar, Papa’s worldview changed during his military service. Papa experienced things seemingly only possible during wartime as evidenced by what he told me, “[he and others in his unit] came across a mentally handicapped person in that country that was chained up and treated like a dog…it is just insane to see stuff like that.” Because of that experience and others, Papa’s worldview changed. He said, “…you’re changed. You’re a different person [afterward].” The transition from the military back to school continues to be a gradual one for Papa. He said, “I’m still learning and I'm still working on my transition and being more comfortable.”
In contrast to those perspective-altering experiences, Papa could also talk about his experiences as a seasoned military veteran. Though less than 10 months out of high school at the time, his manner and voice expressed a sense of fatalism that belied his age. Papa spoke at length about how life is so different in a war zone when compared to civilian life, “I mean, life's different. You come to that aspect, life's different, like shit. You live close with everybody.” At the same time, he had accepted that life and what accompanied it. He added, “Life's different. Yeah, I mean, it's what it is. But yeah, life's funny. It's that type of thing where just how the environments are different from a civilian world.”

Papa also described difficulties with navigating in the student culture after his return. In this example, he is discussing a situation where he went out with friends: “You're trying to make it a good event, a good night [with military friends] and some [student] starts being an ass to you. Like, it's hard. It's tough.” The things other students would say in class or in passing also bothered Papa. He said, “You know sometimes, that immature younger kids and stuff like they have no idea about what the rest of the world's really like. You know just stuff that bugs you.”

Zulu experienced discomfort coming back to school as well, especially after having served in the military and being 10 years older than most of his classmates. Describing one such scenario, he said, “I was sitting in like Sociology 101 here and there is this conversation going on that is just, not to be insulting, but it was very much like a culture shock, like I am in a different place.” Zulu was certainly aware that his perspective differed from that of his classmates, but expressed surprise in this way, “I am
among people with different, slightly limited world views and things like that, but it’s like, wow, all they want to do is go out and get wasted on the weekends.” Although such a perspective may have agreed with Zulu during the student career before his military service, he did not identify with it now. Instead, Zulu’s worldview went beyond thinking differently about other cultures or having a more developed sense of purpose. It included the ability to deal with new or challenging situations upon his return to school. Zulu’s take on the common phrase, no pain, no gain, was described like this, “One of the things that I took from the military that I have applied to school is the ability to suffer with purpose.”

Echo did not describe his scholastic or transition experiences in terms of suffering. On the contrary, his resolve was the dominant characteristic exhibited in his transition to the student culture. To illustrate the point about Echo’s perspective when dealing with college and complaining classmates, here is one clear example: “I don’t think any of them had to dig a hole to sleep in in the ground, or gone several weeks without a shower, so there’s that element to it as well, I guess.” When a student complained about having to get up early some morning, Echo’s reply was, “Well, I woke up from a bed in my house. No one’s tried to kill me today.” Thanks to Echo’s broadened worldview, he had an appreciation for everyday things in the US that were lost on his classmates. To illustrate this point, he said, “…a lot of Americans don’t get out and see the world, you know, and like people don’t realize that we live in one of the greatest countries in the world and they take a lot of stuff for granted.”
To help with the transition back to college, Echo gravitated socially toward fellow student veterans, and especially the student veteran’s organization on campus. He did not connect well with traditionally aged and experienced undergraduate students on campus. “We [veterans] have that shared camaraderie that is carried over even though none of us served together. We still all went through the generally same experiences and it’s good to talk about stuff like that together.” Such camaraderie helped Echo in his every day student life and helped minimize the effects of immature classmates.

Immature classmates bothered most of the respondents interviewed, including Romeo. He shared, “It was the people that annoyed me most [when I returned from my deployment].” Some students would say things about the wars in the Middle East or ask Romeo questions about his service and he would think, “…you guys are dumb, like why do you even say that stuff?” It got to the point where he would opt not to go out to bars with friends, saying his classmates were “annoying the hell out of me.”

Romeo’s descriptions of classmates’ immaturity included references to the military discipline he learned in the service. This was especially true when applied to completing academic projects in a timely way. He said, “I’m in like my [major] classes, and there are still people who are like dumb, whatever, like working on their projects like a couple of nights before it’s due.” Part of Romeo’s discipline included not wanting to draw attention to himself as a veteran. As he described one encounter with an instructor, “So, it was like almost to the point where I didn’t want to talk about it [in class when she brought it up], but I almost felt like you know I didn’t want to upset her [either].” When instructors talk about the wars in the Middle East or knew that Romeo had served and
asked for his opinion, he did not necessarily get embarrassed, but he did not want to emphasize his experience. Such self-reliance almost prevented him from connecting with other veterans upon his return and he did not realize that a connection he was missing. He said, “I was automatically on the e-mail list for like these veterans’ clubs, which I ignored until I ran into a guy, he invited me to come, so I was glad to have [had that connection].”

Navigating among three different cultures posed several challenges for the respondents in this study. In the next section, I describe the second emergent theme and include depictions of how the veterans coped and/or thrived when going through those transitions.

**Coping and thriving.**

The theme of Coping and Thriving comprises such traits as self-reliance and self-confidence, as well as support resources and structures available or lacking on behalf of the student veteran. The respondents’ stories provide several examples of how this theme emerged from our conversations.

Charlie talked the most about his attempts to cope with administrative processes, both in the military but especially from the university’s perspective. Because of his orders from the military, he needed to leave midway through a term. Despite the mandate from the U.S. Army, his professors at the time were not very sympathetic to his plight. They told him, “‘You know the rules. You’re this far into the quarter. We got to give you the grade you have now.’” While not all of them felt that way, Charlie characterized it as another battle he had to fight upon his return to school, when he added,
“It wasn't actually until I came back and met with a student advisor [that I learned] I had three failing grades from [that term].” Because of the failing grades, Charlie had been dismissed from school and experienced “a lot of paperwork to get re-enrolled.” Fortunately, the paperwork process was completed without any issues.

