

College Completion and Combat Veterans: Barriers and Institutional Efforts to Facilitate
Successful Completion

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ABSTRACT

Since the signing of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2008, veteran enrollment in college has increased to numbers not seen since the end of World War II. This most recent iteration of the GI Bill provides education benefits for thirty-six months at a great cost to the taxpayers. Student veterans are a unique class of non-traditional students due to their military experiences and use of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

This qualitative study was conducted using the CIPP evaluation model to assess the needs of the student veteran, what measures the institution has in place to meet those needs, and if the veterans thought the institution's procedures, programs, and services facilitated degree completion within the timeframe of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Data were collected through individual interviews of current and recent graduates using open-ended questions. After respondent validation of the interviews, thematic analysis was used to code the data from which the researcher identified several themes. The themes identified were mandatory policies and processes and optional services. The data and participant responses indicate that some institution services, those specifically for veterans, can be very beneficial toward degree completion. However, the policies and processes of the institution geared toward traditional students can inhibit timely progress toward degree completion for veterans. Some of these processes and policies are outside the institution's ability to change, though there are institutional requirements for programs which should look at the veteran's whole life experience, not only their transcripts.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to those people who inspired me to start and continue my journey through higher education – my children, Tony, Nicki, Ian, and Abbey. I wanted them to see no matter how old one is, you can still follow your dreams.

This paper was inspired by the experiences of my favorite veteran, my son Anthony Brock. You were the reason I started this paper, and you believed in me every step of the way. Also, those friends who helped me, cheered me on, and were sure one day I would finish this; Nor, Lacey, Rachel, Kayla, and Amy -thank you for your help and support over the years. I hope I can be as good a friend to you as you have been to me. Last, but not least, the veterans in my family, my Pops (Grandpa), USN, My Uncles: Del, USA, Butchie, USA, Bill, USMC, and my cousin Cathy, USA.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Since World War II, millions of men and women have served in the armed forces of the United States. Many of these veterans have taken advantage of the educational benefits earned when honorably discharged from military service. Initially, the G. I. Bill was provided to service members returning from war. Eventually, the G.I. Bill was extended to service men and women who also served in the reserve component of the military. Attending college or a trade school with the backing of the G.I. Bill allowed veterans to reintegrate into the civilian world while setting themselves up for a successful career post-military service. Veterans, with the aid of the G.I. Bill, continue their education with the intent to improve their job skills and increase their employability (Minnis, 2014). Success can be determined by higher salaries and increased longevity at their place of employment. Additionally, veterans who complete college or training tend to find jobs quicker (Andrews et al., 2014; Barnhart, 2011).

Despite veterans having access to the G.I. Bill for college tuition and some expenses, they face other obstacles while attending post-secondary institutions. The challenges veterans face have been discussed in a multitude of publications, such as those by DiRamio and Spires (2009), Stripling (2010), and Winston (2010), which discuss the bureaucratic morass at all levels for veterans, especially the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the bureaucracy of the educational institution. The campus climate toward student veterans, the lack of resources specifically for veterans who have challenges different from other students, and the general lack of personnel to meet the

needs of veterans on campus also contribute to the challenges veterans face when participating in higher education.

This study will look at the college experience of veterans and the efforts of one university to facilitate a successful outcome for veterans as they complete their degrees. There will be a discussion of the barriers and facilitators student veterans face on campus, including programs, faculty/staff training, and facilities that have been instituted and supported and those that could be considered for implementation to aid college completion for veterans.

Background

The passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill has seen an increase in veteran enrollment in numbers not seen since the end of World War II (O'Connor, 2011). Veteran enrollment includes students attending for the first time as well as students returning to college after serving in the military (Vacchi, 2012). The Post-9/11 GI Bill offers veterans an opportunity to attend college without incurring excessive student loans. Unfortunately, veterans, particularly combat veterans, face barriers that can hinder completing a degree program. Many veterans who return to school have spouses and children, which comes with increased financial obligations, necessitating a job to pay for expenses not covered by the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Baskas, 2021; Falkey, 2016). Some combat veterans have physical disabilities, which are not only impediments to navigating campus, but require medical appointments, which can impact class attendance. The government has invested a significant amount of taxpayer funds into the Post-9/11 GI Bill and, therefore, the education and future of veterans. Combat veterans are attending college in more

significant numbers, but just over fifty percent are completing college within the time limits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Cate et al., 2017).

This author attended college after serving in the military. While not a fast process, the author did complete their undergraduate degree despite experiencing some obstacles - although not as significant as combat veterans- but not within the time frame of their GI Bill benefits. The author's son returned to university after he served six years on active duty, with a combat deployment to Afghanistan. The author's son left active duty without a briefing on the process of utilizing the Post-9/11 GI Bill to complete college. He arrived at his university and was not informed how long processing his Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits would take or that he would be responsible for tuition until his benefits were certified. The financial aid office did not complete his Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits in a timely manner, necessitating he pay his first semester's tuition out of pocket. He did not receive the living stipend until the end of January, five months after he started classes and six months after he first met with the financial aid officer. In addition to attending class and waiting for his benefits to begin, he was also navigating the local Veterans Affairs Hospital for an injury he received on active duty, as do many veterans.

Although the author's son left active duty, he was required to finish his eight-year enlistment in the Reserves, necessitating weekend drill (duty) once a month; as of 2020, 11.35% of veteran/military students were still active in the Reserves or National Guard ("SVA Census," 2021). Several of his professors would not accommodate requests to complete work early when due/test dates would fall on a day or weekend he would be training with the military. During the second semester of his return to university, he was activated for deployment and had to withdraw from his classes. The university did not

notify instructors of the proper procedure for his withdrawal, which was due to military orders, nor note the reason for withdrawing on his transcript, which had a deleterious impact on his GPA. These events occurred at a “military-friendly” university. Indeed, his experiences are not unique to him; it was, however, his experiences upon returning to school after military service that led me to investigate the issues student veterans face when matriculating into college.

Statement of the Problem

Millions of Americans have enlisted in the military and served honorably. One of the benefits recent enlistees earn through serving is access to the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This version of the GI Bill provides a living stipend based on their college location. It pays the tuition and fees for state colleges and universities, as well as private universities participating in the Yellow Ribbon Program (“Yellow Ribbon Program,” 2020). The Post- 9/11 GI Bill was enacted in 2009, replacing the Montgomery GI Bill, for those who have served on or after 11 September 2001 (“Veterans affairs: History and timeline - education and training,” 2013). Since the signing of the Post-9/11GI Bill, more than 877,000 veterans have used it to attend college (Borsari, et al., 2017). The taxpayer cost for funding the Post-9/11 GI Bill has been more than fifty-three billion dollars (Molina & Morse, 2017). Unfortunately, veteran students had a completion rate of 54% in 2015. This is not a strong return on the investment of veteran education made by the United States government (“Factsheet Veterans in higher education,” 2020). Since this is a significant investment by the American people in the future of its veterans, it is imperative that colleges provide the resources necessary to enable the timely completion

of a degree by veterans to ensure the taxpayers are not wasting their money and veterans are not wasting their time.

This study will evaluate a Veteran Student Life program at a large Mid-Atlantic university. In recent years, there has been much research and many articles about veterans and their experiences in college. David DiRamio along with Robert Ackerman, Regina Mitchell, and Michele Spires have published several, including *What's Next for Student Veterans?: Moving from Transition to Academic Success* (2017), *From Combat to Campus: Voices of Student-veterans* (2008), and *Partnering to assist disabled veterans in transition. New Directions for Student Services* (2009). Additionally, articles from Dasarathy, (2016), such as *Back to School: How Academic Departments at Universities Can Best Assist Student Veterans' Transitions into Degree Programs Post-service*, look at how to improve veterans' experiences in an academic program. Most of these articles are from the veteran's point of view and leave the reader wondering if any of the shortcomings have been addressed by universities with lasting results. This study will look at the initiatives implemented by the university and then evaluate those initiatives through a qualitative research model using the Context, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) framework (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985).

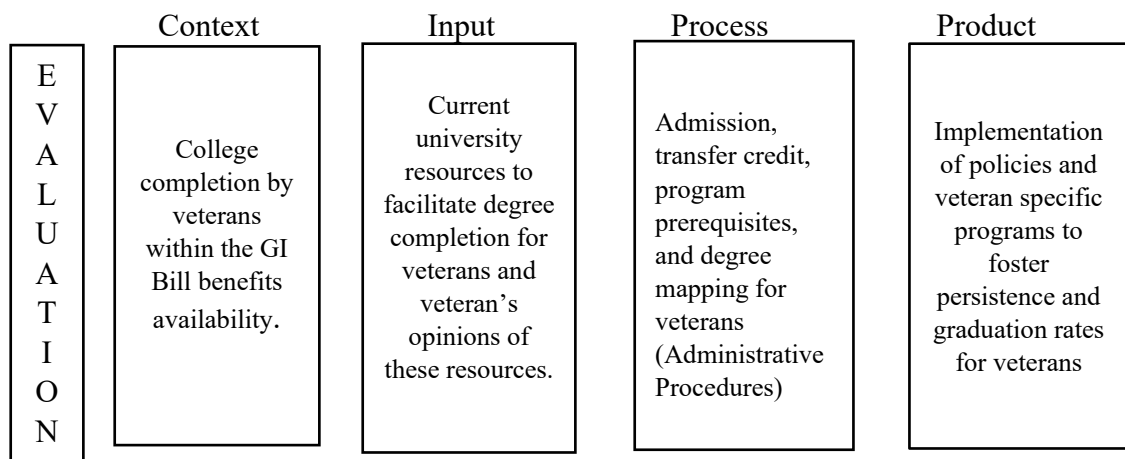
While the CIPP has been used extensively in both business and educational studies, as of the writing of this paper, the use of the CIPP model in the context of evaluating veteran services on college campuses has not been in any published articles. The CIPP model offers a systematic process to review, evaluate, and propose any necessary changes; it provides "a comprehensive framework for guiding evaluations of programs, projects, products, institutions, and systems...the CIPP Model is focused on

program evaluations, particularly those aimed at affecting long-term, sustainable improvements” (Stufflebeam, 2007, p. 1).

Theoretical Framework

The research questions at the center of this qualitative study lend themselves to using a CIPP framework to evaluate the programs currently in place for student veterans and propose solutions, if necessary. The CIPP model by Daniel L. Stufflebeam evaluates the context, input, process, and product of the issue being studied (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985).

FIGURE 1: CIPP Model for Combat Veterans and College Completion



The purpose of evaluation is to determine the effectiveness of a program (Darussalam, 2010). Effectiveness can be measured in achievement and student satisfaction with the program. The effectiveness can be assessed through questionnaires, interviews, observation, and discussion groups (Darussalam, 2010). The effectiveness of a program determines whether the program should continue as it is, continue with modifications, or be discontinued. Essentially, the CIPP evaluation framework is one that can be used when a decision needs to be made in regard to a program (Sancar Tomack, et

al., 2013). One assessment category is improvement/accountability, which determines the merit and worth of the program being evaluated (Zhang et al., 2011). CIPP is one of the most widely utilized evaluation frameworks because of its ability to assess both user satisfaction and the programs; according to Zhang et al. (2011), the CIPP model is the preferred evaluation model when assessing programs already in place.

As CIPP is not used to prove a program is effective but to improve the effectiveness of a program, understanding the four components of the CIPP model will better clarify this researcher's decision to utilize CIPP as the theoretical model for understanding how to improve college completion for veterans (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985). The first component is context evaluation; context evaluation is also referred to as needs assessment (Zhang et al., 2011). Evaluation is used to make the program(s) work better for the target population (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985). Context evaluation is used to determine the target population and identify their needs. It is also used to determine if the program(s) in place are addressing the needs of the target population (Zhang et al., 2011). According to Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (1985), surveys, document reviews, and interviews are among the better methods to conduct context evaluation.

The second component of the CIPP theoretical framework is Input evaluation. The main purpose of input evaluation is to determine what, if any, changes need to be made to programs currently in place (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985). Input evaluation not only looks at in-place programs but also programs that could be implemented (Zhang et al., 2011). The overarching purpose of input evaluation is to modify or find programs that will meet the needs of the target population without excessive waste of resources

(Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985). Methods used to conduct the input evaluation include reviewing new programs, visiting localities with programs already in place, requesting suggestions from the target audience, and reviewing the budget (Zhang et al., 2011).

Process evaluation is the third component of CIPP. According to Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (1985), process evaluation is an ongoing check of programs that have been implemented. If changes have been made at the staffing level, the process component of CIPP evaluates those changes to ensure they are working as planned; if not, further changes need to be implemented to achieve success. Process evaluation also assesses if participants on all levels are accepting, carrying out, and satisfied with the changes (Zhang et al., 2011). Among the methods used in process evaluation are observation, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and record reviews (Zhang et al., 2011).

The final component of CIPP is product evaluation. Product evaluation is similar to outcome evaluation and is used to measure and judge a program's worth (Zhang et al., 2011). The primary purpose of product evaluation is to determine to what extent the changes and program implementation have met the needs of the target population (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985). Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (1985) suggest several methods to gather data for evaluation including interviews, surveys, and a review of data. Of these methods, reviewing data would be a long-term endeavor; however, it would be the most accurate in determining the success of the changes and new programs implemented.

The CIPP framework is apropos for evaluating the policies and programs in place for veterans as they matriculate into higher education. As veterans use their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to enroll at institutions from community colleges to universities, they face

challenges that, if not addressed, will lead many to become discouraged and discontinue their education. Evaluating the policies at institutions can uncover many barriers veterans are facing. The best source for evaluation of in-place policies and programs are the users.

The context of this study includes how does the institution ensures veterans' timely college completion? Are there processes, programs, and offices necessary to facilitate college completion for veterans? If so, what are they? The needs of veterans differ from those of traditional students; what accommodations, if any, are made to address those needs, including VA appointments and military duty?

A discussion of input would include what and how much previous experience is counted toward transfer credit. Regarding credit, how are veterans set up to succeed, how are the student veterans given the path to degree completion, and is it clearly stated? What programs intended to increase veteran success are already available at the institution, and what are the veterans' opinions of the effectiveness of these programs? How are student veterans' opinions collected and evaluated on veteran-specific programs?

