Veterans' Perceptions and Use of Student Support Services at a Midwestern University

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Eastern Illinois University

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Veterans' Perceptions and Use of Student Support Services at a Midwestern University

(TITLE)

BY

Amanda J. Starwalt

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2015

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE
Veterans' Perceptions and Use of Student Support Services at a Midwestern University

Amanda Starwalt

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VETERANS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT SERVICES

ABSTRACT

The number of student veterans on college campuses is increasing (NCVAS, 2012). There is a need to support these students, but how? Campuses must take a closer look at the student services they offer to student veterans, and how they are being utilized (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). In this study, six student veterans were interviewed to better understand what resources and support student veterans utilize on campus. It was found that student veterans are similar to adult learners and bring with them experiences and responsibilities which play an important role in the support and services they utilize. Student veterans desire to be treated as adults and have personal challenges in which they rely on support from family and not the institution. In order to best support our student veterans, orientation, campus student veteran centers, and faculty and staff training must be tailored to meet the needs of these students.

Key Words: Veterans, student support, Veteran Center
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my favorite student veteran, my husband Chris. Thank you for serving our country and allowing me to stand beside you. I am so proud of you and your dedication to pursuing your degree while balancing your service, work, and our family. Thank you for being my inspiration and biggest supporter in everything. I love you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thesis has been my favorite part of my graduate program thanks to my wonderful thesis advisor, Dr. Dianne Timm. As an adult learner going back to school to complete a Masters degree there were times I was unsure of myself. Dr. Timm helped me to see that being an adult learner was to my advantage. I am grateful for the encouragement and insight she gave to me throughout this entire process. Thank you Dr. Timm so very much.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee members Dr. Mona Davenport and Dr. Jennifer Sipes. In my meetings with Dr. Davenport and Dr. Sipes they both pushed me to think more broadly and write more professionally. Their guidance and assistance in the writing and research process helped me to grow as a researcher. Thank you both.

I have many other friends, family, coworkers, and classmates which cheered me on along the way. I thank all of you for sharing in my enthusiasm for my topic and believing in me.

Finally, thank you to the six student veterans who were willing to share their stories with me. I feel honored to be able to share your stories with others. I thank you for your service and I wish you the best in the future.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The number of student veterans on college campuses is increasing. According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (NCVAS) (2012), the number of total education program beneficiaries increased from approximately 400,000 in 2000 to 800,000 in 2010. This number had increased to more than 924,000 by 2011 (Lighthall, 2012). With this many veterans entering higher education there is a need to understand what resources will help them be successful. This increase means that college campuses must take a closer look at the student services they offer to student veterans, and how they are being utilized.

Feedback on such programs is critical to ensuring the continued success and improvement of the services offered, as well as the benefit to student veterans. Vacchi (2012) stated that undergraduate military veterans are likely the group most in need of campus services and support. Additionally, those still currently serving in the National Guard or Reserve components may still experience challenges in shifting between college responsibilities and military duties (Vacchi, 2012). Many campuses have done little to specifically support this population, and even less has been done to understand the quality of these services. Student veterans are “one of America’s greatest untapped human resources,” and they are “the kind of role models we need on our campuses” (Lighthall, 2012, p. 88).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this research study was to gain further knowledge regarding the student services veterans at a Midwest university are using on campus. The research
sought to discover if student veterans are knowledgeable about the programs and services offered, and to what extent the programs and services are utilized. The results of this study can be used to improve programs and services not only at this institution, but also at other university and college campuses. In this study the services aiding student veterans in the transition to college life were investigated, specifically looking at the level of satisfaction student veterans have with these services, and what can be done to better serve this population. This study was conducted by asking the following research questions:

1. What challenges do student veterans face in obtaining their degree?
2. What services and forms of support do student veterans identify as resources aiding in the transition to college?
3. What is their [student veterans] level of satisfaction with the services offered?

**Significance of the Study**

Many articles provided suggestions for what can be done to better serve student veterans including establishing specific points of contact, providing comprehensive services with campus wide training, conducting orientation programs, and establishing campus student veteran groups (O'Herrin, 2011, Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, Vacchi, 2012, Whiteman, Mroczek, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Barry, 2013, Zinger & Cohen, 2010). What was lacking in many of the articles was evaluation of the effectiveness and use of student support services by veterans once these programs are put into action. Feedback from student veterans on the effectiveness of these programs is crucial for improvement. It is important to know if the right kinds of services are being provided and if the student veterans know how to access them.
Limitations of the Study

As the spouse of a twice-deployed Army Reserve combat veteran who is currently enrolled at a community college, I am conducting this research to better understand what is most helpful and important to student veterans when returning and transitioning to college. I have experienced, with my husband, first-hand the struggles of trying to complete a college degree while serving in the military. This has included navigating financial aid and veteran's education benefits, withdrawing from courses midterm due to mobilization and deployment, and returning to college following deployment. Many things can change from one semester to the next and it can be difficult to keep up. Also, being a non-traditional student myself, returning to complete my master’s degree with a full time job, spouse, and two children at home, I feel I am sensitive to the needs of adult students. It is also important to note my full time position is as a financial aid advisor within the financial aid office at the university. I have not worked directly in the veterans’ services area; however, the selection of my participants was impacted by my position within the office. Two of my participants were referred by the veterans’ certifying official within the office of financial aid and two were referred by the student veterans’ office coordinator. I hope this research can provide insight into what can make this university more veteran friendly.

There are factors which could limit the results of this study. This study welcomed participation from all veterans from all branches of the military. Being that there were major differences in the experiences of the student veterans who participated, consideration needs to be given to the participants’ status as active duty veterans, reservists, and members of a National Guard unit. The length and type of active duty
service the participants encountered varied and this is important. Identification of these student veterans was difficult. Some student veterans no longer wished to be associated with the military and view their time in the service as final (Vacchi, 2012), and did not seek the camaraderie or recognition some of the veterans’ services may provide. Others may not utilize military benefits such as state or federal education benefits and financial aid, counseling services or new student programs, because they feel these services do not apply to them, or they do not understand how the services might help them. This was a possible factor in low participation rates.

Due to the research including qualitative analysis, another limitation could be the quality and credibility of the self-reported data collected from the interview if participants are hesitant to share their true opinions and thoughts with the interviewer. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness of the self-reported data, triangulation was utilized (Krefting, 1991). Credibility of the interview process was enhanced through reframing, repeating, and expanding questions.

Time and money were also possible limitations to the study as no incentive was offered to the participants. The data was collected and analyzed over the course of only one year. The research was conducted at a rural Midwest university, with the nearest major military base located over 100 miles away.

Definitions of Terms

**Activation.** According to the U.S. Army’s website (GoArmy.com) activation is defined as when a Reserve component soldier is called to serve full time. Activation can place the soldier within the United States or deploy them to foreign soil.
Adult Learner. This study will use the term adult learner which was originally referred to as non-traditional student. Ely (1997) states “the average non-traditional student is an adult, age 25 or older, who has returned to school either full-time or part-time. The student must balance school with employment, family, and financial commitments, placing them “at risk,” and leaving no time for extracurricular campus activities” (p. 3).

Deployment. According to the U.S. Army’s website (GoArmy.com) a military deployment is defined as the soldier being transferred to another place in the world to fulfill their contract of service, usually on foreign soil.