When it came time to talk about experiences with university staff, Charlie reported mixed results. His advisor was highly regarded, based on this: “My student advisor, meeting with him for the first time, he’s been great – extremely helpful.” The staff members responsible for getting him enrolled again were not so highly regarded. He lamented, “I want to say it was probably about three weeks I hadn't heard anything, so I finally gave them a call. And they were just like, ‘Yeah, you're re-enrolled.’ I was like, Oh, thanks for the heads-up.” Charlie also experienced delays in getting his veteran benefit application processed in a timely way. He shared, “When it came to the problems I was having with my benefits and stuff like that, I wasn't just going to sit there and let it happen.”

Despite the frustrations described earlier, Charlie did have good support structures in place when he returned from his tour of duty. Reflectively, he shared, “Family and friends were great about it. They've known I was in the military for this long and then, boom, I had to leave for this long. They were going to take care of me when I got back.” He added, “I think family support is a big success [in my transition process].”

Like Charlie, Oscar also relied on family to help him cope with various transition periods. He said, “My family was whatever I needed.” This included providing food, clothing, tuition, books, and shelter at different times during his transitions from the
military back to school. Oscar also emphasized several times how his family helped him through different aspects of the transition, where the institution did not, when he said “Without the family support [I would not have been as successful] because there was so often a lack of institutional support.”

At the same time, Oscar utilized self-reliance and self-confidence to work through transition issues. When he is stressed, Oscar said, “I will use that as motivation. I've had to teach myself to become very aware of my triggers and to avoid them.”

Oscar also talked much about how he applies military-acquired discipline to the student life transitions he experiences when he said,

[My platoon mates] really drove in that work ethic with just little things every day. And that's what I base it on now. My work ethic is, you know, when I'm tired, I'm like, oh, you know what? I'm just going to read one more thing. And then, as soon as you start reading, it's not that bad.

In addition to working through the transitions back to school, Oscar shared stories of how he was dealing with the physical and emotional effects of the transitions. In speaking with fellow unit members, Oscar learned he was not alone in experiencing such things, and shared that most of them have trouble dealing with stress “…and they can be easy to anger, frustration… I'm talking like to the point where they itch all over. I mean, physical manifestations of stress.”

While Zulu did not discuss any physical or psychological transition issues with me, he did share some of his negative experiences with university administration this way, “I had a boatload of transfer credits and I was trying to have someone see how much
of that would be worthwhile, and I couldn’t register for classes until that happened.”

Zulu attempted several times to reach a person who could help with his transfer credit. In the end, Zulu was successful in getting his transfer credits evaluated and he was re-enrolled for the term at the university. In contrast to the transfer-credit frustrations, Zulu recommended taking advantage of the veteran-related services available on campus, like the student organization for veterans and the veteran’s services representative in the Registrar’s Office. He concluded, “I could go to this [student veteran group] and honestly the VA representative here is a very nice lady.”

Academically, Zulu was challenged but met the challenge head on. “When you come back [from overseas and] you have overcome that, you know that if you get your mind right, you can kind of deal with anything.” More specifically, when Zulu was enrolled in more than the normal amount of credits for a term, “all of a sudden something like 20 credit hours is not that bad.”

In contrast to other respondents who discussed coping or thriving through academic and social transitions, the fact that not everyone got to home alive bothered Romeo and affected his transition. Toward the end of his deployment, a convoy of his platoon was attacked, killing several service members who had recently arrived. “[It was their] very first convoy, like two weeks in the country, and it was like, ‘I’m going home in less than a week.’ So is that guy [referring to a soldier in a casket].”

Romeo thrived in his transition home in other ways, however. He took great pride in being resourceful and self-reliant, especially in the classroom. Whether it was how he characterized working through a class project, “Just like no matter what the project or
assignment, I can perform it,” or described his reliable reputation among instructors, “I’m always on time, I always have stuff done, and I never complain,” Romeo achieved what he set out to, without complaint.

Bravo also thrived in his transition back to school. It was due, in part, to his advisor and the help he received before returning from his deployment. Bravo was having difficulty scheduling classes and had his advisor “running around all day trying to figure out why.” Bravo added, “She is a great lady, she’s helped me out a lot, getting interviews for jobs and stuff like that.” Even though Bravo experienced some delays in getting back into a normal routine academically after his return, he appreciated his advisor’s work in helping him navigate the best path for a successful return to the classroom.

Bravo also expressed pride in serving his country, especially after the camaraderie he felt toward his fellow soldiers.

I’d be doing my weekend drill and my supervisors are talking about [how] they went to Cuba, they went to Kuwait, just different places, Pakistan… they’ve been to all these places and telling all these stories and it’s kind of like… you kinda want to get deployed.

Loneliness is another feeling expressed by student veterans I spoke with. Bravo said, “You know if you’re over there by yourself and you have no one to contact back home, it can be a rough deployment.” He continued, “I know people have had been in those situations where they haven’t been able to reach to someone back home.”
In contrast to other respondents that either sought out or received family support during their transitions, Echo acted more independently with his family. This was certainly true as he talked about sharing the news of his deployment order and preparing for that deployment:

So I really just put it off, until I was, I do better when I’m by myself, really, as far as mental focus, because when other people are around I don’t want to upset them or especially like my mom, like she really, she didn’t deal with it very well. Echo played the stereotypically “tough guy” and “always tried to be like it’s not that big a deal and I’ll be all right.”

Affirming a tough guy persona was something Echo appreciates from his experiences in the military. He was also grateful for how the military instilled a sense of discipline in his academic work – something he does not always see in his fellow students. In this segment, he compares the two perspectives:

I feel like my training has come in handy. Sometimes, like when I look around at my other fellow students, they kind of seem lazy to me, even though I know obviously, if you’ve made it to college you’re probably not a lazy person, but to me with Marine Corps training, you know, we get stuff done.

While school does provide challenges for Echo, he approaches them with a positive outlook and often uses military experiences to provide perspective on what he feels on a given school day. “I listen to people complain about like having to do assignments or like complain about class and I guess I kind of have that drive to succeed and do well.” When faced with academic challenges or temptations outside of school,
Echo keeps looking ahead, “If I’m going [to school], I need to make it worthwhile. There’s no point in going and spending all this money and time [going to college] if I’m going to get a 2.5 GPA and not get a job anywhere.”