The process component of this framework includes the staff, offices, and procedures the university utilizes to ensure veterans are successful, from matriculation to degree completion within the timeframe of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Regarding staff, are there those who receive specialized training to understand veteran needs better? If so, what training do they receive? How are veteran requests for veteran-specific programs considered and implemented? Is it feasible, financially and logistically, for the campus to implement changes that can enhance the college experience for the student veteran specifically, or must there be a positive impact for traditional students as well?

The final component is the product, which for this study will be what additional programs or policies might be implemented by the university to foster a culture conducive to degree completion by the student veteran. Should the college invite established organizations to campus to meet the needs of student veterans? If so, which organizations should be considered? Does the university have staff or faculty willing to sponsor these organizations? How can the university incentivize participation by the staff and faculty? How can the administrative, financial aid, and advisory offices provide veteran-specific information to ensure student veterans complete college within the time allotted by the Post-9/11 GI Bill? Is additional training needed for the staff in these offices?

Research Question

The overarching question addressed in this study is: As a population within the student body with unique needs and characteristics that differ from traditional students, are combat veterans receiving the institutional support from the university they need to complete a college baccalaureate degree within the time frame allotted by the Post-9/11 GI Bill?

The following research questions are more specific and focus on each of the components of the CIPP evaluation framework which is used in this study.

1. (Context Evaluation) What are the demographics of the participants of the study, and how do they view their experiences at this university?
2. (Input Evaluation) What measures does the university offer to address the unique needs of students who are military veterans?

3. (Process Evaluation) How is the application and admission process for veterans and how is transfer credit evaluated and applied? Is there a specialized office and staff trained to process GI Bill certifications and handle veteran specific issues?
4. (Product Evaluation) Are there any procedures to ensure a veteran student has the best opportunity to complete college, from admission through graduation, within the allotted time frame of their GI Bill? If success is defined not only by graduation within the allotted timeframe of the GI Bill, but also a satisfactory experience by student veterans, how well does the university meet that metric?

Methodology of the Study

The methodology of a study should be one that can provide the most data with sufficient background to create a holistic picture of a given problem. If a solely qualitative study were to be used, a case study, narrative, or a phenomenological approach would be proper to understand the problem on a personal level while providing the background to understand what a student veteran experiences. If one were to take a wholly quantitative approach, a study design that could address this issue best would be causal-comparative or correlational. That approach would provide the data that could delineate the outcomes but not necessarily why those outcomes occurred. It is the researcher's belief a qualitative study would provide the best data to understand the veteran's experiences. The methodology that best answers this paper's research questions is a case study approach.

The goal of this study can best be achieved through an interview process. A qualitative study gathers narrative data, which provides details and a complete picture to better understand the effect of the initiatives the university has implemented to help

combat veterans succeed with degree completion (Knafl & Howard, 1984). This study will begin with demographic questions to characterize the sample of participants. Awareness of these characteristics will provide a frame of reference for the responses from the interviewees. A semi-structured interview, beginning with the collection of demographic information, will be conducted. This data will provide a holistic picture of what student combat veterans need from the university and their opinions on the effectiveness of the institution's programs and policies as they complete their education.

Significance of the Problem

College immediately after high school is not feasible for many young adults in the United States. With that in mind, many veterans chose to enlist in the military for the opportunity to have access to the GI Bill. Many users of the Post-9/11 GI Bill are first-generation college students (Wurster et al., 2012). For these veterans, a college degree is an opportunity for an enhanced quality of life, as it creates better job opportunities, which usually brings increased income, thereby alleviating financial stress. Combat veterans who are able to complete college within the time allowed by the Post-9/11 GI Bill do not incur excessive debt and are better able to contribute to their communities (Lopez et al., 2020).

The Post-9/11 GI Bill has been an incentive for many military veterans to enroll in colleges and universities with the intent of completing a degree in order to pursue their goals after military service. Studies consistently show completing college, either two-year technical programs or traditional baccalaureate programs, allows workers to earn more over the course of their careers (Resnick, 2008). Benefits of a college education can

include increased job satisfaction as well as increased earnings, both of which can lead to a more fulfilling quality of life.

The majority of recent veterans have been deployed to hazardous duty locations and experienced combat. Combat veterans return to the civilian world with different experiences than veterans who did not deploy to hazardous duty locations. These experiences can leave scars, seen and unseen (Jamieson et al., 2020; Mahoney et al., 2021). The experiences and needs of a veteran student are different from those of a traditional student, and many colleges are beginning to adapt their practices to facilitate college completion; however, combat veterans can have additional needs that have to be addressed. These needs can include physical and psychological barriers, social disconnect, financial struggles, and residual military and service-connected obligations.

Combat veterans arrive at a college with many traits deeply ingrained in their personalities from military service. They have a strong sense of self-discipline, a sense of selfless service - putting others' needs before theirs, and a drive to excel (Hill et al., 2019; Lopez et al., 2020). They also have high expectations of themselves and others. Due to their experiences, they can be perceived as abrupt, aloof, and distrustful. All of these combined can make college completion a social and academic challenge for combat veterans (Fredman et al., 2019).

Some combat veterans have impediments when they begin college after serving in the military, which they may not have had before their military service. These can include physical disabilities, PTSD, and/or TBI's, which can lead to depression, anxiety, memory, and cognitive issues affecting their academic performance (DiRamio, 2017). Many veterans also have families, full-time jobs, and financial obligations, which can be

stressors when trying to balance school and life (Wagner & Long, 2020; Wurster et al., 2012). Some student veterans also experience social isolation due to the difference in age and experience between traditional students and themselves (Borsari et al., 2017). Additionally, these factors can be compounded by the combat veteran having been out of school for several to many years, necessitating a need to re-establish a learning mindset (McDermott et al., 2020). According to Kenner and Weinerman (2011), veterans have learned skills as they progress through the ranks, which allowed them to succeed in the military. However, those skills do not guarantee success in a college classroom setting. Kenner and Weinerman go on to state veterans who have delayed college to serve in the military may need developmental courses to refresh skills that many have lost due to the long break between formal educational classes and thereby be better prepared to succeed in college.

Many colleges claim to be veteran-friendly, but action and implementation do not always follow intent. Veterans experience problems with many college administrative offices, including the registrar, advisement, and financial aid offices (Baskas, 2021). These problems include acceptance of transferred credits, processing the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and adopting a plan of study to ensure graduation will be completed before their GI Bill benefits are exhausted. In addition to the struggles with the bureaucracy, student combat veterans have instructors who do not view appointments with the regional Veterans Affairs office or military training as valid excuses for interference in classwork (Ingala, 2011). Finally, the social disconnect combat veterans experience from their classmates can be a hindrance to establishing the working and social relationships needed to successfully complete college (Borsari et al. 2017).

Colleges and universities need to address the barriers that can inhibit the successful completion of college for combat veterans. Realization by the educational institution of the barriers veterans face, both personal and institutional, is needed to enact changes and programs that can aid a veteran in completing their education. College completion within the time constraints of the Post-9/11 GI Bill will benefit the veteran, the educational institution, the Veterans Affairs Administration, and society.

Delimitations

The delimitations of this study will be veterans who enrolled in a degree program. It might also include veterans who took time away from their program but have since returned to college in an attempt to understand better why the veteran initially left college. A further delimitation would be veterans will come from a state-funded four-year university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Data collection will be through a semi-structured interview with participants who meet the criteria of combat veteran status, Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiary and current or recent graduate of the university indicated above.

Limitations

There is a limitation to this CIPP study regarding one portion of the product component of the study framework. At the request of the researcher the university provided data related to persistence and graduation rates of veterans. This data only extends to the end of the academic year of 2022. As of this writing, the persistence and graduation rates for student veterans has not been aggregated for the academic years ending in 2023 and 2024.

Definition of Terms

BAH – Basic Allowance for Housing – Provides uniformed service members equitable housing compensation based on housing costs in local civilian housing markets when government quarters are not available (“Basic allowance for housing,” n.d.).

COE – Certificate of Eligibility – Certifies you are entitled to benefits for an approved program of education or training under the Post-9/11 GI Bill (“VA.gov | Veterans affairs,” January 2024).

COL – Cost of Living – The amount of money needed for essentials in a specific location and time; higher living costs require a higher income (“Cost of living: Definition, how to calculate, index, and example,” 2010).

Combat Veteran – A veteran who has served on active duty in a theater of combat operations or hostile operations with military records reflecting such service (“Combat Veteran Eligibility,” 2023).

First Generation College Student – A student whose parents did not attend and graduate from a four year college as traditional students (“Who is a First-Generation Student?,” 2024).

OIF – Operation Iraqi Freedom – Military members deployed to the Gulf Region from March 2003 to December 2011 (“Operation Iraqi Freedom,” 2023).

OEF – Operation Enduring Freedom – Military members deployed to Afghanistan from October 2001 to December 2014 (“VA.gov | Veterans affairs,” 2021).

PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – A mental health condition that develops in some people following experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event (French, n.d.).

SSM/V – Student Service Member/Veteran denotes both veterans and still-serving military members attending college (Barry, 2015).

TBI – Traumatic brain injury – An injury to the head that affects the way the brain works.

A TBI can change the way you think, feel, act, and move; symptoms can include confusion, headache, seizures, and loss of consciousness (US Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, 2024).

VA – Veterans Affairs – The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is a federal agency providing benefits, health care, and cemetery services to military veterans (“VA.gov | Veterans affairs,” May 2024).

VHA – Veterans Health Administration – Federal administration that provides primary care, specialized care, and related medical and social support services to United States Veterans (“Veterans health administration (VHA),” n.d.).

VRC – Veteran Resource Center – A website at the university in the study with onsite and offsite veteran resources for students.

VSL – Veteran Student Life – A community to build and support the transition to civilian life of military and veteran students at the university in the study.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter is a review of the literature relevant to understanding the issues combat veterans face when enrolling in college. The individual and institutional barriers as well as some institutional initiatives that have had success in other universities are reviewed. This is followed by a review of several evaluation models that have been used in higher education studies but were determined inappropriate for the goals of this study. The final part of this review will explore the CIPP model and its use in evaluating background programs in higher education.

Barriers

The portion of the literature review will focus on the barriers/difficulties veterans face when returning to school and how colleges have addressed these barriers. Obstacles can be those that the SSM/V perceives, as well as factual barriers such as injuries, preparedness for returning to school, balancing work and family, navigating the bureaucracy of the VA, and logistical issues (Osam et al., 2016). Veterans' thoughts on the measures the institution can institute or improve on to help student veterans complete a degree will also be covered in the review. Finally, it will look at organizations and offices that can help veterans make the transition from serving in the military to matriculating in college and successfully completing a program. The literature review will also include the reasoning behind the decision to use the CIPP model as the theoretical framework for this study.

Situational Hurdles

A prevalent obstacle SSM/V faces when returning to school is balancing school with work and family (Callahan & Jarrat, 2014). Many SSM/V have families, and almost all will have jobs, as despite the generosity of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, it does not cover all living expenses. While an SSM/V may be accustomed to balancing their family responsibilities with their military duties, adding academic commitments is a new challenge they must overcome. The need to balance family, work, and academics can strain a marriage, which can affect college completion (Jenner, 2017). It can also exacerbate any doubts about attending college an SSM/V may have, which can then affect their ability to succeed in degree completion (Darcy & Powers, 2013).

Student service members/veterans consistently mention a social disconnect with their college classmates. This disconnect occurs through many examples. SSV/M find traditional college students to be immature and unaware of the experiences of others, particularly veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008). SSV/M comment on their classmates' lack of experience and responsibility compared to their own. Veterans are keenly aware they have a finite time to complete their degree, so they are focused on completing college. Additionally, they often have families; they are not there to socialize and party (Livingston et al., 2011).

Another aspect of the social disconnect is an inability to blend and fit in with classmates. Veterans will be asked about their wartime experiences by other students and are not always comfortable sharing with virtual strangers (Ackerman et al., 2009). Many SSV/M also retain their military bearing. Those still in the reserves or National Guard are required to meet military grooming standards on weekend drills and may not blend in

with the traditional student body (Parks et al., 2015). Many SSV/M attend college after relocation to a new area and will be trying to fit into the larger community outside the college. Additionally, they have familial and other financial obligations, which further set them apart from traditional students (Falkey, 2016).

A perceived negative classroom climate is another potential barrier for student veterans (Fernandez et al., 2019). Student veterans felt some faculty and staff members did not understand them and made no real effort to understand they might not want to discuss their experiences or opinions of the war in class (DiRamio et al., 2008). When faculty push to discuss a servicemember's experiences in the classroom, it further alienates them from their traditional classmates. Additionally, when pressured to discuss their military service, they experience increased feelings of isolation associated with tokenism (Fernandez et al., 2019). Discussion of their military service can increase veterans' stress, leading to anxiety and depressive episodes, which impact academic performance (Bryan et al., 2014).

In addition to the difference in age from their classmates, many veterans have injuries they have sustained during their time in service. It is estimated that one-fourth of all student veterans have some type of disability (Kraus et al., 2017). As of 2016, the Department of Defense has estimated more than 60,000 military members have been wounded in action (DiRamio, 2017). Among these injuries are both visible and invisible injuries. Considered to be invisible injuries are PTSD and TBI's (Hammond, 2017). Another common invisible injury among combat veterans is hearing loss. As of 2013, it is estimated between four and twenty percent of veterans leaving active military service have PTSD (Taylor et al., 2016). Another nineteen percent of veterans have had a TBI,

which has an increased risk of PTSD (Elliot et al., 2011). Of those veterans with a TBI, it is estimated that more than eighty percent of veterans have some level of hearing loss (Oleksiak et al., 2012). Hearing loss alone can have a significant impact on an SSV/M's academic performance in a lecture-based class. Coupled with these invisible injuries, forty-five percent will have depression (Udesky, 2018). Depression, particularly, can affect a veteran's school performance, which can present as late assignments, failed tests, and skipped classes, leading to a poor grade point average. Depression that occurs with PTSD significantly increases the negative effect on veteran academic performance (Bryan et al., 2014).