Mobilization. The U.S. Army’s website, GoArmy.com, defines mobilization as the soldier being ordered to report to their home station, which is usually the soldier’s Army Reserve Center, where the unit will begin preparing for activation.

National Guard. The military reserve units controlled by each state of the United States, equipped by the federal government and subject to the call of either the federal or the state government according to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2013), PTSD can occur following a traumatic event. For a veteran, a traumatic event is something terrible and frightening that they see or experience, such as: combat exposure, a terrorist attack, or serious accident, in which one feels they are in danger and have no control. After a traumatic event, many people have some stress-related reactions, but not everyone experiences PTSD. PTSD reactions do not tend to lessen over time and disrupt daily life (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013).
Reserve. The U.S. Department of Defense defines reserve members as members of the military services who are not in active service but who are subject to call to active duty.

Student veteran. For the purpose of this study, I will utilize Vacchi’s (2012) definition which defines a student veteran as “any student who is a current or former member of the active duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience, legal veteran status, or GI Bill use” (p. 17).

Veteran-friendly. Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) define veteran-friendly campuses as those who have put in place “personnel, policies, resources, and programs that reflect sensitivity to and understanding of the need of veterans” (p. 10).
CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

In reviewing the literature on previous research conducted on student veterans and college services, many studies pointed to the need for the understanding of student veterans’ transition from combat to college, as well as the importance of faculty and staff training to provide the best support services possible. In this chapter, the main themes found in the literature on student veterans and their transition to college will be shared. This will include the history of veterans’ in higher education, transitional issues, identity development, student veteran support services, and faculty and staff preparedness.

History of Veterans in Higher Education

In 1944, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, also known as the G.I. Bill of Rights was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, as millions of veterans returned from serving overseas in World War II (Verstegen & Wilson, 2002). The G.I. Bill was created to assist in providing education and training for returning veterans. According to Verstegen and Wilson (2002), “More than one million veterans were enrolled in higher education during each of 1946 and 1947, and well over 900,000 during 1948. Veterans represented between 40 and 50 percent of all higher education students during this period” (p. 928).

This increase in the number of student veterans meant construction of new facilities and creation of new programs to best meet the needs and goals of these students (Verstegen & Wilson, 2002).

The veteran was among the most successful of all college students academically, and this phenomenon generated a psychological shift for many within American
society: no longer was the college campus seen as the exclusive preserve of elite sons and daughters. Once veterans were welcomed inside the college classroom, the irreversible trend began of more and more people, from all groups within society, being able to secure a stable and successful future through the pursuit of higher education and training” (Verstegen & Wilson, 2002, p.928).

The G.I. Bill was utilized by more than 7.8 million veterans in the years following WWII and made the middle-class lifestyle a reality for many young Americans (Verstegen & Wilson, 2002). With this many new students on campus institutions needed to find ways to support this population on their campuses.

The success of the 1944 G.I. Bill led to subsequent veteran legislation, which continues to benefit returning student veterans. Legislation includes the 1984 Montgomery G.I. Bill and the 2008 Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, which provides “veterans with active duty service on, or after, Sept. 11 2001, enhanced educational benefits that cover more educational expenses, provide a living allowance, money for books and the ability to transfer unused educational benefits to spouses or children” (http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/history.asp). While the veterans are offered the financial support toward their education, campuses have identified that the student veterans need more than just financial support toward their transition to college and their pursuit of a degree.

**Transitional Issues**

Schlossberg (1981) stated that adults experience transition and change throughout their lives, and that adapting to those changes is a dynamic process. Schlossberg believed the need lied in connecting those adults to the resources needed to cope with these
changes (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009, p. 213). According to DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008), who studied the transition from military to college found, “the transition to college was among the most difficult adjustments to be made when returning from wartime service” (p. 97).

This study will utilize Schlossberg’s transition theory and her four S’s, which include situation, self, support, and strategies (as cited in Evans et al., 2009) in understanding student veterans’ experiences. According to Evans et al. (2009) these four factors influence a person’s ability to cope with transition. How the individual views the transition is important. Many veterans are transitioning to college or back to college and this can be a challenging time.

**Situation.** DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) utilized Schlossberg’s theory in their research on 25 student veterans and their transition from combat to campus, stating that deployments qualify as major life transitions because of the uncertainty surrounding the situation and the disruption of existing routines and relationships. Schlossberg looked at several factors relating to situation including the trigger, timing, sense of control, role changes, duration, previous experiences, and assessment of who is responsible (as cited in Evans et al., 2009). In the transition back to college for veterans, many things could trigger the change in their situation. This trigger could be retirement, the end of a deployment or active duty contract, or forced separation from service. In regards to timing, the separation from active military duty and return to civilian life could be viewed in a positive or negative light, depending on if the veteran feels the timing is right.
The individual may or may not feel in control of the role change from soldier to student, may be uncertain as to the duration of this change, and may have many other stressors to contend with at the same time. The transition from trained soldier in a combat zone, to civilian responsibilities and family, is a major adjustment (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Lighthall (2012) states that on top of the typical fears new students may have, many veterans may also have a spouse and family to support while tackling the new challenges of college. The campus environment itself is very different from the military environment. The campus environment allows for more freedom with less structure and different rules than the military demands. The veteran’s assessment of where the responsibility for the change lies is an important factor in how they handle the transition and change.

**Self.** Schlossberg identified many factors that shape the way a person views the world and how they cope with change, including personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources (as cited in Evans et al., 2009). Not only are the students in this study soldiers and veterans, but many are also spouses, parents, and professionals. Student veterans are demographically very diverse and can vary in age, gender, and socioeconomic status. As soldiers, student veterans are likely to be more resilient, optimistic, committed, and better equipped with coping skills, than the average student. “Many of these veterans have survived, endured, and excelled in artificial and real-world situations, leaving them both resilient and self-confident” (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010, p. 31).

**Support.** In Schlossberg’s (as cited in Evans et al., 2009) 4S model, she focused on social support from friends and family, as well as the support seen in communities and
other formal institutions. For veterans returning to college, there is a major shift in where their support lies. As a soldier, support comes from the structured military unit and other soldiers who are experiencing the same challenges, “this teamwork and affiliation are essential keys to physical and emotional survival in the military” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 28). As a student, support comes more in the form of friends and family. While these supports are more stable, they may not be able to support in the way fellow soldiers might. This is one reason student veteran organizations are important, they bring in another level of understanding and support to the campus environment.

**Strategies.** How a person copes is important. Schlossberg identified that multiple coping strategies and flexibility are key to effectively coping with transition and change (as cited in Evans et al., 2009). As soldiers, these veterans are continually mandated to participate in trainings on suicide prevention, PTSD, and money management among other topics (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). Soldiers are continuously encouraged to utilize resources such as Veterans’ Administration counseling, their unit Chaplain, Strong Bonds relationship retreats, and online websites such as Military OneSource. As student veterans, the only mandatory training on the college campus might be their initial orientation program. While other resources are available on the college campus, many student veterans may not know how to access them or may not feel the same pressure to do so as they felt while in the military.