Despite those successes, Echo would appreciate a designated, fellow veteran to listen to student veterans at the university and help them through issues. Such a person would have been helpful to Echo and thinks others would benefit from such a person as he describes,

Maybe guys don’t feel comfortable talking with other vets that weren’t there with them about stuff or they, you know, they’re having a rough time and they don’t know who to talk to. I think it would be good to have somebody who’s like, basically a certified therapist or counselor or whatever, for guys to come and talk to.

Like Oscar, Papa shared similar gratitude to his parents for their help with transitions when he said, “they took care of everything for me. I mean, I don’t know I would've been able to do it on my own if I didn't have my parents that knew the school or a roommate going there.” Papa also reflected on how his military life affected his supportive family, when he said, “Someone was always home because they were afraid that they'd hear I was dead or something.” He has experienced many difficult times since his return to the US and can still rely on a family member’s ear or shoulder to help him weather them.

The first two themes to emerge from the analysis of the initial codes were Navigating Cross-cultural Transitions and Coping and Thriving. These next two themes
comprise two other aspects of the student veteran experience and are called Making Plans and Reconnecting.

Making plans.

The theme of Making Plans comprises the logistical aspects of the student veteran’s transition. It includes depictions of how these students navigated the administrative, and sometimes frustratingly bureaucratic, structures that accompany them to and from the military and to and from school. The respondents’ stories provide several examples of how this theme emerged from our conversations.

Veteran Administration (VA) benefits was an area where Charlie experienced the theme of Making Plans. Through no fault of the VA, Charlie’s educational benefits were delayed. “Benefits and finances have been the least successful [transition] so far, but it's a work in progress. It'll get there.” He recalled, “I found out that my paperwork from [the institution] never got submitted to the VA.” While the institution eventually submitted Charlie’s benefit paperwork to the VA, his benefits were further delayed because of backlogs at the VA.

In my conversation with Echo, I also learned about different financial planning lessons he had learned over the years. His mother had taught him how to have money in reserve to help weather unexpected financial crises. For Echo, these crises took the form of delayed VA benefits and car repairs. As Echo explained it,

What if your car breaks down and you have to spend $500 to get it fixed? [My mother] implanted that lesson on me, even though I didn’t really listen and didn’t realize it until I started living on my own. This stuff does happen.
As for the VA and the issue of veteran educational benefits, Echo said, “It’s just the overall bureaucracy of the VA is just terrible, to be honest, but that’s, I guess that’s neither here nor there, but, or it’s outside of the university’s control.” Beyond making financial plans, Echo also reflected on the more personal planning he attempted before he was deployed. In this case, it relates to a conversation he attempted to have with his mother before he left:

I kind of told my mom [about my upcoming deployment]. I didn’t really have like a serious talk with her or anything, but I was kind of like, “Hey, you know, if anything happens to me, I want you to use my life insurance to pay for my brother and sister’s college.”

In contrast to Echo, financial planning did not come up in my conversation with Romeo. Instead, Romeo focused on his pre- and post-deployment preparations in our conversation. Before leaving school for his service in Afghanistan, Romeo worked with the university to ensure he was leaving in good standing. When Romeo told them he was being deployed, they let him know he would, “still be a member of [the institution], then when you come home you can just add, you had to re-register, and start the cycle over again.” Another example of Romeo trying to plan ahead lies in the conversations he had with fellow soldiers during weekend drill exercises and before he was officially deployed. Romeo explained, “During my drill weekends, we all talked about it, you know, like we’d kind of use each other, I guess, as a support, just like preparing for it, like what are you guys doing?” Those examples of planning ahead academically contradict Romeo’s lack of preparation before heading to pre-deployment training with
his unit. “I didn’t really think about it a whole lot until it was like the week before, and then it was just like, gotta pack my bags…”

The last examples of the Making Plans theme are reflected in Bravo’s interview. He took the academic and life planning aspects of this theme seriously, especially since he learned about his deployment nine months ahead of time. He reflected on what was going through his mind after learning about the deployment: “So A, I need to get this schoolwork done. B, I need to do this by this point to be able to set myself up before I get deployed.” Even while he was stationed overseas, Bravo was planning for his return to school:

So while I’m over there, you know, my down time was making sure that all my classes were lined up and stuff, because I thought about taking the term off…[instead] I wanted to make sure I got my schooling in as soon as possible.

In addition to the themes of navigating cross-cultural transitions, coping and thriving in those transitions, and making plans, the respondents talked about reconnecting with the family, friends, and colleagues from the military in the final theme that emerged from the analysis.

**Reconnecting.**

The theme of Reconnecting comprises the more social and emotional aspects of the transitions experienced. It encompasses how a student returns to the social aspects of their lives as a family member and as a student and includes how they want to help future veterans navigate the transition home. The respondents’ stories provide several examples of how this fourth and final theme emerged from our conversations.
Oscar had the most advice to give to current and future student veterans about the theme of Reconnecting. Specifically, when he would recognize a fellow student veteran on campus, he would approach them and try to engage them in conversation. After getting to know the fellow veteran better, “I would try to talk to them about identifying their [stress/frustration] triggers [surrounding their inability to cope with their return to school].”

As the oldest of the respondents interviewed, Oscar did not always connect easily with traditional aged students and described one set of interactions this way,

I'd go out and I just didn't feel right with 22 [year olds]. I'm at this point, what, 31? So, I'm not feeling right. And I remember after two nights of going out with them, and I didn't drink at all, and I just said to roommate, “This is stupid.”

At the same time, a positive facet of Oscar’s age and maturity is the free tutoring work he does with younger classmates who are struggling academically. This serves as a different way for him to reconnect with peers. Because the GI Bill takes care of his tuition, Oscar has “no worries in the world [financially]. I can truly express my personality here. And I want to help them. It's not for money or anything. I want them to pass.”