While challenging, veterans can mask these invisible injuries to some extent from other students; however, the visible injuries are far more difficult to disguise. Visible injuries to veterans can include amputations, burns, and orthopedic injuries (Church, 2009). As of 2016, amputations and orthopedic injuries affected over forty percent of servicemembers. Amputations comprised six percent of the forty percent, followed closely by neurologic injuries at five percent, and fractures almost forty percent of orthopedic injuries (Belmont et al., 2016). In 2008, combined visible and invisible injuries affected twenty-five percent of student veterans (DiRamio, 2017). While many student veterans have visible injuries, most do not identify as disabled and will not seek assistance. (DiRamio, 2017).

Logistical Barriers

Perhaps the greatest logistical barrier student veterans face is the one that should be the best facilitator: the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The Post-9/11 GI Bill is the most generous since its inception in 1944 (Olson, 1973). It should be noted the Post-9/11 GI Bill, like

the post-WWII GI Bill, is not a thank you for your service but a tool to help soldiers readjust and reintegrate into the civilian world while receiving an education to move forward and be productive (Sportsman & Thomas, 2015).

Similar to the first GI Bill, officially known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has been updated as the needs of veterans change. The original Post-9/11 GI Bill was signed into law in August 2008 but President G. W. Bush with an effective date of 1 August 2009 ("Post 9/11 GI Bill," n.d.). The Post-9/11 GI Bill pays for thirty-six months, four school years of college, provides a book and school supply stipend, and a housing allowance ("Post 9/11 GI Bill: Beneficiaries, choices, and cost," 2019). Under the 2008 version of the Post-9/11 GI Bill veterans had fifteen years to use this benefit, an increase from the ten years of the previous iteration. It also allowed for the servicemember to transfer their benefit to their children or spouse ("Transfer your Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits," 2023). On 16 August 2017 the "Forever GI Bill" was signed into law, this iteration of the Post-9/11 GI Bill had one significant change, the benefits do not expire – that is there is no longer a time limit to make use of GI Bill benefits.

Between tuition, a housing allowance and book stipend returning to school should be financially worry-free for veterans. However, the processing time and the many rules guiding the use of the Post-9/11 GI Bill make paying for college very worrisome, creating a distraction for many veteran students (Dasarathy, 2016). Veteran students are not always informed of all the qualifications they must meet in order to receive benefits, and they are seldom prepared for the length of time it may take to begin receiving their benefits.

Other logistical barriers include getting to and from the school, securing housing, and working out family obligations. Once on campus, those veterans with physical limitations due to injury can have problems negotiating the campus. These problems can be as simple as parking or going from building to building within allotted time constraints. Programs that require fieldwork can also limit what the SSV/M can pursue when adequate accommodations cannot be instituted.

Institutional Practices

According to veterans, colleges could improve some of their policies and practices to provide a more supportive structure for veterans. One of the problems student veterans have mentioned is the difficulty in processing and receiving benefits. In part, this occurs due to the bureaucracy of the Veterans Administration, which oversees the disbursement of funds to veterans (“About GI Bill Benefits,” 2019). However, a large part of the problem occurs at the school, with staff in the financial aid office not always fully trained in processing the forms for the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Kirchner, 2015). If processing the Post-9/11 GI Bill is slow, it can lead to students being removed from their classes due to non-payment. Another issue reported by student veterans is a need for policies regarding student withdrawals for residual military service or medical care for injuries sustained during service (Kelley et al., 2013).

In line with the GI Bill processing, there are problems satisfying the requirements for graduation within the timeframe allotted by the GI Bill. Advisors do not always pay attention to the plan of study for the programs in which SSV/M chooses to enroll. Additionally, academic advisors who are unaware of the resources and requirements of the military can impede the academic progress of SSV/M (Parks et al., 2015). This is part

of a larger problem of veterans finding college campus procedures illogical and confusing. A lack of regimentation can be disconcerting for newly enrolled SSM/V, who are used to specific and detailed reasoning for actions and processes (Sportsman & Thomas, 2015). According to Parks, Walker, and Smith (2015), academic advisors can be a mitigating influence on the persistence and success of veterans in higher education. They go on to state that there should be some academic advisors who are either veterans or familiar with military life (Parks et al., 2015).

Many veterans with invisible disabilities struggle in the classroom with the manner in which the material is presented or with comprehension. Veterans have experienced instructors who could have aided students by altering the delivery of their courses (Branker, 2009). For SSM/V with hearing loss, traditional lectures, and PowerPoint presentations are not always effective (Gonzales & Elliot, 2017). Other issues veterans can include more than just the presentation of the course curriculum. Combat veterans are often uneasy when they are forced to sit with their backs to windows or doors in a classroom, but many instructors have their rooms set up, so students are forced to sit in those positions (Kelley et al., 2013).

Many veterans feel colleges do not account for their military experience, as noted by how veterans feel lumped together with younger students who have little life experience. While most colleges offer a generalized orientation, some veterans feel as though it is a waste of their time. They did not feel a need to be toured around campus. One stated, "...I can look at a map and find my way around" (Wheeler, 2012, p. 782). Veterans would like to have an area where they could disengage from the traditional student population and meet with other veterans (Wheeler, 2012). While veterans do not

want to be singled out, they do want to have the college provide offices and staff well versed in the needs and bureaucracy of veterans' services and the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Overall, veterans feel schools are veteran-friendly, but they speak of a lack of respect for the military. They feel this is evidenced, in part, by the lack of official recognition of Veterans Day. In some schools with military students, there is a general unease when attending class in uniform. While student-athletes are excused from classes for games, not all service members who attend are excused for military service. Students still serving have indicated professors violate institution policy for military members with no repercussions from the administration, usually due to the administration's delay in addressing the issue when brought to them. (A. Brock, personal communication, 12 March 2016).

Due to a lack of continuity in their education, many veterans have started and stopped college as their military career progressed. It follows they likely attended many colleges and accumulated college credit that does not always transfer (Falkey, 2016). Veterans who enroll in college have already earned credit for training received in the military, via SOCAD an agreement some institutions have with the military to accept credit given for military training ("Socad," 2009). Still, some are not aware their training translates into college credits earned, and those veterans who are aware don't always find colleges willing to accept the credit (Morrill & Somers, 2019; Ventrone & Karczewski, 2015). Another problem student veterans face is enrolling in the required classes for their degree. Some veterans, due to military obligations and financial aid difficulties, miss early registration or find they have not been attending a school long enough for priority registration, so they end up enrolling in classes they do not need to maintain their Post-

9/11 GI Bill benefits (Ventrone & Karzewski, 2015). Veterans begin or return to college with a finite timeline to complete their degree and not exceed their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. Not all schools are prepared for the challenges of enrolling veterans.

Institutional Initiatives

As more schools try to be veteran-friendly, they are realizing they need to be proactive in the services they provide for veterans. They can institute programs for faculty and staff, programs for students run by faculty and staff, and programs run by students for students. There are also initiatives the school can institute to create lounges or rooms for veterans to decompress and be with fellow veterans, creating a space where veterans can interact with students who share similar experiences.

One of the most profound ways a college can help a veteran achieve academic success is through degree mapping. While not a new concept, and in some places, it is referred to as a plan of study, this relatively inexpensive endeavor can benefit not only veterans but traditional students as well. Veterans begin college after service with more responsibilities and possible disadvantages than traditional students (Norman et. al., 2015, p. 707). According to Richardson et al., (2014) providing a degree map from the start of their academic career can help them be more successful. A degree map will have all the classes the veteran will need to graduate. This is beneficial for several reasons. First, the veteran knows all the classes they need to take up front and the sequence. Veterans have a limited amount of time the Post-9/11 GI Bill covers. Seeing all the classes can help the veteran to maximize their benefits. Second, students, especially online students, require fewer meetings with advisors on campus and are able to stay focused on graduation (Richardson et al., 2014).

McCaslin et al. (2013) wrote the City College of San Francisco has implemented an initiative to ease the burden veterans face when working with the bureaucracy of Veterans Affairs and Veterans Health Administration by creating offices for both on campus. The intent of placing these offices on or near the campus was to ease the burden on student veterans to obtain services with a minimal impact on class attendance, thereby increasing the likelihood of completion. It has been determined that veterans are more likely to attend appointments and receive treatment at VA community clinics as opposed to VA medical centers. The collaboration of the college and VHA enables veterans to feel more comfortable seeking treatment for PTSD, depression, or anxiety, all of which can be barriers to college completion. Treatment can diminish the impact those issues have on college completion. The services offered are not limited to a veteran's health and PTSD, but include community resources that can improve the overall quality of life for a veteran, which in turn eases stressors affecting academic performance (McCaslin, et al., 2013).

Green Zone is a program that has been implemented at colleges across the nation. Green Zone training is provided to faculty and staff members interested in helping veterans (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). The training is done on a local level, for little cost. After completion, those who complete the training receive a sign to place on their office door denoting that their office is a safe place for veterans. Another measure some colleges have started is creating veteran-only spaces or lounges. Studies have shown veterans benefit when they have an area only for their use (Moore, 2017). While rare, a VA liaison, who is an employee of the college with specific contacts at the local VA

office to refer student veterans to, as well as being able to help student veterans on campus with GI Bill benefits, has been beneficial for student veterans.

There are programs that are supported by the college but run by student veterans. Among them is SVA. SVA is the Student Veterans of America. This organization was established to provide resources, support, and advocacy for veteran students to succeed in higher education (“Home,” 2016). According to the SVA webpage, there are currently more than 1,500 local campus chapters across fifty states with over 754,000 student veterans (“About Us,” 2022). On a local level, the chapters provide camaraderie for veterans and opportunities to vocalize to faculty, staff, and fellow students about their needs. SVA allows student veterans to use their leadership skills to improve the college experience for veterans on campus.

On a national level, SVA has grown large enough to lobby for and have Congress unanimously pass the Forever GI Bill (“About Us,” 2022). SVA holds a national convention for its members, which focuses on not only improving leadership skills but also setting a national agenda to improve the college experience for veterans. Among other topics covered at the national convention are health and wellness, personal development, diversity, and a multitude of workshops aimed at growing local chapters (“NatCon 2022 | Student Veterans of America,” 2022).

Peer mentoring can be helpful for all students, but especially for veterans transitioning back to an academic environment. One of the earliest veteran peer mentoring programs, one in which student veterans help student veterans, is PAVE. PAVE is Peer Advisors for Veteran Education. This program provides training for veterans to be advisors and mentors to help new student veterans successfully make the

transition from military to college life (“Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE) – Outreach, peer support, and linkage to resources for student veterans returning to college on the Post-9-11 GI Bill,” 2018). There are specific needs and resources for veterans that are best shared by other veterans. Initially, PAVE was implemented at the university being evaluated in this paper. However, after PAVE changed to a pay-for-use program, the university in this paper ended its association with PAVE. Utilizing the skills and tools learned through their association with PAVE, this university instituted its version of a mentoring program referred to as Battle Buddies (Reese, 2022).

While face-to-face peer mentoring is ideal, there are some SSM/V who enroll in only online classes and could benefit from being mentored. One such program is Uvize, which is both an in-person and online peer mentoring resource. Founded by Dave Cass, the mission of the platform is twofold. First, to help veterans transition more efficiently, and second, to organize mentorship and peer support among student veteran communities (Tveten, 2015). While it has traditional mentoring, it also has online resources connecting veterans with other veterans interested in similar programs (Cass & Hammond, 2014). Uvize has four ways it helps veterans: online mentorship, online preparation for a return to school, team building, and skills training to aid in academic success for SSM/V’s (Cass & Hammond, 2014). According to Kurzynski (2014) Uvize’s platform is a cross between LinkedIn and Facebook. Uvize has local networks that are limited either to the institution where the veteran is enrolled or in their local region. When a student veteran creates an account, they gain access to a network of veteran classmates, peer mentors, or advisors that can be accessed at any time of the day. This type of mentoring is essential for students who may be commuters or predominately online students (Kurzynski, 2014).

Additionally, there are several programs that focus on building relationships between the community and new veterans. These voluntary service organizations (VSOs), including Team RWB, The Mission Continues, Team Rubicon, and the Travis Manion Foundation, among others; allow veterans to continue serving the public while using skills they learned in the military in their new communities. Some universities with veteran lounges and resources will partner with some or all of the VSO through the staff who brings the organizations to campus or student veterans who are members and recruit from peers at the university. When the institution allows these organizations to have chapters or recruit from campus, they are not only showing institutional awareness and support for veterans but they are also assisting the veteran's transition from the military into the local community.

Evaluation Models

Before determining an evaluation model to utilize in this paper, the working definition of evaluation was accepted as “systematic and objective determination of worth or merit of an object...” (Maudas et al., 1983, p. 123). There are many program evaluation types and models which could be used. The types researched for use in this paper included formative, process/implementation, outcome/effectiveness, impact, and summative evaluation. According to Maudas et al. (1983), a formative approach to evaluation is the collection of data and judgments to aid in the development of a program. Process/implementation evaluation evaluates the design and implementation of the program to determine if any obstacles conflict with the success (Wang, 2011). An outcome/effectiveness evaluation assesses if and how well a program has achieved its stated goals (Chen, 1996). Impact evaluation might seem the same as outcome

evaluation. Still, instead of evaluating if a program is meeting its goals, impact evaluation measures to what extent the program achieved its stated goals and if it served the intended beneficiaries (Frey & Hintze, 2018). Finally, a summative approach uses an outside evaluator to collect data and determine the value of a program by comparing the collected data with similar programs (Madaus et al., 1983).

Kirkpatrick Model Evaluation

Three evaluation models were considered for this study: the Kirkpatrick Model, the Outcome Based Evaluation Model, and the CIPP Model. The first model to be reviewed was the Kirkpatrick model. This model has been used extensively to evaluate training programs; it is considered simple, practical, effective, flexible, and complete (Cahapay, 2021; Wang, 2011). Traditionally, this has been used in business and organizational settings. More recently, it has been applied in higher education settings, not without controversy (Praslova, 2010). The Kirkpatrick model uses four levels of evaluation criteria to collect data. These criteria are reaction, learning, behavior, and results, which are divided into internal and external aspects. The first two criteria levels are internal; this includes *reaction*, which is the student's reaction to the instruction, and *learning*, assessed by a measurable demonstration of knowledge (Bates, 2004). The third and fourth levels are external, *behavior* in higher education can be assessed through a compilation of skills learned, such as capstone portfolios or integrated research projects. The final criterion of the Kirkpatrick model *results* is difficult to assess in higher education. Still, this can be done via internship feedback, alumni career success, and/or community service projects (Praslova, 2010). This researcher finds the Kirkpatrick Model better suited to course evaluation than programs and policies for student success.