**Identity Development and Adult Learners**

According to Evans et al. (2009), Chickering’s theory of identity development looked at seven vectors of development which contribute to the formation of identity. Students may deal with more than one vector at a time and may move through the vectors
at different rates (Evans et al., 2009). The vectors build on each other and become more complex taking into account emotional, interpersonal, ethical, and intellectual aspects of development (Evans et al., 2009). Of the seven vectors, moving through autonomy toward interdependence is the vector most closely related to student veterans’ stage of identity development. Evans et al. (2009) quotes Chickering in stating that “this aspect of development results in increased emotional independence, which is defined as “freedom from continual and pressing needs for reassurance, affection, or approval from others” (p.68). Most student veterans have developed to this level of maturity beyond that of their fellow students. They have had more life experiences and challenges that have helped them develop in different ways than their peers who did not serve abroad. They are likely to have a more developed sense of who they are and what is important to them.

According to Kenner and Weinerman (2011), there are four principles which define adult learners; one of which is the “extensive depth of experience, which serves as a critical component in the foundation of their self identity” (p.88). Veterans have had more experiences than their same age peers, or even younger college companions. They have had to learn to survive in other parts of the world, depend on members of their unit, and respond to crisis situations. The other three principles include being self-directed and responsible for their own actions, being ready to learn and actively engage in the classroom, and being task motivated and focused on a specific goal (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Where student veterans are in the development of their identity is similar to that of an adult learner. Student veterans are a sub population of adult learners who often times return to college with unique challenges traditional students do not face (McBain,
Veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq who delayed their education to serve in the armed forces are one of three main groups of students responsible for the increasing number of adult learners entering college (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Kenner and Weinerman (2011) state that "these new adult learners bring learning styles and life experiences that may either be critical foundations for future success or deeply entrenched beliefs that hinder learning in the academic environment" (p. 87). This is true of the experiences military veterans bring to the classroom.

Graham and Long Gisi (2000) considered the effect of the college environment on adult learners and state that class-related learning and relationships with faculty are the most influential in adult learners’ experiences. The limited interaction with other groups on campus leads adult learners to draw their support from outside sources such as family, friends, and coworkers (Graham & Long Gisi, 2000). Veterans have also identified these groups as their form of support throughout the undergraduate experience (Livingston, 2009). In his 2009 dissertation, Livingston found:

Student veterans do not tend to utilize much campus 'support', but instead rely on other student veterans and friends and family. The increased academic emphasis resulting from the military influence minimizes the need for formal academic support for student veterans. Student affairs has not been an avenue of support for student veterans (p. 196).

The results of Graham and Long Gisi's (2000) study looking at college involvement in adult students also interestingly found that time spent on work or care of family had almost no effect on the outcomes reported by their adult participants. Graham and Long Gisi stated this "confronts conventional wisdom about the conflicts between work and
school” and that “adults seem to balance the two activities in this area fairly well” (p. 114). For many veterans the idea of balancing work and family have already been something they have had to work on; coming to college means adding one more thing that they need to balance in their lives.

Senter and Senter (1998) quote Schlossberg and noted that adult learners are highly motivated and are more involved in learning and studying than their younger peers. As adult learners, veterans have learned to be independent and for the most part take care of themselves. The study also found that adult learners felt less need for non-academic support services such as career planning assistance, housing on campus, part-time work on campus, and orientation programs (Senter & Senter, 1998). Eileen Ely, an adult student wrote a paper reflecting her experiences as a non-traditional adult learner. In this paper, Ely (1997) writes about her adult experience in college saying:

Unless absolutely necessary, you will not see me in student services. I will get my needed information from my instructors, the department secretary if available, other students in my classes, or on a department bulletin board. I see faculty and staff as extensions of student services and value their ability to answer my questions (p. 4).

Support Services

Each student population requires support and veterans are no different. Identifying the unique needs of this population can be difficult because students may or may not present themselves as a member of this group. In order to work towards an inclusive campus program, every effort should be made to identify those who are student veterans on campus (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Becoming veteran-friendly should be the overall goal for college campuses who serve student veterans.
(Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). While educational pursuits can help in the healing of veterans, including those with PTSD, it is important for college professionals to readily provide support in the early stages of the transition (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, Widome, Kehle, Carlson, Laska, Gulden, & Lust, 2011). Bonar and Domenici (2011) suggest the relationship be established early with recruitment and admission practices and services of the institution, and continue by increasing the number and quality of student veteran outreach and support programs.

**Admission and Orientation.** The purpose of the admissions office is to be the first point of contact for prospective students, by providing information, tours, and highlighting the assets of the university (Kramer & Associates, 2003). Once students are admitted to the university, the orientation office takes things one step further by connecting students to the university by creating connections with other students. DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) recommend mandatory orientation for incoming student veterans, while providing them with a mentor to aid the veteran in navigating administrative, academic, and emotional aspects of the transition to college. Traditional orientation programs assume the student will be on their own away from home for the first time. The role of traditional admission and orientation programs may not appeal or apply to the support needs of student veterans. Most student veterans have lived away from home, many times overseas, and away from family for months to years at a time. Although many veterans may be first time college students, their situation will not be the same and admission and orientation programs should reflect this uniqueness. While it is suggested there be a period of adjustment after return from military service, some student veterans return to school as soon as possible following deployment.
VETERANS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT SERVICES

(diRamio & Jarvis, 2011). With a high number of veterans belonging to the Reserve and National Guard, many students will experience unpredictable and often disrupted enrollment patterns (Renn & Reason, 2013, Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This makes student veterans’ abilities to utilize their flexibility and coping strategies very important.

**Academic Advising.** The role of academic advisors is to link students to the faculty and academic side of the institution with the overall goal of helping students to succeed by developing a plan for their college career (Kramer & Associates, 2003). Academic advisors should be prepared with an understanding of the situation surrounding many student veterans return to college, since many students will want to pick up right where they left off following their deployment. Advisors should be prepared with knowledge of institutional policies on military transcripts and regulations and requirements relating to the veterans’ degree program and their education benefits (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Understanding the situation surrounding the student veteran’s return to college can also help academic advisors provide the best service possible.

**Financial Aid.** The role of the financial aid office is to assist students in the processing of state and federal aid. Many students returning from military service will use some form of veterans’ education benefits to fund not only the payment of their tuition and fees but also their living expenses. With the passage of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill in 2008, eligible service members who have served since September 11, 2001 have an even greater incentive to pursue a college degree (O’Herrin, 2011). Not only can the application and certification system be difficult to navigate, the delay seen in the processing of payments can be stressful. Identifying a primary contact person within the
financial aid office can help students in the application and certification process. Since many student veterans are leaving a situation most likely involving full time employment with the military in order to pursue their degree, the timely and efficient processing of their aid is crucial to their success.

**Counseling Services.** The role of counselors on campus is to help students work through difficult transitions and problems in both personal and academic areas (Kramer & Associates, 2003). There is still a stigma in the military community associated with seeking help from counseling services. While the majority of veterans returning from deployment do not suffer from PTSD, many may still experience stress and uncertainty when transitioning to college. DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) expressed their concern with whether students know how to access counseling, disability, and health services on campus. Bonar and Domenici (2011) identified three principles necessary in campus counseling centers when working with student veterans. Those principles include identifying, appreciating, and understanding military culture and the student’s situation, offering PTSD treatment on campus, and making student veteran outreach programs a high priority (Bonar & Domenici, 2011).