The theme of Reconnecting appeared in my conversation with Papa when he talked about noticing the psychological toll a deployment had on a fellow student veteran. He said, “I had to talk to him and be like, [student], you do have PTSD. And he finally started to learn more about it.”

From Zulu’s perspective, his best preparation advice for the soon-to-be veteran is for them to “read a lot, especially if you are in the military getting ready to transit out,
read whatever you can [to help you decide on your career].” It certainly helped him as he made plans for transiting out and it helped him to reconnect to the college portion of his transition upon his return.

Echo noted that staying connected to his military roots was important upon his return to the university. He shared an off-campus apartment with a fellow student veteran, “which was good because we kind of had that, I guess like that nucleus, or that solidarity that we were both going through the same thing at the same time, so we could sit and talk about it.” He also connected with other student veterans through the campus-based student organization. As he characterized it, “we have that shared camaraderie that is carried over even though none of us served together. We still all went through the generally same experiences and it’s good to talk about stuff like that together.”

Echo appreciated the amount of growth and maturity he gained by serving in the Marines. At the same time, he had trouble identifying with everyday college students upon his return and those transition experiences dominated our conversation. “I think it’s been really difficult for me to make friends with people that aren’t in the military or haven’t served in the military.”

Romeo’s advice to future veterans followed a similar path to Echo’s. He also encouraged would-be student veterans to reach out to their fellow veterans and establish a built-in support network in the process. He said, “Meet the veterans, there’s tons of them. If you don’t meet a bunch of them that are like you, you’ll find one or two that are like you and they’ll help.”
Romeo also encouraged fellow student veterans to stay true to their intent to complete a college degree and echoed a ‘never give up’ will to succeed expressed by most of the respondents:

If you want to do what you started out to do, don’t give up on that. That’s what I keep telling myself. You get that degree, then figure out what else you want to do, but at least you’ve got that degree, you know, so that’s a big one.

Romeo concluded his advice for future veterans by saying, “You’re in the military. Don’t ever give up on anything!”

Bravo agreed with Romeo on how helpful it can be for student veterans to talk about their experiences. Bravo offered this advice to future veterans, “Talk to someone, you know, whether it’s your roommate or your friends, your mom or your dad, talk to people on how you feel – talk to people you can trust.”

Bravo also shared these encouraging words to future student veterans – something he thinks about in hindsight, “Have time for yourself where you can reflect on the things that you did during your deployment. [Things] that you kind of need to hash out and realize what happened and that things are going to move forward.” Bravo hopes that by sharing such hindsight reflections, he can help student veterans reconnect to their home and institution upon their return.

**Constructivist Grounded Theory**

The goal of this study was to contribute to the scholarship and theoretical base about how student veterans navigate their transitions back to college. Specifically, I focused on conversations with re-enrolling student veterans at a public four-year
university – those who had interrupted their postsecondary studies to serve in the U.S. military, then returned to school. Those conversations, the analysis of those conversations, and the lens through which I interpreted those conversations combine to shape the theory described herein. From Charmaz (2006), approaching grounded theory from a constructivist approach “means more than looking at how individuals view their situations” (p. 130). It also means that the developed theory has at its core the interpretation of the researcher. As detailed in Chapter Three, I have worked for more than 22 years as a professional in higher education. In that time, I have worked with many different types of students at different points in their student experiences. That work experience provides me with a base from which to expand on this Theory of Transition Experiences of Re-enrolling Student Veterans.

The experiences of the respondents in this study are not generalizable to other re-enrolling student veterans at a public four-year university. Even so, this study may help guide the work of other researchers and could be used as template for that work. This interpretive theory “assumes emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as inextricably linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual” (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 126-127). As described in the previous section, the themes that emerged from the analysis of my conversations with researchers were: Navigating Cross-cultural Transitions; Coping and Thriving; Making Plans; and Reconnecting. These themes were present in each individual’s set of transitions back to school. When examining each student veteran’s story individually, the commonalities are not clear. Taken together, the Theory of Transition Experiences of Re-enrolling Student Veterans becomes clear. It
resulted from the review of each participant’s described experiences, combined with the memos I wrote during the research and analysis phases, and combined with knowledge and experience from working with students in higher education. The theory says that re-enrolling student veterans come back to school thanks to three factors. One factor, experiential maturity, is facilitated by a re-enrolling student veteran’s time away from college while serving in the military. This experiential maturity appears regardless of the student’s chronological age. The second factor, a drive for something more, appears for these students in the form of grit or resolves to succeed beyond serving their country. The third and final factor, ability to deal with internal conflict manifests itself in how these students balance who they are as military veterans, with who they are as college students and human beings.

**Experiential maturity – they feel older than they are.**

The factor of experiential maturity points to a re-enrolling student veteran’s broadened worldview as a result of their military service. Beyond having lived and worked overseas with the military, their maturity also appears in their willingness to understand and accept different people and cultures. Experiential maturity in this context shares related ideas with Baxter Magolda and King’s (2004) three aspects of contemporary college learning outcomes:

- *Cognitive maturity*, characterized by intellectual power, reflective judgment, and mature decision making and problem solving;
- *An integrated identity*, characterized by understanding one’s own particular history, confidence, the capacity for autonomy and connection, and integrity;
• *Mature relationships*, characterized by respect for both one’s own and others’ particular identities and cultures…(p. 6)

For example, as a result of Papa’s experiences in the Marines, he changed significantly. “You’re a different person.” “…immature younger kids…they have no idea about what the rest of the world’s really like.” Papa’s experiential maturity belied his 19 years of chronological age. Charlie’s work on a Combat Advisory Team provided him with military training and real experiences in cross-cultural communication, diplomacy, and international relations. He, too, regarded the opinions of his younger classmates as “funny.” “[It was] funny to hear some of the opinions during discussions of 18-year-old kids and their opinions on the Middle East.” Their perspectives were less developed and less informed.