Outcome Based Evaluation

Outcome Based Evaluation (OBE) has been used in education, health care, and social services (Schalock, 2002). The primary purpose of using an Outcome Based Evaluation is to improve the quality of a program via the comparison of results and objectives (McNeil, 2011). Outcome Based Evaluation consists of five elements, which address evaluation and management needs. Schalock (2002) stated evaluation needs include accountability and continuous program improvement; management needs consist of results, quality, and consumer satisfaction. The first element in OBE is the questions: what is the researcher evaluating. The second element is multi-faceted and is determined by the questions in the first element. Step one in the second element determines the evaluation type: program, effectiveness, impact, or policy. The second step is the focus of the evaluation, the organization or the individual. The third step is the standard of evaluation: is the researcher looking for results of a program or for the value the program provides? The last step in element two of OBE is outcome measures. This is broken down into organization and individual, and then the researcher must determine if they are measuring performance or value, which is dependent upon the goals of the evaluation. The third element in Outcome Based Evaluation is measurement approaches, the methods used to obtain data. There are four general categories: performance assessment, consumer appraisal, functional assessment, and personal appraisal. The fourth element in OBE is results and interpretation; within this element, validity, significance, attrition, and contextual variables are emphasized. The final element of Outcome Based Evaluation is utilization, within this element are purpose and success factors, which must be considered when changes are to be implemented (Schalock, 2002).

Within the education realm, OBE has generally been used to assess the learning outcomes of students—competency and knowledge acquired, rather than how institutional services and policies affected student completion (Ali, 2021; Hsieh & Hsu, 2013). According to Chinta et al. (2016), “the outcome-based approach is appropriate for organizations that are mostly interested in the results” (p. 992). This researcher found OBE to be more concerned with the bottom line for an institution rather than the impact on program users.

Context, Input, Process, Product Evaluation Model

The CIPP model has been used in many educational institutions throughout the United States to evaluate a variety of programs (Madaus, et al., 1983). The choice of using a CIPP model is warranted when evaluating a program, as opposed to instituting a new program. The purpose of CIPP as an evaluation model is beneficial because it is not used to prove the efficacy of a program, but instead to improve the program (Frey & Hintze, 2018). CIPP uses “evaluation as a tool by which to help make programs work better for the people they are intended to serve” (Madaus, et al., 1983, p. 118). The framework of CIPP has one significant benefit: the collection and evaluation of data from program participants allows the leadership and staff to repurpose the resources already in use, tweak programs currently in place, and/or implement new programs if feasible (Madaus, et al., 1983).

Stufflebeam et al. (2000) wrote that, when conducting evaluations for educational institution stakeholders at all levels, from users to policymakers, the CIPP Model is a comprehensive framework that can be used not only for evaluation but to report the findings in a collected systematic manner. The CIPP Model may be used by programs

and institutions to conduct internal evaluations or, when preferred, employ external contractors to utilize this model with no loss of efficiency. The CIPP Model follows an objectivist orientation, incorporating the principles of equity and fairness. This is accomplished by seeking out stakeholders and engaging them in the evaluation process, from determining the evaluation criteria through interpreting the findings. The purpose of an objectivist orientation is to ensure personal bias and prejudice are controlled while determining the merit and value of a program. Objectivist evaluations are intended to produce results that are correct, irrespective of the client's preferences (Stufflebeam et al., 2000).

The CIPP Model is used worldwide when evaluating educational institutions. Throughout the world, it is frequently used in public school systems as well as institutions of higher education (Chinta et al., 2016). The implementation of social approaches in context, input, process, and product components of the model is appropriate for assessing higher educational institutions. As stated by Stufflebeam et al., (2000), the purpose of CIPP is to improve a program, not to prove its efficacy (Chinta et al., 2016). In order to be an effective tool in evaluation, the metrics and benchmarks need to be clearly delineated.

According to Chinta et al., (2016), the three benchmarks are internal, external, and aspirational. Internal refers to an institution measuring their current performance against a previous performance. External is in reference to a measurement of institutional performance against another similar institution's performance. While the aspirational benchmark is to consider current performance relative to the institution's ideal performance goals. Chinta et al. (2016) suggest three metrics for each of these

benchmarks: input, process, and output. These metrics will vary dependent upon what is being evaluated but fall into broad categories. Input refers to the program or group to be measured. Process refers more specifically to the program or system being evaluated. Finally, the output metric can refer to the success, satisfaction, or growth of the program users. Utilizing this approach with the framework of the CIPP Model can provide better evaluation data for the stakeholders while allowing the institution to not only evaluate its performance but also establish goals that inherently place the institution on a course toward improvement and excellence.

The CIPP Model was used as an evaluation tool to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of an online master's program. In an effort to provide a meaningful assessment and ensure the program was meeting the needs of the students, the institution (Institution of Informatics) implemented a study using the CIPP Model (Sancar Tomak et al., 2013). The benefit of using CIPP for this study is that the model is based on decision-making. This allowed the researchers to gather information about the needs and desired outcomes of the faculty and students. A needs assessment of the program was conducted, and the decision to implement change in one facet of the program was reached. Improvements were suggested and implemented with a follow-up survey of the students regarding their perceptions of the changes and if they felt they were beneficial to their learning goals (Sancar Tomak, et al., 2013). The CIPP model allowed the program directors to reach a decision that improved the educational experience for the students, thereby enhancing the program's value for the students.

In "How is Sexuality for Adolescents Evaluated? A systematic review based on the Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP) Model," Rocha et al. (2021) use the CIPP

model to qualitatively evaluate sexual education programs for adolescents to define the approach, focus, setting, and effectiveness of program presentation. The authors used the CIPP model to provide ideas for improvement rather than to determine what and why programs may be ineffective. Their qualitative approach was rather unique in that instead of interviewing participants, they conducted a systematic review using PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Rocha et al., 2021). When choosing the program evaluations, the authors looked at the context—what the program’s goals were and to what socioeconomic group they were aimed at. When reviewing the input evaluations, the authors examined the curriculum, resources, and instructors. Process evaluation looked at program length, student participation, and barriers to implementation. Finally, product evaluations examined short-term outcome themes such as health, relationships, and sexuality education (Rocha et al., 2021). The authors determined that the current evaluation of sexual education programs is narrow and focused more on the “proof of Value rather than added value to a context-oriented practice” (Rocah et al., 2021, p. 208). This determination strengthened the author's belief that using the CIPP model for evaluation could provide more holistic results in line with the desired outcomes of sexual education.

The CIPP model has been used to qualitatively evaluate the challenges of a neonatal graduate nursing program regarding professionalism in the workplace of program graduates (Ashghali-Farahani et al., 2018). The context of this study looked at how the students/recent graduates were treated while on the neonatal ward. The input reviewed the curriculum, particularly the theoretical and practical experiences while in school, emphasizing the practical experiences. The process component focused on the

lack of nursing expertise, that is, the performance of tasks required when working on the ward. The product part of CIPP included the competency of graduates, longevity in their careers, and job satisfaction. The study showed many program participants feel they lack the necessary clinical skills, resulting in a lack of respect from their co-workers, leading to dissatisfaction in the workplace and ultimately leaving the profession. The authors recommended changes be made in the presentation and practices of the faculty to produce better-prepared neonatal nurses (Ashghali-Farahani et al., 2018).

CIPP has been used in education to evaluate the quality of the education provided to students. In a study by Aziz et al., (2018), the authors utilized the CIPP model to evaluate the quality of education for several schools in a local school system. For this study, the authors used the goals, objectives, background, and history of the schools to evaluate context. The criteria for input evaluation include human and material resources of the school. The process refers to the manner in which the curriculum is taught and the school's climate. Lastly, the product is the quality of the education and the impact it has on the individual and society. The purpose of the study was to implement the CIPP model in evaluating the schools. CIPP provided a structured format for the evaluation of the different schools. The researchers drew consistent conclusions across all the schools evaluated by establishing the context, input, process, and product parameters (Aziz et al., 2018), which allowed the researchers to make recommendations to improve the product (quality of education) as opposed to recommending all new resources and curriculum which would be cost prohibitive.

The Context, Input, Process, and Product evaluation model has been used to evaluate many different aspects of educational programs using a variety of approaches:

qualitative, mixed methods, case studies, and, in this case, longitudinal. The authors conducted an eight-year study using CIPP to evaluate an undergraduate medical education program (Mirzazadeh et al., 2016). By utilizing the CIPP model, the researchers were able to conduct evaluations in four phases. Starting with the traditional curriculum, the first and second phases were implemented. After a new curriculum was instituted, the third phase began, while the fourth was conducted three years after the new curriculum was implemented. In addition to the benefits of following the framework of context, input, process, and product, the researchers benefited from stakeholder involvement in the evaluation, increased validity due to the triangulation of evaluation data collected, and the ability to continually evaluate and improve the new program as it was implemented. For this study, one of the advantages of using the CIPP model was the ability to manage stakeholders' expectations; that is, through continual evaluation, the researchers were able to convince the stakeholders of the need for change and keep them engaged in the process by creating a sense of ownership in the changes that were implemented (Mirzazadeh et al., 2016). Although the researchers noted some limitations in using CIPP for such a large evaluation project, time and data management were the principal issues faced in this study. The benefits of being able to manage the change process with useful evaluations while implementing these changes and temper the stakeholders' expectations and reactions to the changes far outweighed the limitations.

In the article "Using the CIPP Model to Assess Nursing Education Program Quality and Merit," Lippe and Carter (2018) used the CIPP model to evaluate a nursing education program's end-of-life (EOL) curriculum. The impetus for the study was nurses who did not feel adequately prepared to deal with dying patients once they began

working professionally. In addition, there are seventeen palliative and EOL competencies the nurses must meet in prelicensure programs. When conducting the study, accreditation and program objectives were evaluated under context. These findings were used when conducting the input evaluation. During the input evaluation, they used a faculty survey to compare the current curriculum with other programs. The process evaluation consisted of classroom observations during EOL instruction. This led to the discovery of a large variability in the material covered. This created concerns that not all students graduated with the same level of knowledge regarding EOL care. To evaluate the product, students were given pre and post-semester surveys using the national standards, and the results provided data regarding the students' preparation to care for EOL patients. The flexibility of the CIPP model allowed researchers to utilize a variety of methods for data collection, providing valuable insights into the current implementation of EOL instruction and how to improve it going forward (Lippe & Carter, 2018).

Yazdimoghaddam et al. (2021) used the CIPP model to design a competency test for students at the end of their operating room technology course of study. Competency is essential in an operating room, and prior research had shown that students did not feel they had acquired the needed competencies for employment through classes alone (Yazdimoghaddam, et al., 2021). The researchers using the CIPP model determined the current evaluation methods were arbitrary and subjective, leaving many students ill-prepared for the workplace. Their choice of CIPP as the model for evaluation was to improve on the current competency test for this course. These researchers utilized a mixed methods approach to conduct their study. The first step (context) was conducted with eight faculty members to discuss the indicators, components, and performance of the

comprehensive end-of-course competency test. This was followed up with discussion sessions and emails where focus groups agreed upon and designed an end-of-competency exam to simulate a real-world environment (input). The process component of CIPP was implemented with the students performing the new competency exams for the operating room technology course. The product portion of CIPP was evaluated through the review of student scores on the competency exam. The results of this study created a comprehensive end-of-course exam that more accurately evaluates the student's readiness for the workplace. The researcher's use of CIPP allowed them to assess and help implement a better-designed competency test that more accurately reflects the skills learned by students in the operating room technology course.

When evaluating a TESOL program to improve curriculum, instruction, and evaluation, Sopha and Nanni (2019) state that CIPP is the appropriate model due to its flexibility, ability to evaluate both formative and summative assessments, and give voice to the various stakeholders in the program. Sopha and Nanni (2019) advocate using the CIPP model to evaluate the effectiveness of a TESOL program as it addresses the needs of all stakeholders, students, and instructors. The CIPP model aligns with the educational goals of the students and instructors to evaluate the formal and informal methods of classroom evaluation. Using CIPP to evaluate a TESOL program necessitates a student-centered approach, which can result in instructors being strong advocates for their students. In this article, there are examples of both formative and summative evaluation questions for all components of CIPP that could be applied to many educational programs, not just TESOL. Additionally, there is a list of data collection tools provided for triangulation of data for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon being

studied. The researcher's conclusion of the relevancy of the use of the CIPP model in higher education evaluation is that CIPP is comprehensive and grounded in the values of the stakeholders (Sopha & Nanni, 2019).

Lee et al. (2019a) discuss the benefits of using the CIPP model to evaluate a medical humanities course at Seoul National University College of Medicine, after discussing several models, including OBE and expertise-oriented evaluation, then rejecting them as inappropriate for their goals. They decided to use the CIPP model, as its main objective is to improve rather than prove the effectiveness of the course. At the writing of this article, CIPP was not commonly employed in evaluating higher education programs in South Korea (Lee et al., 2019a); however, Lee et al (2019b) state it would be an appropriate evaluation model in a higher education setting. The flexibility of the CIPP model necessitates a clearly defined set of criteria relevant to the program being studied. Once the criteria have been defined, their context within the program should then be evaluated to determine what the problem or need is within the program. The input component assesses how entities involved in decision-making will be utilized. The process component would focus on the examination of the implementation of the program. The final component, the product, measures the results before and after implementing the changes to determine the program's effectiveness. The researchers state a mixed methods approach to data collection would be an appropriate method when evaluating a course in a medical education program. Lee et al (2019b) conclude that, while utilizing the CIPP model can be difficult, improvements to educational programs would be a less arduous task and have support from the stakeholders' involvement in the evaluation process.