**Student Organizations.** Student organizations on campus can be influential to student success. These groups are typically formed by students with similar interests and goals and give students the opportunity to form friendships and to grow their professional network (Kramer & Associates, 2003). Student veteran peer groups have been organizing on college campuses since the signing of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill (www.studentveterans.org). Visible student veteran organizations on campus can provide opportunities for veterans to interact with other
students who share similar experiences (DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell, 2008). After the attacks on September 11, 2001 and the return of veterans from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), veterans sought more support through peer networks (www.studentveterans.org). In 2008, Student Veterans of America (SVA) was formed with a mission to provide support and resources to local student veteran organizations (www.studentveterans.org). The SVA now includes over 950 chapters on campuses across the U.S. focused on supporting student veterans. Over time, this support has adapted according to the needs of its members.

Many student veterans often feel alone and unable to relate to other traditional students during their transition to college (Sander, 2012, Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Many are older, suffer from PTSD, experience financial hardships, have marital or family problems, and other barriers which can make them feel out of place on a typical college campus (Freeman, 2012). This feeling of isolation may be due to military culture being strongly group-oriented. Many student veterans may feel conflicted when dealing with the loss of that belonging and their gained independence (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Having a place just for veterans can create a supportive environment where student veterans help one another identify strategies for coping.

**Campus Veterans Offices**

Veterans’ offices are relatively new additions to college campuses. Only about half of the college and universities surveyed in a report by DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) stated their school provided a dedicated office for student veterans. The role of a campus veteran’s office is to be a central location for veteran specific resources and information where veterans can go for help (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). Staffing the office with student
Faculty and Staff Support

Faculty and staff training are key to creating a supportive environment, but without awareness of the issues related to this population, will they be able to help? Faculty and staff likely work with student veterans on a daily basis and may not even know it. Faculty and staff should appreciate student veteran diversity and work to gain understanding of the cultural aspects of military and veteran life (Bonar & Domenici, 2011). Training, awareness, and understanding are important to ensuring quality services for student veterans. Programs such as the “Green Zone” (GZ), created at Virginia Commonwealth University, modeled off the “Safe Zone” program for LGBT students, can be implemented to spread support and knowledge of student veterans throughout the campus and to enhance the visibility of the network of faculty and staff who are ready and willing to assist student veterans (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). Nichols-Casebolt (2012) identified that results from the implementation of this program indicated the veterans felt they could identify someone on campus they could turn to and that overall the campus was more veteran-friendly.

Faculty. Kramer and Associates (2003) indicate the role of faculty members is to help students become independent critical thinkers who can connect learning in the classroom to their lives and future careers. The role of faculty members should also be to teach responsibility, time management, problem solving, decision making and other life skills needed in maturing into adulthood (Kramer & Associates, 2003). Student veterans desire to be understood and acknowledged by faculty members and to have a sense that
their professors appreciate their challenges and experiences (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008).

Staff. Most likely a student’s first point of contact in any campus office will be a front line staff member. These staff could be in any variety of positions from office secretaries to department directors. Staff should be aware of the services, resources, and policies in place as they directly relate to student veterans. For example, staff knowledge of activation and deployment policies would ease an already stressful situation for those students currently enrolled when they are ordered to active duty (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). By simplifying the procedures for withdrawal from college due to a deployment, the transition back to college may be less overwhelming.

The literature also recommended a shift towards viewing student veterans and their transitions in a positive light by utilizing their diverse experiences to bring greater success to the classroom (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010). It was suggested to include proactive approaches, such as in-service training for student affairs professionals, providing better communication to student veterans of the services available to them, as well as selecting faculty and staff who are also veterans to boost camaraderie (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Colleges should take the initiative to build relationships with student veterans and veterans’ organizations to continue to build and improve their student veteran support services.

Summary

In reviewing the literature, it is apparent faculty and staff training and offering support services to student veterans is crucial and highly recommended, however, there is a lack of research on their effectiveness and utilization. Lighthall (2012) stated “that
when college faculty and staff understand a few core principles about student veterans, the experience is much more positive for everybody in the classroom” (p. 81). Ensuring all those involved in the student veterans’ transition to college are well versed in the institutions’ procedures, services, and policies can greatly ease the stress of the students’ transition. It could be that it is not only the services which are important to a student veteran’s success, but the knowledge of the faculty and staff they encounter.
CHAPTER III

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative method approach in order to capture the students’ perceptions and satisfaction with the student veteran services available on campus. This study aimed to discover what student veterans’ view as their challenges in the transition to college and what types of support they feel is important to their success. A qualitative approach allowed for the richness and depth of the participants responses to be captured, as well as gave the interviewer the ability to probe and collect specific examples and suggestions for improvement (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). Data was collected and the responses analyzed to look for emerging themes and the “convergence of multiple perspectives for mutual confirmation of data” (Krefting, 1991, p. 219).

Design of the Study

A qualitative design was selected for this study because “qualitative methods are typically more flexible – that is, they allow greater spontaneity and adaptation of the interaction between the researcher and the study participant” (Mack et al., 2005, p. 4). Qualitative research allows for flexibility, and the ability to probe and ask the participants questions, such as why or how, encouraging elaboration (Mack et al., 2005). Data was collected by conducting audio recorded interviews utilizing an approved interview protocol (Appendix A) with six participants who agreed to an interview session.

Participants

Participants were military services veterans, including those who are currently serving in active duty, National Guard, or Reserve status, who are currently enrolled in
degree-seeking undergraduate or graduate programs at a rural mid-sized Midwestern four year university. Six individuals were sought for participation being that this is a thesis study this was deemed an adequate number. Identification of participants was difficult as there was limited access to information regarding student veterans on campus, and in some cases individuals chose not to identify that they are student veterans. Participants were identified through contact with several members of the campus community, including the student veterans office coordinator and the veterans education benefit certifying official. Participants were then contacted by phone, in person, and by email in order to request an interview. Many of those contacted via email and phone did not respond for an interview. A couple of the participants were found by chance meeting in person on campus when they self-identified as a veteran and through contact with initial participants who encouraged their classmates to participate. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw their consent at any time.

Profile of Participants

All six participants identified themselves as Caucasian or white in the demographic survey (Appendix B). There were two female and four male participants. Five of the six participants were undergraduate students enrolled full time. One participant was a part-time graduate student pursuing a Masters degree.

Chris. Chris is a 25-year-old senior enrolled full time, majoring in mass communications broadcasting, who has been in the National Guard for eight years and was deployed to Afghanistan once. He is currently still enlisted and plans to stay enlisted for 20 years. Chris is involved on campus through part-time work at the campus veterans’ assistance center and university news station. He attended a community college
before his deployment and enrolled in the university upon his return. He lives in an
apartment near campus and has a girlfriend.

**Natalie.** Natalie is a 25-year-old female full-time senior communication studies
major who was in the National Guard for six years and was deployed to Afghanistan
once. She works part time and lives off campus with her boyfriend. She commutes 10
miles to campus three days a week. She is expecting her first child in the fall. Natalie
attended a community college prior to transferring to the university.

**Tyler.** Tyler is a 42-year-old part-time graduate student completing his masters
in clinical counseling who was active duty in the Air Force for four years and saw
multiple deployments. Tyler is married, has a step son, and works full time while
pursuing his degree.