Experiential maturity also shows itself in a re-enrolling student veteran’s approach to working through the everyday or mundane tasks of life and the university. Echo exemplified this aspect of experiential maturity several times in our conversation. In one example, in response to a classmate complaining about something, he said, “I don’t think any of them had to dig a hole to sleep in in the ground, or gone several weeks without a shower.” In another, responding to a classmate complaining about an early wake-up call, “Well, I woke up from a bed in my house. No one’s tried to kill me today.” Showing that, things could be much worse than they are. Echo’s classmates do not have the same experiences, so their perspective is narrower in relation to the everyday tasks of a student.
Drive for something more – status quo is unacceptable.

The factor of the drive for something more shows the goal-oriented nature of the re-enrolling student veteran. This appeared in the conversations as “suffering with purpose,” and Zulu actually used that phrase in our conversation. “One of the things that I took from the military that I have applied to school is the ability to suffer with purpose.” These student veterans interrupted their postsecondary studies for many different reasons, but they returned to a public four-year university to finish what they started – to make good on a promise to themselves or to their families – to earn a college degree. The amount of work involved did not faze these respondents, as they were suffering with a purpose. Romeo put it this way, “no matter what the project or assignment, it’s just, I can perform it.” He added, “You get that degree, then figure out what else you want to do, but at least you’ve got that degree, you know, so that’s a big one. You’re in the military. Don’t ever give up on anything.” Every conversation revealed the pride these respondents felt toward their service. All would serve again if given the same choices. Romeo put it this way, “it’s like a hobby, pictures I like to take out, and I have to keep the haircut too, because I have drill, so it’s like, I’m proud of [my service].” Also, in each conversation, the respondents were clearly ready for and working toward the next step in their life outside of the military and with an equal amount of pride. Now that he is back, Echo talked about his will to move on. “I kind of have that drive to succeed and do well.”
Ability to deal with internal conflict – multiple roles to reconcile.

A student veteran must be able to work through different types of internal conflict when returning to school. On the one hand, they would like to be a normal, everyday student on campus, eschewing limelight or attention for their military past. On the other hand, they seek recognition on campus in the form of support services and administrative structures that facilitate their student life. Echo put it this way, “[I’d like to] mentally and physically blend in with civilians...I feel like it helps me adjust better.” While Papa said, “I don’t want it to…make things all easy for veterans, either, but we want people that are interested in wanting to return to school or wanting to do better and helping them through that transition.” He continued by asking, “Why the hell can there not be a commitment of facility space for something better, something more?”

Depending on the classroom setting, the instructor may mention a student veteran’s military service. The internal conflict again arises, but in most of these cases, respondents said they would rather blend in. From Romeo, “I get not necessarily embarrassed, but I don’t want to emphasize it.” In one other situation, Romeo’s instructor used his timeliness as an example of how a disciplined student can get things accomplished in a timely way, inferring that his military service instilled that discipline.

Another internal conflict that re-enrolling student veterans must work through successfully is their wartime self and their everyday student self. Several respondents talked about how the acts of war were affecting them today and how those acts were in direct conflict with their everyday, non-war selves. One anonymous respondent talked through a particular campaign that still affects him, “[the act] bugs me because it's like I
don't want to be that. I just want[ed] to help.” Another anonymous respondent is getting help to resolve the internal conflict of his military self and his student self, “[the treatment is] going to suck but I want to get better with everything...I've learned a lot about [PTSD]. Being a logical thinker, I've learned that's why I act like that or that's why I do that.”

Conclusion

Through the course of a single semi-structured, intensive interview, the respondents graciously shared their transition experiences as a re-enrolling student veteran at a public, four-year university. Although each student veteran’s set of transition experiences were unique, a set of common themes bound their stories together.

These common themes included Navigating Cross-cultural Transitions; Coping and Thriving; Making Plans; and Reconnecting. Navigating cross-cultural transitions comprised the successes and struggles of the student veterans as they moved through and engaged in military, civilian, and student cultures. Depending on the student veteran, they shared different perspectives on coping with the transitions or thriving in the face of them. All of the respondents planned or attempted to plan for different circumstances awaiting them in the military or once they returned to school. Finally, these student veterans reconnected to their family and friends, and offered advice to the student veterans that will come after them.

Beyond the four themes that were evident from the interviews, a deeper thread wove its way through the respondents – connecting them with three factors that comprise the Theory of Transition Experiences of Re-enrolling Student Veterans. The
first, experiential maturity, illustrates the way these student veterans are mature beyond their chronological years. The second, a drive for something more, depicts the goal-orientation and drive of the student veterans. The final factor, the ability to deal with internal conflict, shows how the student veteran switches or attempts to switch among the civilian, student, and military cultures.

The findings of my study included the respondents’ individual stories, the common themes that tied those individual stories together, and the theory resulting from the in-depth analysis of these stories and themes. The next chapter puts these findings and theory in the context of previous work on student veterans and it reviews the limitations and practice implications of the theory.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter serves as an overview of the previous four chapters by summarizing the study, restating the problem, and restating the methods used to research the problem. It also summarizes the findings and theory that resulted from the analysis of the data collected. Lastly, it puts these findings and theory in the context of prior research, offers implications for these findings and the ensuing theory, and provides suggestions for future research.

Re-statement of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to develop a theory grounded in the conversations with and the transition experiences of re-enrolling veterans attending a public four-year university located in the Midwest region of the US. This grounded theory case study was limited to a single institution, to individuals who are veterans and who re-enrolled at a public four-year university upon their return from active duty. These student veterans did not necessarily re-enroll at the institution where they initially began their postsecondary experiences. While other studies have focused on the experiences of student veterans at public four-year universities (Bauman, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston, 2009), they have not focused on re-enrolling student veterans at a public four-year university in the Midwest US. In addition, I was drawn to study this type of institution because of my academic advising, residential life, and academic administration professional experiences at several colleges and universities over a 22-year span. This study seeks to inform college student services staff about this particular group of students and the transition issues they face. It also seeks to enhance faculty awareness of the issues facing their
students who are members of this growing population. Through the use of grounded theory, it will open the door to additional studies of this population, thereby enhancing the body of knowledge and resources for institutions as they work with this student population.