After researching the benefits of using the CIPP model to evaluate courses in higher education, Lee et al (2019a) conducted the evaluation of a medical humanities course at the Seoul National University College of Medicine. The study was conducted in response to implementing a new competency-based curriculum, the intent of which was to graduate doctors better equipped to help all people in a global society. The context portion evaluated the learning goals. Input evaluated the resources and approaches used to meet the goals of the course. Process evaluated the implementation of the course, as well as the student's evaluation of the course. Finally, the product portion evaluated if the initial goals of the course had been met (Lee et al., 2019a). Data collection used a mixed methods approach with tools that included surveys and questionnaires, which included multiple choice, essay, and Likert scale sections. There were different surveys for professors and students. The results showed that the students were not aware of the importance of the medical humanities course, and professors were enthusiastic but could be presenting too much material for the allotted time, thereby discouraging students. Utilizing CIPP as the model for this study allowed the researchers to achieve findings that were detailed from both the student and professor viewpoints and make recommendations that would benefit the students, faculty, and course (Lee et al., 2019a).

Another study was conducted using CIPP to evaluate the integrated science curriculum for the undergraduate medical education program at Shiraz Medical School to determine if recent reforms to the curriculum had been implemented effectively (Rooholamini et al., 2017). The data collected showed the new curriculum was generally satisfactory, but changes could be implemented to overcome the weakness in the curriculum. Rooholamini et al. (2017) stated that CIPP was used due to its basic concept

of improving and modifying, rather than confirming, a program's outcome. In conducting the study, the authors used both quantitative and qualitative measures to collect data. Starting with the context component, the authors completed a review of the literature on all aspects of the recently implemented curriculum. Input data was collected via a detailed Likert survey, which had been vetted and approved by medical education experts administered to the students. Completing the process component of CIPP was a survey administered to first-year medical students who had completed the new curriculum, as well as semi-structured interviews with faculty. The final component product was conducted qualitatively via unstructured interviews and brainstorming sessions with students. The data gathered highlights the positive and negative aspects of the integrated curriculum, ultimately showing there was not a significant difference between the old and new curriculum (Rooholamini et al., 2017). The authors concluded that using the CIPP model as the framework for the study allowed for a systematic evaluation, which would enable the administration to make appropriate, well-informed decisions about curriculum changes.

Harrell and Reglin (2018) used CIPP to evaluate newly implemented advising practices in a nursing program experiencing a decline in retention. After the Faculty Advising Program was operational, the authors used the CIPP model to measure student satisfaction and success of the program. Interestingly, Harrell and Reglin (2018) only used the process and product components of CIPP; as the program change had already occurred, the administration wanted to know what the students' reaction was to the new advising program in order to determine if further changes were needed. The new program required more face-to-face and email contact between advisor and advisee, making

students more proactive in their education plan. Quantitative Likert surveys were given to the students to complete. The research showed there was increased retention of students once the new program was implemented, but continued advising training for faculty would be beneficial to increasing the retention rate (Harrell & Regin, 2018). The CIPP model allowed the researchers to evaluate the new advising protocol from two perspectives: in the midst of the process and the final product in a systematic and objective manner.

Sankaran and Saad (2022) evaluated a Bachelor of Education program at the University of Malaysia using the CIPP model to ascertain if changes needed to be implemented to improve the quality of the programs offered. Specifically, Sankaran and Saad (2022) evaluated the effectiveness of the training and knowledge of new educators and the quality of the curriculum that meets the needs of the students and the program objectives. The areas they evaluated were curriculum development, teaching methods and techniques, materials, and the manner of student assessment. A quantitative survey was used to collect data from the students in the program. The researchers found the components related to input—materials, assessment, and curriculum—were rated poorly; however, the instructors and their methods were rated highly. The process components—instructors and their approaches to teaching—were rated highly. Again, the assessment portion of the process evaluation fared poorly. While the human interaction was rated highly, the product—knowledge gained—did not meet expectations for the program (Sankaran & Saad, 2022). The CIPP model allowed the researchers to denote the positive aspects of the instructors while delineating the multiple negative aspects of the program. The outcome of the study was several recommendations, including ensuring the

program's relevance to the workplace, obtaining higher quality materials for the curriculum, and reviewing teaching strategies.

Anh (2018), in their discussion of evaluation models in educational programs, wrote that the CIPP “is one of the oldest and thoroughly tested” (p. 145) models. Their discussion of the characteristics of the model included “learning by doing,” which allowed the model to continuously identify, correct, innovate, and implement as the evaluation was conducted. CIPP can be considered both a formative and summative evaluation model. This model can be considered formative when suggesting improvements and summative when assessing the program results. Additionally, due to the manner of implementation of the CIPP model, it has an objectivist perspective, rendering it free from human subjectivity and allowing for more accurate conclusions (Anh, 2018).

Anh (2018) also discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the CIPP model. The first strength of CIPP is its versatility. It was not designed for any specific programs or areas of study, which allows it to be easily used in a wide variety of programs in need of evaluation. The CIPP model has been used in “...about 200 CIPP-related evaluation studies, journal articles, and doctoral dissertations in many nations and fields (Stufflebeam & Coryn 2014, p.310). The model was also found to be applied in 134 doctoral dissertations at eighty-one universities involving 39 disciplines” (Anh, 2018, p. 147). A second strength of CIPP is the four components of the model can be used individually or as a whole, dependent upon the goals of the study. Finally, strength is found in the guidance, comprehensive framework, and checklist developed by Stufflebeam and his colleagues to guide the user on when and how to implement the

CIPP model in a study. Of the weaknesses Anh (2018) discussed, neither would be deterrents for the study this researcher intends to complete. The first drawback of CIPP is it is very similar to a needs assessment model. The difference is that a needs assessment determines the needs or gaps in a desired outcome, while CIPP reviews the efficacy of the process. A final criticism Anh (2018) had about the CIPP model was that the time required to complete a study when the entire model is employed. CIPP is a model of evaluation that is best used when the goal is accountability and improvement.

CIPP is flexible enough to use many different approaches when conducting an evaluation. Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods methodologies are all appropriate approaches to data collection via the CIPP model. This researcher finds the CIPP model to be versatile and best suited for the goals of the study.

Chapter III

METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify what issues veterans face while attending college. The study intended to determine the barriers and facilitators the veteran faced while enrolled in college. It was the intention of the study to review which programs, policies, and offices the veteran believed met their needs while attending college. Many of the barriers veterans face have been identified in the literature previously discussed. These barriers include TBIs, PTSD, physical disabilities, familial and continued military obligations, and their perception of their role amongst the student body on campus (DiRamio and Spires (2009); Stripling (2010); Winston (2010)). An additional problem many veterans must navigate is the administration and disbursement of GI Bill funds for tuition and living expenses. Generally, the GI Bill is adequate to cover the tuition and fees at most schools; however, to do so, the veteran needs to stay on a fairly tight path to complete the degree within the allotted time the Post-9/11 GI Bill allows (*"The post-9/11 GI bill: Beneficiaries, choices, and cost, 2019"*) Through the use of semi-structured interviews with recent veteran graduates and current veteran students, both those who had attended college prior to enlisting as well as those who started college after their enlistment, my intent was to determine the veterans' needs, what programs they utilized, what they thought the university administration was providing or should provide to facilitate graduation, and what the university was not addressing that

could increase the likelihood of graduating within the time frame of the GI Bill. The specific questions addressed in this study were:

1. (Context Evaluation) What are the demographics of the participants of the study, and how do they view their experiences at this university?
2. (Input Evaluation) What measures does the university offer to address the unique needs of students who are military veterans?
3. (Process Evaluation) How is the application and admission process for veterans and how is transfer credit evaluated and applied? Is there a specialized office and staff trained to process GI Bill certifications and handle veteran specific issues?
4. (Product Evaluation) Are there any procedures to ensure a veteran student has the best opportunity to complete college, from admission through graduation, within the allotted time frame of their GI Bill? If success is defined not only by graduation within the allotted timeframe of the GI Bill, but also a satisfactory experience by student veterans, how well does the university meet that metric?

Study Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach. A quantitative study can provide the data to determine the percentage of graduates a university achieves within its veteran population, and a qualitative study provides how and why it was successful. The advantages of qualitative research are numerous; first, qualitative research provides “...thick (detailed) description of participant’s feelings, opinions and experiences...” (Rahman, 2016, p. 104). Rahman (2016) states qualitative research allows for a holistic understanding of participants experience in a specific setting as well as the ability to

understand the voices, meanings, and events of participants. Finally, “qualitative research is intended to generate knowledge grounded in the human experience” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 1). While data collection through interviews can be subjective, it is also detailed, providing the participant’s experience and how the meaning of that experience was shaped by their cultural background (Rahman, 2016). Qualitative research generates data that is comprised of words rather than numbers for analysis, allowing the researcher to find the ‘what,’ ‘how,’ and ‘why’ as opposed to ‘how many’ or ‘how much’ of an experience (McKusker and Gunaydin, 2014). Creswell and Creswell (2023) provide the most appropriate understanding of why a qualitative approach was best for this study when he writes:

Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation.

(p. 5)

The decision to use a qualitative approach was reached when it was clear to this researcher that understanding why and how a student veteran was successful, or not, in completing college during the allotted time frame allowed by the Post-9/11 GI Bill were

essential to goals of this study. The qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding from the student veteran's perspective of which programs, offices, and campus experiences were instrumental to finishing their degree, in their own words. The student veteran can verbalize the barriers they faced while attending college as well as what kept them focused and completing requirements toward their degree. Indeed, data exist in the university registrar's office, which can provide the numbers to measure the success of student veterans, and surveys can provide data that can be used to denote which programs were helpful and appreciated by student veterans. Numbers, however, lack the ability to inform researchers and decision-makers of why success was achieved and how programs met the needs of the student veteran. This study's participants were veterans at one university, making the approach phenomenological; the researcher used interviews and conversations to gather individual narratives and experiences to create detailed descriptions of their college journey.

The type of study this researcher believes would yield the most valuable data is a case study with a phenomenological approach. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), a case study can evaluate programs, events, and activities. Case studies are bound by the setting and time in which the program, event, or activity occurs. The setting is a large university, and their programming for student veterans, and their enrollment defines the time. This researcher feels the best way to assess and evaluate the programming for veterans is to adopt a phenomenological approach and interview current and recent graduates of the university who have experience with the programs available to student veterans. According to Schram (2006), a phenomenological approach "...investigates the meaning of lived experiences of a small group of people from the standpoint of the

concept or phenomenon” (p. 98). This approach will provide the researcher with the experiences of the participants who used the programming available to student veterans at this university.

Research Site, Definition of Study Population, and Sampling Procedures

The subjects for this study were veterans with combat experience who were enrolled in courses or recent graduates. The purposeful sample was chosen from veterans and recent graduates at a large Mid-Atlantic university. This study started with purposeful sampling and was amenable to snowball sampling, which created a population of sufficient size for this study (Naderifar et al., 2017). The decision to use purposeful sampling over random sampling to obtain a population was made with the intention of the study at the forefront of the decision-making process. This study was looking at college completion of combat veterans using the CIPP model; therefore, it was best practice to only consider students at this university who are combat veterans for inclusion in this study.

The student veteran population in this study attended or recently graduated from a large Mid-Atlantic university located within one hundred miles of seventeen active duty and reserve military installations. This university is a public, residential, doctoral-granting institution with a 167-year history. The university has a vibrant, well-staffed student veteran center, offering resources, quiet spaces for veterans, and camaraderie. The university is also a participant in the Yellow Ribbon program. There are 30,875 undergraduate students enrolled, with 574 being veterans using GI Bill benefits and a total student veteran population of approximately 1,200. This university has a robust Veterans Student Life program, with a dedicated staff and strong support from Dr.

Guenzler-Stevens, the Director of the Student Union and Chair of the Veteran Steering Committee. The Veteran Student Life program offers a veteran center with access to a kitchenette, study rooms, computers, free printing, and peer support/mentoring. They have a list of contacts they provide to veterans in need of assistance, both on campus and off. Through the efforts of the Veteran Student Life Program and Dr. Guenzler-Stevens, veterans have priority registration for classes in order to facilitate degree completion. Additionally, they have a wealth of information centrally located to aid veterans in preparing and applying for admission and GI Bill Benefits.

Participants

The initial goal for study participants was set at fifteen. The criteria for being a participant was a degree-seeking combat veteran who is actively enrolled or a recent graduate of the university. The intent was to have a representative population of participants based on the branch of service and gender of military members. Participants were given pseudonyms to attempt to provide anonymity and protect their privacy, as suggested by Seidman (2013). Participants were recruited from the Veteran Student Life (VSL) center at the university. I asked the VSL to send an email (see Appendix A) asking for participants to the currently enrolled and recently graduated students who identified as military veterans. From the responses I received, I selected twelve to interview.

Procedures for Data Collection

An informal, semi-structured interview of participants was used for data collection. Individual interviews were conducted with the participants. At the start of the meeting, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and provided a brief overview of the study. Participants were informed of the Institutional Review Board (IRB)

guidelines and purposes for this study stated in the Research Statement (see Appendix B). In accordance with the Research Statement, participants were informed that their participation would be confidential and they could choose to skip any questions. Additionally, the researcher informed the participants of the data storage procedures, and completing the interview would serve as their voluntary agreement of participation in the study. The researcher informed the participants that the interview would be recorded for accuracy once it was time to transcribe their responses, when there were no objections, the interviews proceeded. Each participant was informed that they would have the opportunity to review the transcript to inform the researcher of omissions, errors, misunderstandings, or statements they wished to clarify (Seidman, 2013). Additionally, the participant was informed that pseudonyms would be used in the attempt to retain anonymity.

The interviews began with the researcher providing their background interest in the study followed by a set of demographic questions (see Appendix C), both to help build a profile and create a rapport between the researcher and the participant. This was followed by a second set of questions, which were pre-formulated to be open-ended, allowing the participant to provide context in their responses (see Appendix D). Additional questions were posed if the responses needed elaboration or further explanation. (Seidman, 2013). While the initial interview questions were expected to take approximately forty-five minutes for adequate responses, it was hoped the open-ended questions would inspire further questions based on the responses to allow the participant to provide examples of their experiences while enrolled. Therefore, additional time was

built into the entire session, for a total of ninety minutes, to allow for deeper questioning of given responses.