**Jacob.** Jacob is a 23-year-old full-time freshman healthcare administration major
with a minor in business administration, who was active duty in the Army for four years
and was deployed to Afghanistan once. He commutes 40 miles a day to campus and he
has a girlfriend. He is currently unemployed.

**Melissa.** Melissa is a 25-year-old full-time kinesiology and sports studies major
who was active duty in the Army for three years and served one hardship tour in Korea.
She had planned to make her work in the Army her career; however, Melissa was
medically retired after her tour in Korea and had to identify another career path. Melissa
lives near campus and participates in the campus student veterans’ organization as the
secretary. She attended a community college briefly prior to enlisting in the military.
She is currently unemployed.
Jarrod. Jarrod is a 31-year-old junior full-time sociology major who served in the Marine Corps for five years and in the Army for five years. Jarrod was deployed three times and was involved in five different explosions during those deployments. He is married and has two children at home. He experienced two previous divorces during his military career. He works part time at the campus veterans’ assistance center and actively participates with the campus student veterans’ organization. Jarrod benefits from the companionship of a service dog who accompanies him everywhere he goes.

Research Site

The research site is a midsized, rural, Midwestern four-year state university, located in a community with a population of about 22,000 residents. The initial interview request was made in person, by phone, or sent electronically to the student’s university email account (Appendix C). Interviews were then held in locations convenient for the participant such as a conference room in the campus library to ensure privacy and eliminate any concern for the participants being identified as part of this study.

Data Collection & Analysis

Interviews were held in the beginning of fall semester 2014. The interview consisted of a short demographic survey (Appendix B) completed by the participant at the beginning of the interview followed by the 30-45 minute audio recorded interview session consisting of predetermined, guided, open-ended questions (Appendix A). The recordings were then transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. Responses to the interview questions were evaluated by the researcher to find common themes among the participants’ responses which were then coded. The task of coding the interview data was a process. A code is a short phrase or word which symbolically captures the essence
of what the participant is trying to convey in their interview (Saldana, 2013). Coding the interview responses allowed for organization of the information into categories to aid in looking for patterns and themes (Saldana, 2013). To ensure accuracy in identifying patterns and themes, the data was coded by both the researcher and thesis advisor to look for convergence of the data (Krefting, 1991).

**Treatment of Data**

An informed consent was completed by each participant prior to participating in the interview. Contact information was kept separate from the interview data to maintain anonymity. All information and data will be stored on the researcher’s computer. Access to the interview data will be viewed only by the researcher and thesis advisor. Per IRB policy, data will be stored for three years following the culmination of the research, and then destroyed.

**Summary**

According to Mack et al. (2005), “in-depth interviews are optimal for collecting data on individuals’ personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, particularly when sensitive topics are being explored” (p. 2). The experiences student veterans bring to the college campus need to be understood in order to create an environment which meets their needs. The information gained from these interviews will aid in developing and improving transition and support services in many departments across campus to ensure the success of student veterans.
CHAPTER IV

Results

This chapter will present the results of the six interviews conducted with a focus on the three research questions for this study. This research utilized a qualitative approach to gain further understanding of the student services veterans at a Midwest university are using on campus while attempting to discover if student veterans are knowledgeable about the programs and services offered, and to what extent the programs and services are utilized. The research questions included:

1. What challenges do student veterans face in obtaining their degree?
2. What services and forms of support do student veterans identify as resources aiding in the transition to college?
3. What is their [student veterans] level of satisfaction with the services offered?

The interview responses were analyzed and themes emerged pertaining to each research question and were grouped into similar headings.

Challenges Student Veterans Face

The participants in this study were asked questions regarding the challenges they faced in attending college following their military service abroad. While the participants spoke of feeling more mature and independent, they also spoke of uncertainty, lack of connection and structure, and feeling behind in their life and education. Finances were also a topic important to most participants. It is also important to note that certain topics of a more personal nature may not have been easily uncovered in a first time interview and were likely unaddressed by the participants because these topics require trust built
over time and a more personal connection. This section will take an in-depth look at their responses.

**Feeling Behind.** The notion of being behind in education and life was a sentiment echoed among most of the participants. Jacob, who is a freshman, stated, “Postponing education for four years felt like I was going to be behind. Education was going to progress faster than I could catch up.” He was also nervous about his time away from learning and whether this lapse of time would put him behind his classmates. Natalie, who served in the National Guard, said she was frustrated as her deployment caused her to miss out on an entire year of school and lose a scholarship. Chris, who is also currently a member of the National Guard, feared a deployment would interrupt his education again and stated the desire to finish his degree. Melissa, a 25-year-old Army veteran, shared this same desire to finish and said, “If you don’t get where you need to get now you’re going to be stuck.”

**Level of Maturity.** Although Jacob is younger than the provided definition of an adult learner, at only 23 years old, he meets all other criteria to be identified as an adult learner through his life experiences. He stated, “I came out of the Army way more disciplined and motivated, head on straight, and it really gave me an edge. Homework is no problem now; I can breeze right through it.” Natalie, at age 25, said she felt too old to be going to school and related more closely with faculty than fellow classmates. She also talked about how her experience of being in a third world country gave her a perspective which made her feel different than everyone else.

**Lack of Structure.** The military provides a structure and routine for those enlisted; however, life on a college campus can be quite different. Chris, who is still
currently serving in the National Guard, said, “When you come back to college, it’s like I have all this free time and I don’t know what to do with it, so sometimes you make the wrong choice.” While Chris missed the formal structure, he also talked about going out to the bar and partying with his more traditional college age friends. He had a desire to make his experience more like the traditional age student while still viewing this as the “wrong” thing to do at times.

The lack of formal structure is a major difference in college life when compared to the military. Melissa, who had planned to make a career in the Army before being medically retired, spoke of the need for a schedule and order as being important and something which is ingrained through the military experience. She said:

The military really trains you to be a certain way and then there’s all these free spirits everywhere which is fine, but they just act like they’re away from home for the first time and they can do anything they want.

Lack of Connection. Some soldiers talked about the camaraderie they had with their unit in the military and the connection the military provided between the enlisted members. They found it more difficult to develop close connections with their classmates in college. Natalie stated that if she were to begin again she would make an effort to be more involved in college life in order to make new friends. Of the few friends Natalie has on campus, one is a female student veteran and Natalie said, “It’s good to know other people who are veterans and that they’re going through the same things that you are.” Tyler who is a graduate student said:

One of the biggest difficulties I’ve had in the masters program would be that most people are in a cohort where they’re really close together. Since I’m married,
have a kid, and am working full time, I did not have the opportunity to be as close to the other students as I would have liked to have been.

Since student veterans are also adult learners, they are most likely also dealing with factors outside of college such as work and family. The participants may not have been comfortable sharing some of their more personal experiences with one participant sharing just a glimpse into deeper challenges. Jarrod, who served 3 tours in Iraq, said the transition to college is hard enough itself, while also managing the transition taking place at home. He said:

There were a lot of challenges before I was able to go to school. I had to fight a bunch of demons off to do it. Then I went through a divorce and all that crazy stuff in that situation and it’s been a battle.

**Independence and Uncertainty.** Many participants identified themselves as being independent in managing their transition to college while also speaking of initial concerns of uncertainty. Tyler, who has earned two Bachelors degrees and is completing his masters degree, said:

I’m just one of those people who go about doing things on their own. I had an advisor and she steered me in the direction of the courses I needed to take. But once I saw her once, I never went back and saw her again.