Re-statement of the Problem

Colleges and universities have rekindled their interest in serving student veterans returning from foreign and domestic tours of duty. As early as the first Gulf War in the early 1990s, campuses have been faced with the need to accommodate students who are deployed during their academic studies, often times during the middle of an academic term. To facilitate these premature departures, campuses had to adopt new policies and processes to support their students being deployed on short notice. Since the events of September 11, 2001, the federal government has increased its support for returning veterans in the form of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This legislation has been touted as the most comprehensive GI Bill since the original Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (Iraq Afghanistan Veterans of America, 2012). In parallel, institutions have enhanced support services for veterans enrolling in their classes. While they have further developed and implemented services to support student veterans, the lack of research dealing specifically with re-enrolling student veterans serves as the impetus for this study. As the number of re-enrolling student veterans continues to grow, it is vital for institutions to understand the needs of this unique population and understand how the institutions can best support them before deployment and once they return to campus.
Scope of the Study and Methods Summary

Data for this study were collected from seven re-enrolling student veterans attending the same public four-year university in the Midwest region of the United States. Appendix B contains the participant recruitment letter, and Appendix C contains the consent form used. Using a semi-structured interview protocol with a common set of starter questions, interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed upon, private location. The conversations were digitally recorded, professionally transcribed, and lasted between 50-105 minutes. Using constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006), each interview was coded, from which I analyzed common themes, which led to the development of the following theory.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

The purpose of this study was to describe and illuminate the transition experiences of re-enrolling veterans attending a public four-year university located in the Midwest region of the US. The impetus for this research was two-fold. First, the need for this specific type of research stems from the growing number of veterans returning to colleges and universities, following several campaigns in the Middle East (namely Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom). Second, this work stems from my work and interests in higher education administration and the services and programs provided to students, developed through 22 years of professional work in the field as a residence hall director, an academic advisor, and as a manager within academic support offices.
To fulfill the purpose of the study, a constructivist grounded theory method was used to create meaning of the experiences of returning veterans. This method was applied to the recorded and analyzed conversations with seven re-enrolling veterans at a public four-year university. Constructivist grounded theory affords the researcher to take into account their own life and work experiences. Charmaz (2006) suggests that the life and work experiences of the researcher often influence the research they do and the subsequent interpretation of that work. A constructivist approach to grounded theory methods also “places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130) between the researcher and the respondents. In the end, the Theory of Transition Experiences of Re-enrolling Student Veterans emerged.

Elements of Theory

The Theory of Transition Experiences of Re-enrolling Student Veterans comprises three tenets that connected the experiences of seven individual re-enrolling student veterans, as I interpreted them. Each respondent either spoke about or demonstrated these tenets: experiential maturity (maturity that goes beyond a person’s chronological age); a drive for something more than they have currently; and the ability to deal with internal conflict (created either by their desire for simultaneous anonymity and recognition on campus or by their past war selves and current civilian selves). Here are more specific examples of these three tenets and how they revealed themselves for this study’s respondents.
Experiential maturity – they feel older than they are.

The tenet of Experiential Maturity showed itself at different points in the conversations with the study’s respondents. For some, they shared they were old beyond their years and attributed their advanced age to their military experiences. Echo put it this way, “…when you get back home you kind of feel like an old man in a young man’s body. I feel a lot older than people that are the same age as me.” He went on to share that although he was concerned about university-related things in keeping with his student status, he was also concerned about “grown up” things like financial management, future career aspirations, and not where his next bar outing would take him. Zulu was profound when he was offering this advice to future student veterans:

   Live with a purpose; do something, because this is a rare experience that very few people have. …I could be surly and bitter about it because not everybody served. I had terrible experiences overseas. I had to spend over two years of my life overseas. There are a lot of things you can be bitter about, but why?

   For others, experiential maturity showed itself in the student veteran’s perspective on day-to-day life as a college student. These student veterans cared very much about their academic work and but did not worry about seemingly small things or issues that their fellow classmates complained about. In fact, the respondents made no reference to complaining, but instead eschewed those who did. From the respondents’ perspectives, either the issue needed to be dealt with and resolved, or it was not an issue to worry about. Romeo proudly said in our interview, “I’m always on time, …I always have stuff done, and I never complain.” When talking about his self-confidence after returning
from his deployment, Zulu said, “…when you come back you have overcome [those hurdles in the military]. You know that if you get your mind right, you can kind of deal with anything.”

**Drive for something more – status quo is unacceptable.**

The respondents in this study discussed or otherwise demonstrated an under-the-current drive for something more. For some, the military received credit for instilling this goal-oriented drive. For others, it was already part of the upbringing and values of the respondent. Romeo gave credit for his goal-oriented nature to his upbringing when he said, “[being goal-oriented is] definitely part of my upbringing, part of how I like to carry myself, and you know, I slip up, and I’m really hard on myself…and I learn from it.” For Zulu he translated his military-learned goal orientation to his schoolwork. “So just being able to apply that [military] mentality now to school, like well, I’m doing this for four years anyway, may as well do something good with it.” Regardless, these student veterans were proud to have served, would serve again if given the opportunity to turn back the clock, and were working toward something more – something larger – some end result or goal that was not as daunting as the things they faced while in the military.

**Ability to deal with internal conflict – multiple roles to reconcile.**

The last tenet of the Theory of Transition Experiences of Re-enrolling Student Veterans appears at different times in the conversations with the respondents for this study. These respondents all described internal conflict in one way or another. For some, the conflict arose from having significant life experiences in two very different theaters – the theater of war and the theater of home or civilian life. While not all of the
respondents experienced lethal combat during their service, all were trained in the use of deadly force and most had near-death experiences. The respondents were trained to carry out deadly work, yet returning stateside and to school requires a more civilized approach to day-to-day life. Such a change in the everyday life takes a toll on the student veteran and creates the internal conflict. Echo spoke in terms of “civilian mode” and “Marine mode” and the inability to easily switch out of Marine mode when he wanted or needed to.

I can almost snap my fingers and go into Marine mode, you know? All that training and all that experience, kind of makes it easier. However, even though yeah, I had 17 to 18 years of civilian [life], I find myself unable to flip that switch and go back to civilian mode.