Prior to starting the study, the researcher obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) from their institution as well as site approval from the university where the participants were enrolled or recent graduates (see Appendix E). Once the researcher had conditional approval to conduct interviews at the study site the researcher then submitted plans for the study to the IRB of their institution. The IRB issued a Protocol Exemption for this study, based on category 2 of federal regulations (“Exemptions (2018 requirements),” 2024). First this study was completely voluntary, participants responded to a flyer asking participation. Second, the study was exempt from IRB oversight as it was to be conducted via one-on-one interviews, protocols were in place in the attempt to ensure anonymity. In an effort to maintain confidentiality of the participants’ identities the dates of the interviews were used instead of names for the recordings. The calendar with names and dates was kept separately from the recordings. In another effort at confidentiality the researcher transcribed the interviews. Once the interview transcript was checked by the participant, in accordance with exemption protocols, the recordings were deleted. Currently the data collected is in a password protected file, after three years all data will be destroyed. Once the IRB Protocol Exemption was issued the researcher presented the approval to the study site and received an official site agreement letter allowing the researcher to post flyers asking for participants.

The interviews took place in an off-campus face-to-face setting, via Zoom, and by telephone dependent upon the participant's availability and preference. The interviews were voice-recorded with the participant's permission. The researcher then transcribed the

recordings. The transcriptions were sent to the participants for review, and when necessary, follow-up sessions were conducted when the participant or researcher needed to clarify any responses; this was done via phone or email.

The setting for the interviews turned out to be inconsequential when establishing a rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee. The responses to the interview questions were dependent more on the life experience of the interviewee, that is, those who were older were more expansive in their responses. This held true whether the interview was conducted in a face-to-face, Zoom or phone setting. There were, however, more off topic conversations in the phone interviews than those conducted face-to-face or via Zoom. This researcher feels the conversational approach allowed the participants to feel comfortable with the process and be relaxed and forthcoming with their responses.

Data Analysis

This researcher decided to use thematic analysis for this study as it “provides a flexible and useful research tool which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Qualitative research offers a more personal view of a phenomenon being studied that quantitative cannot. Qualitative data is more open to interpretation and the influence of personal bias, necessitating a method of analysis that is both rigorous and methodical to ensure trustworthiness in the results of the study (Nowell, et al., 2017). The method of thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report on the themes found in the collected data. Thematic analysis is valuable for exploring the differing perspectives of participants. It can bring to the forefront their similarities and differences as well as unexpected themes

(Nowell et al., 2017). Most importantly, it can establish trustworthiness in the results of the research.

The data collected through semi-structured interviews was transcribed and sent to the participants for respondent validation. Once the participants had verified the transcript of their interview as accurate, this researcher began the analysis of the data. This researcher followed the six phases of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first phase is to become familiar with the data; this, in part, was accomplished initially through transcription of the interviews. The second phase is coding the data. Coding refers to the identification of features that appear interesting to this researcher and the collating of the data into groups. The third phase is searching for a theme. The codes from phase two are sorted into themes and sub-themes that can coalesce into an overarching theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fourth phase is reviewing the themes, where the themes and codes are reviewed to ensure there is enough data to support them. In this phase, a thematic map may be created. The fifth phase is the final defining and naming of the themes. This refining of themes determines the crux of each of them and their importance to the study. The final phase is producing the report. A concise, coherent, and interesting account will be written in this phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Examples from the data will be used to illustrate important points in the analysis.

Once the interviews have been transcribed and reviewed for accuracy, the researcher started coding the data by pulling similar statements for each question from the interviews. Once that was complete, those similar statements were placed into groups, and eventually, themes began to develop. Once the themes emerged, a review was

conducted to ensure the data could support the theme and is appropriate given the interview questions and study purposes.

Limitations

The conclusions of this study are limited by several factors. First, the participants were self-selected veterans. Second, the interpretation of experiences by each participant is unique and may or may not be unconsciously skewed in their favor. Third, the population of participants was limited to one university. Fourth, although respondent validation was utilized, my unconscious bias may affect how I understand the data. Finally, whether or not the prompts posed were appropriate and pertinent to the research questions.

Validity

The concept of validity in qualitative research has been controversial, as some researchers feel it is too closely associated with quantitative research and too rigid of a requirement for qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell's (2013) definition of validity is "...the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (p. 122). Maxwell (2013) elaborates that validity's general use by qualitative researchers is not to "imply the existence of any 'objective truth'" (p. 122). Rather, he states the theory of validity in qualitative research is used to give researchers a basis for ascertaining the credibility of accounts. Maxwell concludes with the thought that attaining the ultimate truth is not necessary for a study to be valuable and believable. More critical to the validity of this study was construct validity. Construct validity refers to how well the instrument measures what it intends to measure (Lavrakas, 2011). In this study, construct validity was established through the

interview questions and how well they assess what the researcher is attempting to assess regarding college completion and student veterans. The participants' responses were rich with data that indicated the interview questions were appropriate to the research questions of this study.

Maxwell (2011) discusses five types of qualitative validity and their potential threat to the validity of the study. He refers to them as descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, generalizable, and evaluatively valid. Of these five types, evaluative and external generalizability are less central to qualitative research than the other three. Descriptive validity is paramount when conducting qualitative research; according to Maxwell (2011), descriptive validity refers to the accurate recording of specific events and situations during the interview. It is essential to note the participants' mannerisms during the interview as well as the tone and pitch of their speech. This provides additional context of their responses for the researcher. The second type of validity Maxwell (2011) discusses is interpretive validity. Interpretive validity concerns the meaning participants assign to the events or situations they experienced. The researcher needs to understand the responses from the participant's perspective and not impose their perspective on the responses the participants provide to interview questions. It is essential the words and concepts be those of the participants and not an inference of the researcher; the participants' 'truth' is reflected in their understanding of the words and situation (Maxwell, 2011). Theoretical validity refers to the ability of the researcher to achieve a concurrence of what the data represents (Maxwell, 2011). A final thought on validity threats to this study: as with most qualitative studies, the data is limited in generalizability to a larger population. Therefore, the findings from this study will not be

applied to all student veterans. Instead, the data should be considered representative of the student veteran's experiences at the university in the study.

As a veteran who attended college after serving in the Army and while using the Montgomery GI Bill, I recognize there could be some potential bias. My path through college had many starts and moves as I PCS'd with my active-duty spouse and raised a family. The challenges I faced while trying to complete college differed from those using the Post-9/11 GI Bill after combat deployments. My son's experiences sparked my interest in researching this topic after returning to college from his six-year enlistment and combat deployments. I would like to be able to highlight the positive experiences student veterans had as well as give voice to their negative interactions. While I realize I may be partial to veterans, I will use respondent validation, also known as member checking, to ameliorate any unconscious bias I might have.

Chapter IV

Findings

The qualitative study was undertaken with the purpose of looking at what factors could inhibit and which factors could facilitate college completion within the timeframe of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The CIPP model with its evaluation components of Context, Input, Process and Product, was used as the framework and guided the creation of the interview questions. The overarching question to be answered is: As a population within the student body with unique needs and characteristics that differ from traditional students, are combat veterans receiving the institutional support from the university they need to complete a college baccalaureate degree within the time frame allotted by the Post-9/11 GI Bill? The questions in this study were used to gather demographics and further data for the following questions:

1. (Context Evaluation) What are the demographics of the participants of the study, and how do they view their experiences at this university?
2. (Input Evaluation) What measures does the university offer to address the unique needs of students who are military veterans?
3. (Process Evaluation) How is the application and admission process for veterans and how is transfer credit evaluated and applied? Is there a specialized office and staff trained to process GI Bill certifications and handle veteran specific issues?
4. (Product Evaluation) Are there any procedures to ensure a veteran student has the best opportunity to complete college, from admission through graduation, within the allotted time frame of their GI Bill? If success is defined not only by

graduation within the allotted timeframe of the GI Bill, but also a satisfactory experience by student veterans how well does the university meet that metric?

This chapter contains a summary of the data collected including the demographics of the study participants and their perceptions about their experiences of the services offered to veterans at the study university. The process component addresses the procedures, personnel, and offices that are in place to facilitate a timely completion of the student veterans chosen degree program, those which are meeting expectations and those that could be improved. The product component of this study is the completion rate and satisfaction of veterans who are using the GI Bill, within the thirty-six-month timeframe and what the university does or could do to improve the rate of completion.

Along with the summary of the qualitative data, a description of the data analysis and the resulting themes, which addressed the associated research questions, are also provided. The findings are framed within the CIPP Evaluation model components of Context, Input, Process and Product.

Establishing themes

Thematic analysis is a flexible method that allows for either inductive or deductive approaches to data analysis (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). An inductive approach to theme identification was used when reviewing the interview responses. Once the interviews were transcribed and reviewed by the participants. The researcher read and pulled out the ideas related to the research question. During this process initial codes emerged from the repeated analysis of the transcribed interviews. As the data associated with the codes was reviewed the data coalesced into distinct themes relative to the main

research question. These themes were then categorized into the components of the CIPP model.

Context evaluation

When looking at the context component of this study the research question focused on the demographics of the participants and how they viewed their experiences while enrolled at the university.

Demographics

The study participants were all veterans with deployments. Table 1 is a breakdown of the participants of the study including their age, gender, ethnicity, branch of service and component, whether or not they are first-generation college students is also included. Table 2 contains secondary data the researcher feels is important to this study. The data in Table 2 addresses several factors that may affect the veteran’s college experience. These factors can influence the readiness, drive, and potential barriers to completion within the time limits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Table 1.

Participant demographics

Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Branch/Component	First Generation
Male	25-29	Caucasian	USMC Active Duty	No
Male	22-26	Caucasian	USMC Active Duty	Yes
Male	36	Asian	USN Active Duty	No
Female	33	Caucasian	USA Reserves	No
Male	25-29	Caucasian	USA Active Duty	Yes
Female	36	Native American	USAF Active Duty and National Guard	No
Male	40+	Caucasian	USA Active Duty	Yes
Male	27	Caucasian	USA Active Duty	No
Male	27	Asian	USAF Active Duty and National Guard	Yes

Table 1. Continued

Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Branch/Component	First Generation
Male	28	Caucasian	USA Active Duty and National Guard	No
Female	26	Native American	USN Active Duty	No
Male	26	Caucasian	USMC Active Duty	Yes

Table 2.*Life experience factors*

Gender	Years served	Rank	Spouse/ Dependents	Undergrad/ Graduate Student	Enlisted for GI Bill
Male	6.5	SGT (E5)	None	Both	No
Male	4	CPL (E4)	None	Undergraduate	Yes
Male	5	PO2 (E5)	Spouse	Graduate	No
Female	14+	SSG (E6)	Spouse	Both	Yes
Male	6	SP4 (E4)	Spouse	Undergraduate	No
Female	11	MSgt (E7)	Spouse	Graduate	No
Male	20	CW3(CW3)	Spouse + 1	Undergraduate	No
Male	4.5	SGT (E5)	None	Undergraduate	No
Male	7+	SSgt (E5)	Spouse	Undergraduate	No
Male	8.5	SGT (E5)	None	Undergraduate	Yes
Female	7	PO1 (E6)	None	Undergraduate	Yes
Male	5	SGT (E5)	None	Undergraduate	No

The participants of this study were solicited with the help of the Veteran Student Life center at the university. The twelve participants volunteered for participation in the study. The subjects in this study consisted of three females and nine males. The percentage of females in the study is overrepresented compared to the number of females in the four traditional branches of the United States military. In the study, females were 25% of the participants while in the United States military females make up 9.95% of the armed services as of 2022 (“Chapter 1: Total DOD military force,” 2023). The ages of

the participants ranged from 22 to 40+ with the majority being in their middle to late twenties. Eight of the participants were Caucasian, two were Asian, and two were Native Americans. In this study Asians and Native Americans each made up 16.6% of the study population; this is an overrepresentation compared to 4.9% of Asians and 1% of Native Americans in the four traditional branches of the United States military according to Military One Source 2022 Demographics Dashboard (“Chapter 1: Total DOD military force,” 2023). The four branches of service, Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force with their components of Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard were generally representative of the breakdown of members in those branches and components. There was a slight overrepresentation of the Army and Marine Corps members compared to Department of Defense data from 2022. Five of the twelve participants are first-generation college students, of those five, only one enlisted for the GI Bill benefit. Three of the remaining participants also cited the GI Bill benefit as one of the reasons for enlisting in the military.

Eleven of the participants were on active duty for at least four years. One retired from the military, two are still in the reserves/national guard, the remainder served between four-and one-half years and eleven years. Only one of the participants was considered active duty only for training and deployments, the majority of their service was as a Reservist. All but one of the participants were non-commissioned officers, one was a junior enlisted. One participant had become a Warrant Officer after achieving the rank of Staff Sergeant in the Army. Six of the participants have spouses, with one of those having a child. The majority of the participants are using their GI Bill to fund their

undergraduate degrees, while four of the participants are currently using their Post-9/11 GI Bill to pay for graduate school.

All of the participants were using or had used the GI Bill while attending this university, some had used the GI Bill at schools prior to this university. Several had exhausted their GI Bill benefits but qualified for Chapter 31, Vocational Rehabilitation via the Veterans Affairs Department. The focus of this paper, however, is on the participants' experiences at this university while using the GI Bill, both negative and positive.

Experiences of Student Veteran

This study inquired into the satisfaction and social interactions student veterans experienced while attending this university. Participants spoke about both the satisfaction and dissatisfaction they felt with their degree programs and the admittance requirements. Social interactions and the lack of connection with younger students was discussed and while there was not often a connection with traditional students, veterans did comment on making social connections through the Veteran Student Life center. Student veterans used the VSL for multiple reasons which enriching and enhancing their experiences at this university.

Table 3.