Jacob, a new freshman who served four years in the Army, said he knew what he was doing when he was released from active duty and had done his research before stepping foot on campus. At the same time, he also spoke of feeling nervous and unsure of what to expect. Jacob said:
Yeah I was nervous. I didn’t know what to expect. If I was going to do well. If I was going to be able to study again. If I was going to be able to get back and be actively engaged in learning.

Melissa conveyed this same uncertainty in saying, “You go from doing something you know to feeling the pressure of something you don’t.”

**Financial.** This study found that whether it was securing employment or navigating their veteran education benefits, finances were a top priority for many participants. Chris, who works part time in the student veterans’ office on campus, said his biggest problem upon returning to college was trying to be financially independent and find a job that would work with his schedule. While his veteran education benefits and G.I. Bill covered his tuition, there was still a need to pay other expenses such as utilities. Natalie, who was in the National Guard, also experienced problems with not knowing how to best utilize her veteran education benefits. She initially just did what her friends were doing. This led to Natalie having to repay thousands of dollars in benefits due to lack of guidance. For Jacob, a first-semester freshman, at the time of the interview, was still waiting for some of his benefits to be processed and he was working with the veteran certifying official in the financial aid office to gain assistance. He said:

> I went to Teresa at veterans financial aid and that’s really who I talked to about all of my problems because those are basically the only ones I haven’t been able to figure out on my own or that I’ve had to turn in paperwork to get stuff.

*Identified Support Sources and Support Systems Aiding in Transition*

The participants were also asked questions regarding the services they utilized and the support sources and support systems they felt aided in their transition to college.
The most important service they utilized on campus the participants spoke of was their veteran education financial benefits, while the support systems they discussed were their family, partner, friends, faculty and advisors. The campus veterans’ office was also talked about, with participants talking about the office as inconvenient and a place many of the participants did not take advantage of due to other time commitments. Frustration was not usually found with faculty or staff but in themselves for not taking the steps to best utilize the services and people readily available on campus.

Student Veteran Office. This study’s campus student veterans center states on their webpage that they offer a one-stop location and coordinate services and resources across campus for student veterans; however, the participants in this study did not provide evidence that this was happening. This university’s student veterans office is less than five years old and has had three different directors during that time. The student veteran coordinator position is also new to the university and in that time has grown from a desk located within the office of financial aid to a small office and study room located in the basement of a residence hall. Jarrod, who works part time in the campus student veteran office, said “all we have right now is a little office in the basement [of a residence hall] and that’s not working.” He also said:

The school said they don’t want to give anything the veterans aren’t going to use but the thing is you’ve got to give them something to use so they can show up and use it but they’re not thinking that way.

Jacob, who is a first time freshman and currently unemployed, spoke of having a hard time finding the student veterans office and said “I actually applied for student work there and they turned me down so I really haven’t been back there since.” Natalie, who is a
senior, spoke of having a friend who works in the student veterans office but that she lacked the time to utilize the office herself while balancing school, work, and family. Jarrod, who is a disabled veteran and strong advocate for the student veterans office, said “I think just putting everything together in one spot. That would make everything easier, not only for myself, but generations to come. These wars aren’t over, they’re far from over.”

**Veterans’ Education Benefits.** All participants spoke of the importance of veteran education benefits and many noted this was a contributing factor in their decision to join the military. Chris said once his veteran’s education benefits were in place that “everything was a little bit easier because not only did I not have to worry about tuition, I was also getting paid to go to school.” Natalie, Tyler, and Jacob all said the veterans certifying official in the financial aid office was the only true service they utilized on campus. Jacob, who is a first time freshman, said completing the veteran benefit forms was the biggest hurdle for him. He referred to those forms as, “Basically the only problems I haven’t been able to figure out on my own.”

**Family/Partner/Friends.** As adult learners, the participants cited friends, family, and partners as their biggest form of support aside from the veteran certifying official. Chris, who is in the National Guard, said he talks to his girlfriend when he needs help and does not seek out assistance in the form of counseling. Natalie, who was in the National Guard, focused on her mom and boyfriend as her support system and said that she can always talk to them when she’s struggling and needs encouragement. Melissa, who served a tour in Korea, spoke of connections with friends still in the military and said her
platoon sergeant was the one to encourage her to attend college and utilize her education benefits.

**Faculty/Advisor.** Faculty and advisor awareness of veteran status and personal connection to the military was important to most participants in feeling understood. Natalie, who transferred from a community college, said her professors and advisors were more understanding once she disclosed she was in the military. She said, “My current advisor’s husband was also in the military and is now a contractor overseas, so she has been very understanding and helpful.” Melissa said she struggles with math and her professor who has a daughter in the military is very understanding. Melissa said:

> I like how she understands but she’s still not going to give me an easy time. I don’t want the easy way out. If you know I have this going on then cool, but I don’t expect an easier way.

**Level of Satisfaction**

Most participants were satisfied with their experiences in the transition to college and found it rather easy to face this new time in their lives. In this time of change, lack of guidance or an orientation tailored to meet their needs left the students frustrated. However, the personal attention and understanding from faculty and advisors, and the help found from the veteran education benefits certifying official, made the student veteran transition easier.

**Lack of Guidance and Orientation.** While the participants spoke of being self sufficient, they also spoke of a need for more guidance and an orientation geared towards veterans and adult learners. Melissa, who was active duty for three years in the Army, spoke of her frustration with orientation:
When I went to orientation, they didn’t really talk about the health care side of things that the University offers. They talked a lot about scheduling. Then it sort of broke up. I don’t know if the parents heard all of that part, but I’m not with my parent and I’m financially independent so I didn’t get to know about that. I didn’t get to know if counselors are available for flu shots or anything.

Natalie’s frustration came from a lack of guidance when transitioning from the National Guard to veteran status. She said, “It was my fault because I didn’t look into it, but I kind of felt the people in the veterans office should have known a bit more about it.”

**Veterans’ Education Benefits.** Not only was the processing of veteran education benefits one of the most important areas for students in the transition to college, it was also something the students spoke of highly. Chris, who is a senior and still enlisted in the National Guard, said the first service he utilized was the veterans certifying official and that the service he received was “outstanding.” He said, “It was nice to have somebody to actually hold your hand and take you through each process instead of being tossed to the wall.” Jacob, who is a first time freshman, said the veterans certifying official was “spot on” in helping navigate his benefits.

**Faculty and Advisors.** Not all of the participants spoke about disclosing their veteran status to faculty or advisors; however, when they did, the student veterans spoke about the faculty being more understanding or sympathetic to their status. Tyler, a graduate student who also completed two bachelors degrees said:

The professors and staff I have gotten the most support from are those who have spouses who were in the military, or they were, or they have family members who
were. They understood what I’d gone through in the military. It wasn’t that they favored me; it was that they were more understanding.

Melissa also spoke of her math professor who has a daughter in the military and felt her professor understood her better because of this connection. Jacob said:

The University was real good to me. They worked really well with my schedule and how I needed to contact them. I never met my advisor in person, but she helped out a lot. I could email her and she’d get back to me the next day, which was awesome.

Jacob also informed his professor right away of his time away from school and said “I would say my biggest help was my English teacher. I told him the first day of class I’ve been out of practice for 5 years. He’s been the biggest help.”