Student veterans also experience internal conflict on campus when they are trying to blend in with their student peers and at the same time, seeking and often needing campus-based support services appropriate for their military experiences. As told by the respondents, the conflict occurred equally in the classroom with an instructor who “outed” their military status or interacting with students who would ask if the respondent had killed anyone or other inane questions about the war.

Contributions to the Field

There are several studies referenced in Chapter Two that focused on student veterans and their collegiate careers (Johnson, 2009; Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011; DiRamio, et al., 2008; Livingston, 2009; Rumann, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Johnson (2009), for example, discussed Appalachian State University’s successful work
with veterans since the start of the Gulf War. Comprising both Desert Shield and Desert Storm, those military campaigns served as the first time Johnson’s institution had experienced significant numbers of military call-ups and, thus, institutional withdrawals. Appalachian State University quickly implemented policies and practices to minimize the effects on students as they transitioned to become soldiers. At the onset, tuition refunds and non-punitive withdrawals were granted to students who received orders for deployment. Depending on the course and the point of withdrawal, called-up students worked with faculty to take final exams early, received an incomplete grade, or made arrangements to complete their courses while away from campus. Depending on the situation, Johnson (2009) described e-mail and other Internet-based exchanges between student and faculty as the most common option chosen. Advisors and the institution kept in touch with the students where possible through email messages, newsletters, and notes of encouragement. One goal of these efforts was to maintain the connection between soon-to-be-veterans and alma mater. Another goal was to facilitate the one-day return of the student soldier and ease his or her adjustment back to civilian and student life.

In a more recent study of a national sample of student veterans who served in either Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) or Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Rudd, Goulding, and Bryan (2011) investigated issues such as emotional adjustment and suicide risk. Their findings were consistent with findings from a previous study conducted by the Department of Defense (2010), with regard to suicide risk and emotional adjustment. Compared to when these young men and women first went off to serve, the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and general psychological symptoms are far above
the regular university student and were higher than the veteran population as a whole. Of those who participated in Rudd, Goulding, and Bryan’s study, almost 46% suffered from severe PTSD (2011, p. 354). The authors warned that the expected influx of student veterans on U.S. college campuses could easily overwhelm mental health professionals.

This study was unique in its focus on re-enrolling student veterans and their attendance at one public four-year institution. The study was further unique because of the combination of researcher’s background and experiences combined with the experiences of the seven individuals who served as respondents.

This research contributes directly to the field of higher education administration in several ways. First, the way in which the interviews were conducted is important for future researchers to consider. All but one interview was conducted in a private study room, devoid of distractions and outside noise. This setting helped the respondents understand I was protecting their anonymity and valued their participation. Sitting on the opposite side of a table within the room and having the respondent sit closest to the door solidified the feeling of security and permission to leave the interview if the respondent was uncomfortable. Papa’s interview setting was not ideal as background noise interrupted the flow of our conversation at times. The interview setting for this type of study is important for future researchers to consider.

Another contribution to the field relates to the grounded theory that emerged from the study. Chapter Four provides more detail, but the Theory of Transitions of Re-enrolling Student Veterans comprises these three tenets: experiential maturity, a drive for something more, and the ability to deal with internal conflict. The tenets are woven
together by the conversations I had with the student veterans and by my interpretive lens through which their experiences were seen.

**Implications for Practice**

There are several ways this research can benefit student veterans and postsecondary institutions alike. For postsecondary institutions, this research can serve as the impetus for a program review of student veteran support services currently in place. By taking into account the theory presented here and the experiences of the respondents interviewed, institutions can learn what their particular student veterans need to help facilitate the transitions experienced. It may also serve as a model for initiating conversations with student veterans at an institution, in the hope of expanding on the knowledge gained in this study. Using this study as a starting point, additional or different themes will certainly emerge thanks to different student veterans and different institutions.

For current student veterans, this research shows a level of commitment by their fellow veterans – a commitment to help one another succeed in this part of their life. It also contributes to the consciousness-raising among institutions in the hope that more people will be aware of and talk about the needs of this significant population. It is essential for institutions heed the call to service when it comes to supporting student veterans.

When asked what their institution could do differently to help with the transition, respondents shared several things. First, communicate with your student veterans. While each one is unique and has his or her own story, it is clear these student veterans wanted
to receive information about the services available to them at the institution. Institutions should do what they can to know when student veterans are entering or leaving. During the application process, learn about and maintain an applicant’s veteran status. Use it to ensure these students know about the services available at the institution and to help connect them with other student veterans. During a withdrawal process for a student being deployed, track their expected return date and send correspondence during the deployment to maintain a connection with the institution. As the student’s return date nears, the institution could offer emotional and administrative assistance ahead of time. Such contact could serve to facilitate their return. As more service members return to the US in conjunction with the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, such strategies will be even more important to employ.

Implications for Further Research

Despite attempts to speak with a more diverse representation of re-enrolling student veteran, the sampling method used in this study did not provide an opportunity to record a means to ensure such diversity. Although the sampling strategy meant that all student veterans at the institution were invited to participate in the research, that pool may not have contained a good sample of gender- or culturally-diverse student veterans who interrupted their studies to serve in the military. Another explanation for their lack of involvement is female and diverse student veterans may not comfortable responding to invitations to research studies. To improve the diversity of the respondent pool, the study could be conducted again at an institution with a higher percentage of women veterans and diverse veterans.
Other implications for further research include the study of the children of student veterans attending a postsecondary institution. If they are education benefit-eligible students, they work through similar institutional and VA administrative processes to student veterans and likely have a perspective to share about an institution’s student veteran support services.

From the perspective of a faculty member, it would be interesting to study the use of student veterans as peer mentors in a classroom setting, given their experiential maturity and the examples of improved academic performance in this study’s respondents.

A study like this could be conducted at a private institution or at a community college, where the student populations are very different from a traditional, public, four-year University. A study like this could also focus exclusively on female veterans. As such, the results would likely include a broader array of experiences and would provide an important voice for a doubly-marginalized segment of the campus community.