Student veteran experiences

Theme: Program of Study and satisfaction	Theme: VSL Center usage	Theme: Social Connectedness
<u>STEM</u>	How Veterans use the VSL	How Veterans felt about traditional students
Transfer students not admitted to Engineering school upon initial application, traditional student admitted with no pre-req's required.	Social connections	Not focused on classwork/different priorities

Table 3. Continued

Theme: Program of Study and satisfaction	Theme: VSL Center usage	Theme: Social Connectedness
Limited in the math and physics courses the participant could enroll in.	Veteran orientation	Traditional students could be agist
Participant was not admitted to engineering school due to one missing transfer course.	Free tutoring	No commonalities
Transfer credits filled all electives and had to take three years nonstop STEM courses.	Mentoring/Battle Buddies	Traditional students do not have similar work ethic
<u>Business</u>	Lounge use for printing, coffee, snacks	
MBA is too AI and data focused.	Scholarships	
MBA eliminated Logistics focus with no warning.		
MBA First year courses chosen for students focus chosen by school.		
<u>Humanities</u>		
Participant majored in humanities when transferring to business would have required taking many pre-req's. This participant had great experience in Humanities major.		
Humanities programs allowed transfer admittance to programs immediately.		

The participants of the study who were in STEM focused programs expressed the most displeasure with their experiences at the university. As seen in Table 3, the main source of dissatisfaction in STEM programs occurs around transfer and admittance to engineering programs. Those in a humanities program had the highest satisfaction with the university the academic processes. Table 3 lists the admittance to humanities programs immediately upon transferring to the university is viewed favorably by the participants. Those in the business programs were less than impressed with the manner in

which the department implemented major changes to the focus of the program. Eliminating one focus of the MBA program and concentrating on data analytics and AI (see Table 3) were highly contentious issues for the participants of the study. Although not all the participants took full advantage of the Veteran Student Life center all were aware and appreciative of the effort to have a veteran-only resource available. While the veteran orientation and tutoring were highly appreciated offerings of the VSL, according to Table 3, social connections were the top reason to use the Veteran Student Life center. All of the participants, even those closest in age to traditional students, felt a social disconnect with other students. This disconnect is not different from the detachment noted by DiRamio et al. (2008). In this study the participants most noted the lack of focus on classwork and the agist tendencies in their interactions with traditional students (see Table 3).

Input Evaluation

The second component of the CIPP model is Input; the research question focused on what measures the university offers to address the unique needs of students who are military veterans.

University resources for veterans

Knowing that student veterans are a unique category of non-traditional student this study looked at the resources offered to student veterans to facilitate their path toward graduation. Participant's thoughts and opinions about the financial, social, and academic opportunities offered through the university were gathered and analyzed. While few of the participants took advantage of all the resources available, all did make use of at least one of the resources available for student veterans.

Table 4.

Veteran student resources

Academic Assistance	Financial Assistance	Connect with other Veterans	Lounge
Tutoring	Scholarships	Mentoring/Battle Buddies	Socialize with other veterans
Designated department/office veteran contacts	GI Bill certification contacts	Terp Vets	Printing
	Vocational Rehabilitation contact information	Veteran off campus events	Couches
		Veteran nights at university sporting events	Study area
			Coffee, snacks

Student veterans are a unique category of non-traditional students. While they share several characteristics of non-traditional students such as being older, having been away from academia for a number of years, and often have familial responsibilities and financial obligations, student veteran's military experiences set them apart from other non-traditional students. In this study they had all had at least one deployment to a hazardous/hostile theater of action, while several had physical and/or psychological trauma from their military service. On a more positive note, the student veterans had all learned discipline, focus, responsibility, and determination through their military service. For the student veterans who are using the GI Bill to fund their college education, they are also very much aware of the finite amount of time they have to complete college within the time frame of the GI Bill. With the knowledge of the unique characteristics and needs of the student veteran, the university in the study has set up the Veteran

Student Life Center which offers resources, programs, and personnel with the purpose to aid student veterans through their college career.

All of the student veterans in this study were aware of, and many used the services provided by the Veteran Student Life (VSL) center. The mission statement of the VSL reads in part “To build and maintain a community of veteran and military-connected students, staff, faculty, and alumni at the University [redacted] that collectively supports the transition from military life to civilian college...” (“Veteran student life,” n.d.). In support of the mission statement the VSL has a mentor program modeled after P.A.V.E. called Battle Buddies. Incoming student veterans receive an email from a current participant offering to help them navigate the university, both the campus and the bureaucracy. As seen in Table 4, the Battle Buddies program was one that most of the undergraduate students had participated in. Many of the participants commented on the Veterans Center which is a lounge/study area accessible only to student veterans. It provides coffee, snacks, printing, and a tutoring service for no cost to student veterans. Table 4 lists socializing with other veterans as the most important aspect of the lounge in the Veteran Student Life Center. One veteran stated they “would go to the Vet Center to get free printing and hang out and meet people.” Another participant “...comes often for the free coffee” and finds it is “a good place for vets to talk and not worry about offending someone.” One veteran stated, “the Vet Center is the only reason I have friends on campus.” Most of the veterans mentioned “a lack of focus” and disconnect with traditional students and appreciated having a place where they could step away and socialize with other students who shared a background of military service.

VSL also supports a student run organization of student veterans for student veterans. They host social events off campus, have veterans' nights at university sports events, sponsor intramural teams, and create volunteer opportunities for student veterans who have time to participate. This organization creates opportunities for student veterans who may not be able to get to the VSL center while on campus. The VSL center provides opportunities for student veterans to connect with other student veterans and create a social network on campus. Studies have shown that when student veterans are able to academically and socially integrate into the campus community it leads to a deeper commitment to achieve their goal of degree completion (Meiners, 2019).

In addition to the social aspect of the VSL, they also offer academic support. One of the features VSL offers, that many participants stated they used, is the tutoring services. The veterans in the study had either been out of school for years or not been academically inclined when in school, many of them took advantage of the tutoring services VSL offered. A veteran student need only speak with the program coordinator about needing a tutor and the coordinator finds them a tutor in the subject and VSL covers the cost of tutoring sessions. All of the student veterans who are in a STEM undergraduate program are aware of the service with several having used the tutoring service at one time or another. One participant stated "I needed help brushing up for my organic chemistry last exam and the final. I told [program director], and I think within a day they had me set up with a chemistry tutor and it's no charge to veterans." One veteran mentioned the tutoring service is "huge...free tutoring for STEM courses...will help you be successful in school." The tutoring service is not limited to only STEM courses, there are statistics and business tutors available as well. Table 4 includes the attribute of

department and office contacts the VSL maintains to assist student veterans who need program assistance on a more direct level. A direct contact in a department can lead to a quicker resolution to the veteran's issue.

Table 4 lists the ways Veteran Student Life can assist veterans financially, not through direct funds but by providing scholarship opportunities and contacts. Several of the participants in this study talked about the scholarships that are offered through the Veteran Student Life Center. There are over 70 scholarships available for student veterans; to apply, you must be a military veteran and attend the university. Once you have applied, the staff will review the application and submit the application to all the scholarships the veteran is eligible for (UMDbarnhart Veteran Student Life, 2024). The students mentioned the scholarships were very important to their financial health while enrolled at the university. In addition to the scholarships, the VSL helps student veterans by providing direction and contact information for GI Bill certification and processing at the university. The VSL can also provide contact information for Vocational Rehabilitation benefits to determine if the student veteran might qualify.

Clearly, this university has made attempts to create an environment that can help the veteran assimilate to the campus, create social bonds with other student veterans, aid in academic success, and provide additional financial assistance for student veterans. While the VSL has largely been very well received by the veterans who use it, there were consistent shortfalls by the university regarding matriculation and transfer credits noted by these student veterans.

Process Evaluation

The research questions focusing on the process component of the CIPP model included the application and admission procedures for veteran applicants as well as how their transfer credit was evaluated and applied. The process component also reviewed if there were specific offices and personnel trained to certify and verify the GI Bill and remediate issues unique to veterans.

Administrative procedures and veteran matriculation

All students prior to matriculation have to complete the admission process, if they are transferring, they will need to have their transcript evaluated, and if they are also veterans, they will need their GI Bill processed to receive benefits. The participants explained why they chose this university and their admission experience. Some of the participants related there were several veteran friendly portions of the admission process, but individual experiences regarding admission were more inconsistent than consistent. The student veterans in this survey also had inconsistent experiences with advisors, previous college credit transfers, and processing of their GI Bill. The administrative procedures and policies were difficult, and at times contradictory, to navigate for the participants in the study.

Table 5.

Administrative procedures and veteran matriculation

Admission	Transfer Credit	Advising	GI Bill Processing
Pros	Credits transfer mostly as electives	Priority registration	Length of time between application and receiving COE
Location	STEM credits not transferring for STEM courses	Student/peer advisor	University certification of enrollment

Table 5. Continued

Admission	Transfer Credit	Advising	GI Bill Processing
BAH/COL	Completed Associates will transfer	Advisor only signs off on schedule student created	Disbursement rules not provided to all veterans
Veteran application fee waived	Only courses completed in state community college guaranteed to transfer in course for course	Good advisors draw up a long term plan to complete within GI Bill timeframe	Not enough certifying officials at university
Graduate admissions tests waived	Military service credit awarded inconsistently		Veteran must stay on top of the process to avoid disbursement problems
Yellow Ribbon Program	Transfer credit for courses awarded inconsistently		Not all offices at the university are aware of the GI Bill tuition payment process
Cons			Yellow Ribbon Program
Engineering School no direct admits of veterans Not informed of application fee waiver for veterans Late notice of acceptance Old SAT scores required Letters of Recommendation			

Among the criteria Process evaluation addressed were the application process, transfer credits, advising, and GI Bill Processing. To a lesser extent, the reputation of the degree program, location, as well as Yellow Ribbon Program participation, which are Input criteria for this study, were considerations when the participants selected this

university. The participants had varying degrees of satisfaction with the criteria of the Input component, but most felt there is room for improvement.

Admission is the first process criteria that the study addresses, but prior to discussing the participants' experiences at this university, it is important to understand why this university was chosen by the participants. Table 5 lists the pros and cons of the admission process. Eleven of the twelve participants chose this university due to its location. This decision included the cost of living and amount of BAH they would receive for the area, the availability of jobs in the area upon graduation, and the distance to friends at nearby duty stations. Two participants considered, more specifically, the abundance of jobs for their career field in the local and surrounding areas as their main reason for choosing this university. Six of the participants stated the degree they are pursuing was the main reason for choosing this university. Regardless of the reasons for choosing this university, all the participants went through the application process. Most of the participants stated they thought the process was relatively easy/smooth. Several mentioned that as veterans their application fee was waived; however, most of the veterans interviewed had not been aware the application fee could be waived. Three of the participants stated the problems applying were fairly significant to them. One needed to submit SAT scores, but since it had been more than five years since they took them, they had to pay a large fee to have them sent to the university. The required letters of recommendation were likewise just as difficult to obtain. There is not a system set up to allow military members chain of command to submit the letters. One participant stated, "the admission process needs to be streamlined for vets." Another comment made more than once referred to the length of time the university took to provide a decision. This left

several of the participants just a couple weeks to move, find new living arrangements, and register for classes.

Several of the participants experienced issues when applying to the engineering school, in that they would not admit any of the student veterans to the engineering program directly, they only admitted traditional students in the engineering school. Several of the students who were admitted to graduate programs were able to have the GMAT waived, although it is unclear if that was due to veteran status or changes due to Covid -19. Regarding the overall application process, there was an absence of uniformity on the part of the university for necessary tests and fees the student veterans needed to complete the application. Additionally, there was a lack of consistency when evaluating placement for student veterans. In some cases, they only looked at the courses taken at a college level, while in others they “looked at my entire record, not just community college, they also looked at my high school transcripts, which were bad.”

Perhaps the most important input criteria, in this study, for student veterans is the issue of transfer credits. Table 5 lists the participants’ experiences with transfer credit evaluation. Four of the participants did not have any credits to transfer into this university for their degree program. Of the remaining eight participants only two had all their credits from other colleges transfer in for the appropriate courses, and that was only because they had a completed associate’s degree. Two of the participants had some of their general education core classes transfer in for the appropriate courses at the study university. Four of participants had many of their credits from other schools—community colleges to nationally ranked engineering universities—transfer in as only general electives. Two of the participants had taken some courses at the community college in the

state system as the study university, those courses all transferred in for the appropriate courses. While the university in the study does award credit for military service, it does not do so consistently. Of the participants in this study two received six credit hours, one received three credit hours, and the remainder did not receive any credit for military service. Several of the students were transfer students in a STEM program, the credits they earned at their previous college did not transfer in as STEM courses for the program they were interested in. The STEM courses that did not transfer directly caused a delay in their admission to the STEM program and necessitated retaking the same courses at the university in the study. One participant had completed courses in the STEM program at another university but was refused admission to the STEM program in the study university because they did not take the courses in the same order as they are offered at the school in the study. In order to gain admission to the STEM program one participant enrolled in a local community college and "...overloaded on courses to complete an associate's degree and was then accepted with no issues." Transfer credit evaluation was not consistent for the student veterans in this study, which in some cases caused degree completion to take longer than necessary.

The participants in this study had varying experiences with advisors at this university: a few were good, more were not, and some just saw the advisor to have them sign off on their choices. All of the participants in this study were very aware there is a finite amount of time to complete their degree under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Several are in a graduate program and their academic advisor experiences are not the same as the undergraduate students. The department chooses their initial year's courses after that they

choose their courses, meet with their program advisor, then have the department graduate services coordinator register them in the courses.

The undergraduate students in this study encountered student/peer advisors, one of which told a participant in this study "... go with her plan B and not engineering." The veteran student stated the peer advisor "did not know how to deal with veterans" or their unique needs. Another participant has been placed in "limbo" until they complete the pre-requisites for the program, they are interested in. The "limbo" advisor was not helpful or knowledgeable about the pre-requisites needed to be admitted to the program the student veteran was interested in. Once the participant declared a major from their initial inquiry, they stated the new program advisor was "really great...and helped draw up a plan to complete the degree in one and half more years." The majority of participants relate a relative indifference by the advisors. Whether this is due to the student veterans being better prepared and focused on the end goal or indifference by the advisor is unclear.