Conclusion

The results of the six interviews conducted give further understanding of the student services veterans at a Midwestern university are using on campus. The data provides insights to the challenges student veterans are facing in obtaining their degree and where they are finding the support necessary to be successful. While the participants seemed satisfied with many services offered, there are definite areas for improvement.
CHAPTER V
Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

This chapter discusses the results found and interpreted in Chapter IV. The research questions included: 1) What challenges do student veterans face in obtaining their degree? 2) What services and forms of support do student veterans identify as resources aiding in the transition to college? 3) What is their [student veterans] level of satisfaction with the services offered? This chapter includes discussion of the study’s results, and recommendations are provided on what can be done to better serve student veterans in their transition to college. Recommendations for future research are also provided.

Discussion

Challenges Veterans Face. This study found one of the main challenges student veterans face in their transition to college is the need to be treated as an adult. Adult learners as defined by Ely (1997) are aged 25 and older, have returned to school full time or part time, and manage to balance several responsibilities at once. The student veterans in this study are adult learners in every sense of the word. They view themselves as being more mature and able to manage the demands of school, which is very similar to adult learners who are also motivated, ready to learn, self directed, and goal oriented (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Student veterans value their life experiences and pride themselves on being more mature, responsible adults than their traditional undergraduate counterparts. Through this positivity, and by utilizing their diverse experiences, student veterans bring greater success to the classroom (Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010).
The other challenges faced by student veterans are personal, and the institution is not likely going to be able to help them. Like adult learners, student veterans bring different personal life experiences to the classroom. This study found that because most of their support is found at home, the personal challenges are going to determine their success in college. Student veterans face challenges such as balancing work and family with school, managing finances, relating to non-veteran peers, and managing service-connected injuries such as PTSD (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). The students in this study for the most part did not disclose if they suffer from PTSD or other service-related challenges or injuries. In order to reach their goals, it is likely student veterans need more than the support an institution can offer.

**Resources.** DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) indicated that working as a team and feeling connected to a group is essential to survival in the military. The same holds true for these student veterans; however, the team looks a little different with family, faculty, and advisors playing an important role. As soldiers, veterans are continually required to attend trainings on topics such as suicide prevention, PTSD, and money management when transitioning to civilian life (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). As students, utilizing resources such as veteran education benefits, assists in the transition to college.

**Veterans’ Education Benefits.** Student veterans utilize financial aid more than any other resource when transitioning to college, and the Post-9/11 G. I. Bill and other programs are incentives to pursue a college degree (O’Herrin, 2011). These financial incentives may be the main reason individuals enlisted in the military. Since student veterans are adult learners, veteran education benefits become that much more important in order to support themselves and possibly their family. The participants valued having
a specific point of contact which was the veteran certifying official within the financial aid office. This is a person who is well versed in veteran education benefits and can assist them in completing the sometimes daunting paperwork required. According to the participants in this study, once the financial hurdle is overcome, student veterans were able to more easily navigate other challenges on the college campus.

**Advisors/Faculty.** Advisors and faculty play an important role in a student veteran’s transition to college. According to this study’s participants, student veterans want their faculty and advisors to be understanding and sensitive to their experience. This perceived insensitivity is likely due to a lack of faculty and advisor awareness. Most student veterans, including those in this study understand they can be difficult to identify on campus as they do not look different than most college students on campus. This study found that when student veterans interacted with faculty and advisors and made it known they are veterans, the faculty and advisors who had personal experience, connection, or exposure to the needs of veterans were more understanding and made the transition easier. The feeling of understanding the experiences and culture of student veterans is very important to student veterans, and having someone on campus they can turn to, creates a feeling of a more veteran-friendly campus (Nicholas-Casebolt, 2012). It is worth noting that the participants of this study indicated they were not looking for special treatment or special accommodations from faculty or advisors, and mostly wanted their instructors to be sensitive to their military experiences and understand these experiences impact them as students.

**Family.** Student veterans, as adult learners, spend less time on the college campus and feel less need for non-academic support services provided by the institution
(Senter & Senter, 1998). The students in this study were slightly older than traditional aged college students, had responsibilities and lives away from campus, and found their support off campus in the form of family and friends. They relied on their spouse/partner, children, and parents when faced with challenges both in and out of the classroom. Family was a greater priority for student veterans and most did not feel the need to have the traditional college experience. Much of their time and energy is focused on priorities off campus and for student veterans, support starts at home.

**Satisfaction.** As adult learners who are task motivated and focused on a specific goal, progress is the key to satisfaction (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). This study found that student veterans seem satisfied with their college transition, experience, and services offered, as long as they are making progress towards obtaining their degree. Veteran education benefits and faculty and staff interaction were important in making progress towards this goal.

**Veterans’ Education Benefits.** At the institution being studied, all of the participants identified the veteran certifying official within the financial aid office as their main resource and they were all very satisfied with the support and assistance received. The name of the veteran certifying official responsible for processing of state and federal veteran education benefits was specifically mentioned by student veterans in this study several times as having provided excellent service in the processing of their aid. They all felt she was knowledgeable in helping them navigate their benefits and was able to do so in a timely manner. The participants all spoke of her as someone they could turn to for help as she understood one of the biggest challenges they faced in obtaining their degree, their funding. In this study the personal attention and dedicated individual
staff in the veteran services area of the financial aid office was important to the student veterans' overall satisfaction with the university.

**Faculty and Staff.** In this study the student veterans for the most part were satisfied with their interactions with faculty and staff. Communication seemed to be the key factor leading to their satisfaction. When the student veterans self-disclosed their veteran status to faculty and advisors, it was discovered many could relate to their situation because of having family and friends in the military. The participants said they valued this understanding as a result of faculty and staff awareness and connection to the military experience. Participants were also able to own their hurdles and communicate this with their professors and advisors which aided in their success and satisfaction. Frustration was not usually found with faculty or staff but in themselves for not taking the steps to best utilize the services and people readily available.

**Recommendations for University Professionals**

The student veteran population continues to grow which requires continued evaluation and feedback on the programs and resources provided to student veterans. Given little research has been done on the effectiveness and use of support services by student veterans, the results of this study are important in order to improve programs and truly help our student veterans succeed. Based on the findings of this study, recommendations are made to better serve our student veterans as they begin a new chapter in their lives.

**Student Veterans Center.** If an institution is going to provide a place for veterans, there must also be a clearly defined purpose and role of the campus student veterans’ center. This office must provide guidance, mentoring, and advocacy across
campus; however, that is the role of the director or coordinator of such office. It is noted above that many of the student veterans are adult students who spend little to no time on campus, thus providing a space for students to congregate or hang out would not likely be utilized on a regular basis. However, if the office were to provide structured programs or opportunities for groups to meet and talk, it would need to be large enough to accommodate such a group. If the purpose of this office is to be a one-stop shop for the student veterans, the staff in that office would need to have the appropriate training to be knowledgeable, but not experts, in all student support areas to best serve the students. Additionally, they would need to be connected across campus to serve as both a referral agent and advocate for the student veteran seeking support. The focus should be to provide a first-stop office for veterans to ensure a solid foundation to their new career as a college student.