A final area of research to consider is a comparison study with two different groups of student veterans. One group attends a postsecondary institution with an established student veteran support office and the other group attends a postsecondary institution without such an office. Such a study could help show the efficacy of such offices.

**Reflections on Findings**

My conversations with these seven individuals at times frustrated me and at other times moved me. The higher education administrator in me bristled at the inefficiencies
that were described or the preventable mistakes that occurred. I often grow tired of a reactionary approach to issues that arise at work – I also realize that mistakes can occur, no matter how well-intended a staff member or department may be. Institutions and their employees need to do better.

As for being moved, my life’s path did not include military service. On the contrary, my experiences lead me to embrace cross-cultural dialogue to reach mutual understanding. Even so, I understand and appreciate the commitment and pride the respondents expressed in our interviews. I am not sure what I would have done had the attacks of September 11, 2001, occurred in 1984. I only hope that my 18-year-old self would have at least proudly supported his classmates who went off to serve their country. For now, I can and will be a staunch advocate for campus-based efforts that support today’s and tomorrow’s student veteran.
References


Appendix A: IRB Approval

A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 2 - research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior

Project Title: The Transition Experiences of Re-Enrolling Veterans at a Public Four-Year University

Primary Investigator: Patrick James Beatty

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: David Horton

Department: Counseling and Higher Education

Robin Stack, CIP, Human Subjects Research Coordinator
Office of Research Compliance

Date: June 27, 2012

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letter

Hello,

My name is Patrick Beatty and I am a doctoral student in the Patton College of Education at Ohio University. I am conducting a research study on the transition experiences of students who interrupted their college studies to serve one or more tours of duty as an active or reservist member of the U.S. Armed Forces.

The number of military veterans returning to college has been growing over the past several years and will continue to grow as troops are being sent home from Iraq and Afghanistan. Colleges and universities need to be as prepared as possible to serve the needs of these student veterans! As a participant in this research, you can help let faculty and staff know (anonymously) about your experiences coming back to school and civilian life.

The research itself will hopefully seem more like a conversation, as the “data” collected will be from one or more interviews I have with you. The interview(s) will be held in an agreed upon location on campus or off (including out of town, for those not in Athens over the summer). If you agree to participate, know that your identity will remain confidential and any identifiable information from our conversations will be made anonymous in my dissertation. Also, know that you will be able to stop your involvement in this study at any time without any consequence to you – before we talk, during the interview(s), or afterward.

If you are interested in participating in this study or if you have questions about it before you decide, please reply to this message or telephone me at 740.274.1296.

Thank you for considering this invitation and I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Patrick Beatty
veterantransitions@gmail.com
740.274.1296
Appendix C: Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: The Transition Experiences of Re-Enrolling Student Veterans at a Public Four-Year University

Researcher: Patrick Beatty

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study

This study is being done because colleges and universities need help understanding what it is like for a veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces to return to school after serving their country. By speaking with student veterans who have experienced the transition, I hope the information collected will help colleges and universities better prepare for the next groups of student veterans.

If you agree to participate, you and I will have one or more interviews in a mutually agreed upon location. These interviews will be audio recorded to make sure I am able to review and completely understand what we talked about. In addition, we will likely exchange email messages and/or telephone calls after each interview so I may share my research with you along the way. In the process, you will have the chance to provide feedback and input about my research as it progresses.

Risks and Discomforts

No risks or discomforts are anticipated, but if you are not comfortable during our interviews or afterward, you may stop participating at any time.

Benefits

This study is important to society because of how your experiences will help student veterans after you receive better support and services from colleges and universities.

You may not benefit personally by participating in this study, aside from knowing your involvement has the potential for helping future student veterans by sharing your experiences with me.
Confidentiality and Records

Your study information will be kept confidential in several ways. A well-respected, and confidential transcription company will professionally transcribe all audio recordings of our interview(s). Immediately following transcription, their copy of the audio recording will be destroyed. Original electronic audio files and interview transcripts will be maintained as encrypted files on a personal computer and two thumb drives. Encrypted files cannot be opened and read/listened to without a “key” or password.

In addition, your real name will not be used in the study and stories you share with me will be made anonymous in my final document. This will help ensure that nobody reading my study can identify you.

Lastly, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

- Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
- Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU.

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Patrick Beatty, veterantransitions@gmail.com or 740.274.1296. My academic advisor’s name is Dr. David Horton Jr., and he can be reached at hortond@ohio.edu or 740.593.4163.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740) 593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary
- you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature ___________________________________ Date ____________________
Printed Name __________________________________________
Appendix D: Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your military service. How long did/have you served?
2. Why join the (insert military branch)?
3. Describe your deployment(s) – what was your job? Where were you stationed?
4. You were in college before you (enlisted/were called up). How long had you been in school?
5. If called up… Describe your reactions when you received your orders.
6. If enlisted… Describe how you decided to enlist.
7. Describe how you prepared for your deployment.
8. How were you preparing mentally for this change? Emotionally? Academically?
9. Describe the different support mechanisms you used before you deployed – institutional, familial, from friends.
10. Before the end of your tour of duty, describe the preparations you made for your return. What were you thinking about as you prepared to return home?
11. Describe the different support mechanisms you used before you returned – military, family, friends, fellow troops, your college.
12. Describe the path you took between your initial return home and going back to school. How much time did you spend home beforehand?
13. How did you decide to return to this school after returning home?
15. Once at school, describe what the transition back was like for you.
16. What strategies did you use to deal with the transition?
17. What barriers did you experience upon your return to school?
18. Describe how your transition back to school after having served compares to when you first went to college.
19. What things stand out for you as the most successful part of your transition back to school?
20. What things stand out for you as the least successful part of your transition back to school?
21. Thinking back on when you returned to college after having served, what would you have done differently?
22. What could your university have done differently to facilitate the transition back?
23. If still in school… What can the university do now to ensure you successfully reach your academic goals?
24. Imagine a fellow (soldier, airman/woman, Marine, Guardian) is planning to return to college. What advice do you give to him or her?