The campus student veterans’ center must be easily accessible. In this study, many of the participants, including those who work in the office, stated that the location did not allow for convenient access or outreach. The center must be located near other offices and services student veterans utilize most, such as financial aid for processing of veteran education benefits, academic advising, or the commuter student lounge. It is imperative that the center’s location be accessible to all, as to allow student veterans who have limited time on campus to easily stop by for assistance or camaraderie. The university must be committed to creating a student veterans’ center that is visible and a point of pride for the institution and the campus community, otherwise it is not likely to be utilized.
**Veteran Orientation.** From the day student veterans arrive on campus, they are different from the traditionally-aged students and they must be treated as the mature adults they have become. Student veterans have specific needs, such as highly individualized veteran education benefits, aggressive degree goals, and the need to gain information typically presented to parents of dependent students, which can only be met through specialized orientation programs. Five of the six participants did not identify interest in getting to know the traditionally-aged college students or engaging in social activities; however, they are prepared to complete the tasks necessary to register for classes, process their veteran education benefits, and begin their college careers.

Traditional orientation programs are geared toward your typical 18 or 19 year old and are highly interactive. They are also conducted in very large groups with a lot of activity going on at the same time. A veteran targeted orientation component would eliminate the loud crowds and typical fanfare which could make some student veterans uneasy or trigger PTSD symptoms (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). A targeted program could also provide easy access to expert veteran education benefit advice and processing, allow for quick and easy registration and academic advising geared towards their degree and career goals, and inform students of health and counseling benefits available. This type of orientation could also discuss the importance of sharing their veteran status with faculty and staff for greater understanding of the unique struggles they may be facing. A streamlined veteran focused program as part of the traditional orientation process may be quite beneficial toward allowing them to accomplish these goals and in turn increase their satisfaction.
**Faculty/Staff Green Zone Training.** Student veterans need to feel safe, understood, and supported on campus. Implementation of a Green Zone training program, modeled after the Safe Zone training program (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012), is important to ensure faculty and staff understanding, as well as increased visibility of those who are supportive and sensitive to student veterans’ needs. Faculty and staff need to understand that student veterans many times look like any other students on campus and are hard to identify without self-disclosure. They are adult learners who have priorities beyond the college campus. Participation in a Green Zone program allows faculty and staff to identify themselves as someone who, should a student veteran need help, will be understanding of their experiences and needs. Training would include understanding of military terminology, military culture and practices, emotional effects of deployment and military separation, PTSD, TBI, and other disabilities, as well as the strengths student veterans bring to the college environment. Faculty and staff should be trained to view student veterans as motivated leaders and be ready to support them in reaching their goals. As the number of student veterans grows, the need for increased training, visibility, and trust also increases.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study focused on six student veterans at a mid-sized, Midwestern, public university and their use and satisfaction with support services provided as they transition from military service to college. The following are recommendations for future research:

- Conduct this study at other institutions including community colleges, private institutions, and large research institutions.
• Complete this study at an institution which has implemented Green Zone Training on campus.
• Interview faculty and staff about what they know about the veteran experience.
• Conduct this study with individuals who have suffered from PTSD.
• Conduct a quantitative study targeting specific offices the students should use.
• Conduct a similar study comparing student veterans and non-veteran adult learners.

Conclusions

This study utilized a qualitative approach in order to explore and better understand the support services student veterans utilize in their transition to college and their level of satisfaction with those services. This study also aimed to better understand where student veterans receive their support. It was found that student veterans are similar to adult learners and bring with them experiences and responsibilities which play an important role in the support and services they utilize. Student veterans desire to be treated as adults and have personal challenges in which they rely on support from family and not the institution. In order to best support our student veterans, orientation, campus student veteran centers, and faculty and staff training must be tailored to meet the needs of these students.
References


Freeman, H. (2012, May 13). Veteran student reaches out to other service members in college. *Herald & Review (Decatur, IL).*


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Appendix A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL - VETERANS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT SERVICES

1. Tell me about yourself.
   a. Married, children, commuter, on campus, etc?
   b. How long have you been in the military? Age at entry? Still enlisted?
      Why did you join?

2. Tell me about college.
   a. How did you decide to attend college?
   b. What has the transition been like for you?
   c. Who/what helped with the decision to attend college?
   d. How long have you been at the university?

3. Tell me about your deployments.
   a. Where?
   b. How long?

4. Did you return to school directly following a deployment?

5. Has a deployment interrupted your course enrollment at any time?

6. Did you face any challenges when you returned?
   a. Challenges outside of school?
   b. Challenges with school?

7. What was the first service you utilized when you returned to college?

8. Which services do you utilize regularly?

9. What challenges do you face as a student?
a. Challenges early on?
b. Challenges caused any stress?

10. Where do you get your support?
   a. Are there any people or offices at the university you get support from?

11. Of the services the participant mentioned previously:
   a. Did you encounter any challenges in utilizing these services?
   b. Did faculty and staff play a role in your level of satisfaction or frustration?
   c. Do the offices know that you are a veteran?
      i. Are there any perks received due to veteran status?

12. Can you rank 1-10 the importance of the services mentioned previously as a veteran and as a student?
   a. In your experience, what would be your top 3 most important services?

13. What would you change about your experience at the university?

14. What did you expect from this interview?
   a. Are there any questions which I should have asked you?
   b. Is there anything else I should know?
Appendix B

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE – VETERANS’ PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT SERVICES

1. What is your age?

2. What is your sex?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Other

3. Which of the following best describes your ethnic or racial background?
   a. Asian/Pacific Islander
   b. Black or African-American
   c. Caucasian or White
   d. Hispanic or Latino/a
   e. Native American or American Indian
   f. Other (please specify)

4. What is your current year in school?
   a. Freshman (1st Year)
   b. Sophomore (2nd Year)
   c. Junior (3rd Year)
   d. Senior (4th Year)
   e. Graduate Student
   f. Non degree seeking
   g. Other (please describe)
5. What is your major?

6. What is your current enrollment status?
   a. Less than part time (enrolled 1-5 credit hours)
   b. Part time student (enrolled 6-11 credit hours)
   c. Full time student (enrolled 12+ credit hours)

7. Did you attend another college or university before this institution?
   a. 2 year community college
   b. 4 year public university
   c. 4 year private university
   d. Other

8. What is your marital status?
   a. Never married
   b. Married, Domestic Partnership, Civil Union
   c. Divorced, Separated
   d. Widowed

9. What is your current employment status?
   a. Unemployed
   b. Working part-time
   c. Working full-time
   d. Retired

10. In which branch of the military have you served?
    a. Air Force
    b. Air Force Reserve
c. Air National Guard
d. Army
e. Army Reserve
f. Army National Guard
g. Coast Guard
h. Coast Guard Reserve
i. Marine Corps
j. Marine Corps Reserve
k. Navy
l. Navy Reserve
Hello,

My name is Amanda Starwalt and I am a College Student Affairs Master’s Candidate currently working on my thesis. I am contacting you in regards to participating in the research for my thesis. The purpose of this research study is to gain further knowledge regarding the student services veterans are using on campus. Your participation would consist of completing the 20 minute survey included in this email, as well as a possible 45 minute in person interview with me. All information collected would be used solely for the purposes of this research and your name would not be associated with the research. I have included my IRB approval, Informed Consent form, and contact information for myself and my thesis committee below. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to speaking with you.

Amanda Starwalt