Four of the participants stated they knew what they wanted to major in and did not need advising for program selection. Three of the participants stated once they told their advisor what they wanted to major in. Their advisor helped figure out the order of courses to ensure the quickest path to completion. Two others said they simply selected their courses and had the advisor sign off on it, the advisor did not offer alternatives. Some of the advisors seem to be aware of the GI Bill restrictions, one participant wanted to take more math and physics courses but as the general education requirements did not require them, the advisor told them the GI Bill would not pay for them.

The veteran students who participated in this study, just like all veteran students at this university, have priority registration. Priority registration allows student veterans the

opportunity to register for courses as soon as the registration period opens, regardless of their class status. Priority registration helps ensure student veterans are not forced to wait semesters to take a required course.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is the crux of most veterans' college experience. The GI Bill allows veterans the opportunity to further their education without needing to go into debt. There is also a program, the Yellow Ribbon Program, funded by the Veterans Administration to offset tuition and fees for student veterans who would like to attend a university where they would not be considered in-state for tuition. The university in this study does participate, however it only offsets the cost for two students a year, making it a less than viable option for most veterans. The limited participation in the Yellow Ribbon Program by this university necessitates the student veteran relocate from surrounding areas that are not in state but are within a commuting distance. The distinct limitations of this program are not made clear to veteran applicants when they apply. Table 5 shows that several participants mentioned the Yellow Ribbon Program as part of their consideration of this university, however most were discouraged upon learning of its limitations. One participant benefitted from its use for one semester in conjunction with their GI Bill benefits.

The GI Bill certification and funds disbursement is a bureaucratic process that involves the student, the university, and the Veterans Administration. First a student must apply on the VA website for the GI Bill Benefits. Currently the VA is taking 30 days to make a decision about the application for benefits. After you have applied for benefits you must then request a Certificate of Eligibility (COE) for VA Educational benefits, which also takes approximately 30 days ("How to apply for the GI bill and related

benefits,” 2024). The COE is then mailed to the veteran. Two of the participants had their COE mailed to an incorrect address, due to the VA’s system failing to save the changes they had input, delaying the process. Once you have your COE, the student veteran has additional steps to complete for the university. The student veteran must complete the FAFSA, attend and orientation, check their residency status with the university, request the university certify your enrollment with the VA, and then wait for funds disbursement. Table 5 notes that not all veterans are provided the rules regarding how and when GI Bill benefits are disbursed. The Post-9/11 GI Bill has a two-part disbursement, the first is the monthly housing allowance and book stipend, the second is the tuition and fees disbursement directly to the university. Returning students only need to register for courses and request the university certify their enrollment. All of the steps for GI Bill certification are clearly delineated, but the website neglects to mention student veterans will only receive the housing allowance during the semester. According to several of the participants, information regarding how funds from the Post-9/11 GI Bill are disbursed are not made clear to all veterans when they separate from the military. This can set student veterans up for financial difficulties.

Several of the study participants experienced problems with receiving their funding for the GI Bill. Two had to relocate prior to certification to be considered for in-state tuition although they lived within commuting distance. One participant was ready to drop their courses because the certifying process took so long. In that case the bursar’s office asked for payment in full the day before classes started, the participant had not been informed the college would wait on the tuition reimbursement from the VA and the clerk in the bursar’s office was unaware of the university policy for students using the GI

Bill. One participant was charged out of state tuition and did not receive assistance or information from the certifying officials to correct this mistake. Four months after the initial visit to the certifying officials, they were told their information had not been submitted. During this time, they did not receive BAH, and had to “drain their savings” to pay rent and buy groceries. This similar situation happened to four other participants, with the wait time for funds disbursement ranging from two months to six months. One comment that came up repeatedly during the interviews when discussing their GI Bill experiences was “there are only two certifying officials” at this university, which creates a backlog of applications.

The previous cases are extreme; the majority of the other study participants stated there was little to no delay in receiving their GI Bill funds, but they also stated they stayed on top of the process and followed up on every step along the way. A consistent understanding among all the participants in this survey is the very firm limit of thirty-six months of benefits they can receive from the Post-9/11 GI Bill. One university worker was mentioned multiple times by the study participants as a person who goes above and beyond to ensure the student veterans are making the most of their VA benefits. This person sends emails repeatedly to remind the student veterans of the deadlines for certification and to ask them to get started early. He knows where and to whom to send the student veterans when they encounter any problems with their GI Bill benefits. This person has also suggested other programs the VA has to help veterans pay for their education if they are eligible. The GI Bill certification and processing at this university is not without flaws, but there is one person at the university to whom the student veterans can go to for assistance.

Product Evaluation

The final component of the CIPP model is product evaluation. In this component, the research questions asked if there were any procedures, from admission to graduation, to facilitate college completion within the time constraints of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and how success is defined. Is success only through degree completion in the timeframe of the GI Bill or does it also include a satisfactory experience by the student veteran, and how does the university meet that metric?

Enrollment to Graduation Initiatives

The participants in this study discussed the positive and negative experiences at this university. The Veteran Student Life Center had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the student veteran's college career. The programs they sponsor and the lounge they provide allows student veterans to socialize with other students with similar backgrounds and social mores. The participants did state there are programs and offices at the administrative level that could be better advertised to veterans, as well as having services and individuals to assist them in a singular location.

Table 6.

Enrollment to graduation initiatives

Negative impact	Positive impact
Admission to Engineering school issues	Veteran Student Life Center
Little information provided for disability services	New Student Veteran Orientation
Invisible injury outreach	Scholarships
No one stop veteran services shop	Mentoring/Battle Buddies
	Tutoring program
	Priority Registration

The participants in this study expressed satisfaction with some of the programs the university has in place for student veterans, and frustration with others. The most notable and prevalent amongst the participants is all of the student veterans who wanted to apply to the Engineering school were “stonewalled.” Whether they applied as transfer students with engineering courses or were applying as first-time students, none of them were considered for the engineering school. Two of the participants stated the school will admit traditional students directly into the engineering school, but they will not for student veterans. One student veteran stated “...if you’re not already privileged enough to have a high enough education to be able to clear the barriers of entry into these programs, you’re just shunned and pushed back out...” They went on to state it appears “...building artificial barriers...” while he doesn’t feel this is targeted at veterans, it does have an “outsized impact on veterans because [veterans] represent an outsized number of students that did not have access to STEM courses.” The student veterans who did persist toward an engineering degree are forced to take or retake classes and wait a year before they were admitted to the engineering school.

Participants also stated dissatisfaction with the lack of information provided by the university regarding disability services to veterans. The student veterans were unaware they could receive extended time on tests, quiet rooms to test in, and other accommodations to provide an opportunity for them to perform their best. It was the responsibility of the veteran to seek out information about the services. Several of the participants stated they were only made aware that student disability services might be able to help them after talking with other veterans. As seen in Table 6, along with academic accommodations, veterans expressed they would have liked there to be

outreach by student services about more than physical disabilities, including the invisible injuries they carry such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

A concern of the veterans was the lack of a “one-stop shop” where veteran specific staff and resources were housed. On their initial encounters with staff at the university there were few staff members who were aware of the different processes a student veteran has for tuition payment. Several participants stated some advisors seemed to be indifferent to the time limits a GI Bill user has to complete their degree. The participants felt this could be better if the staff needed to process and advise student veterans, were in one location. One participant stated “[the university] should have better resources for incoming vets who hit a roadblock so they don’t have to wait behind traditional students who have different issues and timelines.” The VSL does provide a starting place in that they maintain a list of contacts across campus who are more knowledgeable and willing to work with student veterans; however, a student veteran is not always aware of this in their early interactions with the university.

Along with the criticisms the participants recognized good initiatives the university provided. Table 6 lists the services VSL provides that most appreciated by the participants in this study, Many, although not all, of the vets attended a student veteran orientation in addition to the new student orientation mandated by the university. Those who attended were informed of the programs VSL sponsored. The Battle Buddies mentor program was consistently acknowledged as a benefit by the student veterans. This program is not used by all student veterans as one mentor noted that some of the people, they reached out to did not respond to their inquiry. Most of the participants in the study

were now mentors in the Battle Buddies program, with a couple becoming good friends with their mentor.

While the stipend provided by the Post-9/11 GI Bill is essential to make ends meet several of the participants were grateful to have additional funds to help with the cost of living while attending college full-time. One of the recipients of a Veteran Student Life's scholarship stated the program is "...amazing. They go above and beyond to make sure as many veterans as possible have a scholarship to alleviate the burden of living cost while in school."

There were multiple positive comments about tutoring available, through Veterans Student Life and the Graduate School participants were enrolled in. Many of the participants were initially intimidated by the rigor of some of their courses, but the no cost access to tutoring and the peer mentoring program provided the assistance they needed to re-establish their competence in their studies.

The themes of the study as they relate to the research question were established through thematic analysis of the data collected during the interviews with participants. The themes were then broken down into the components of the CIPP model. The pattern the researcher sees emerging is while the university has some programs in place to facilitate degree completion, the participants do not feel the university has enough or the right procedures and offices to ensure degree completion within the time frame of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Persistence and Graduation

A final portion of the Product component looks at the persistence and graduation of student veterans using the GI Bill. The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides thirty-six months of

benefits. Full-time enrollment toward degree completion while exhausting the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits can be completed in one of two ways. First, a veteran can enroll in Fall, Spring, and Summer courses year round completing their program in three years (twelve months of classes over three years). A second option is to enroll only for fall and spring, completing their program in four years (nine months of classes over four years). Some veterans also qualify for other veteran specific programs to continue their education if they exhaust their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits.

Table 7.
Retention and graduation first-time undergraduate student veterans

Cohort Term	Retained/ Graduated After 1 Year	Retained/ Graduate d After 2 Years	Retained/ Graduated After 3 Years	Graduated After 4 Years	Graduated After 5 Years	Graduated After 6 Years
Fall 2013	81.8%	72.7%	72.7%	36.4%	63.6%	72.7%
Fall 2014	100.0%	60.0%	60.0%	60.0%	60.0%	60.0%
Fall 2015	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%
Fall 2016	83.3%	66.7%	66.7%	33.3%	50.0%	50.0%
Fall 2017	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Fall 2018	60.0%	60.0%	60.0%	40.0%	60.0%	
Fall 2019	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%		
Fall 2020	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%			
Fall 2021	100.0%	100.0%				
Fall 2022	66.7%					

Table 8.
Retention and graduation transfer undergraduate student veterans

Cohort Term	Retained/ Graduated After 1 Year	Graduated After 2 Years	Graduated After 3 Years	Graduated After 4 Years
Fall 2015	80.6%	29.0%	54.8%	64.5%
Fall 2016	93.1%	48.3%	82.8%	86.2%
Fall 2017	85.2%	40.7%	66.7%	74.1%
Fall 2018	85.3%	35.3%	61.8%	76.5%
Fall 2019	90.3%	48.4%	67.7%	77.4%
Fall 2020	85.2%	37.0%	74.1%	
Fall 2021	89.3%	25.0%		
Fall 2022	90.9%			

One metric to measure how well veterans are succeeding at a university is to review the length of degree to completion time of student veterans. Table 7. shows the year first time college student veterans enrolled at the university in the study and the percentage of student veterans who persisted or graduated in subsequent years. The persistence/graduation rate for first time student veterans is higher than the average completion rate of 54% in 2015 (“Factsheet Veterans in higher education,” 2020). After four years, the graduation rate fluctuates considerably between the years 2015 and 2020, the average rate of graduation between those years is 52.8%. The veterans who graduated after their fifth and sixth years remained relatively high across the cohorts of 2015 through 2018.

Transfer students at this university are those who matriculate with at least twelve semester hours (“Transfer applicants,” 2023). The participants in the study who transferred in enough hours to be considered transfer students were not always given course for course credit. Many had their courses transfer in as electives, the exceptions were those who transferred in with an Associate’s Degree. According to the figures in

Table 8. the graduation percentage of veterans after years three and four at this university, who matriculate as transfer students is higher than the average completion rate of 2015.

As a final note, the completion rate of all student veterans enrolled in this university between years three and six after matriculation is higher than the national completion rate of 47% of all Post-9/11 GI Bill users as of June 2019 (Radford et al., 2024). This completion rate is also much higher than the national completion rate of 27% for students who are financially independent but do not receive the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Radford et al., 2024).

Chapter V

Summary and Recommendations

Combat veterans are attending college in record numbers utilizing the GI Bill. The current iteration of the GI Bill—the Post-9/11 GI Bill—has a finite time to use the benefit. Combat veterans using the GI Bill while attending college has cost taxpayers more than fifty-three billion dollars (Molina & Morse, 2017). While articles have been written to discuss what educational institutions can do to help veterans transition, few have been written from the veteran’s viewpoint. This study *College Completion and Combat Veteran: Barriers and Institutional Efforts to Facilitate Successful Completion* asks the student veteran which initiatives instituted at their university are succeeding and which are falling short of success.

This study sought to address the large question, are combat veterans receiving the institutional support they need to complete their degree within the time allotted by the Post-9/11 GI Bill, through the following research questions:

1. (Context Evaluation) What are the demographics of the participants of the study, and how do they view their experiences at this university?
2. (Input Evaluation) What measures does the university offer to address the unique needs of students who are military veterans?
3. (Process Evaluation) How is the application and admission process for veterans and how is transfer credit evaluated and applied? Is there a specialized office and staff trained to process GI Bill certifications and handle veteran specific issues?

4. (Product Evaluation) Are there any procedures to ensure a veteran student has the best opportunity to complete college, from admission through graduation, within the allotted time frame of their GI Bill? If success is defined not only by graduation within the allotted timeframe of the GI Bill, but also a satisfactory experience by student veterans, how well does the university meet that metric?

Using a qualitative approach, the researcher conducted interviews using demographic and open-ended questions with self-selected combat veterans and a large mid-Atlantic university. The researcher chose to use Stufflebeam's evaluation model—Context Input Process Product—as a framework (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985) to develop the study and create the research questions used to evaluate the policies and initiatives for student veterans at the university in the study. Thematic Analysis was then used to analyze the data collected during the interviews.

Main Themes

There were several themes this researcher identified from the data collected via interviews with the participants. The themes were loosely grouped into mandatory policies and process, and optional services at the university. For the purposes of this study the application, admission, transfer credit evaluation, advising, and GI Bill certification are mandatory policies at the university which student veterans have little control over. On the other hand, the optional services created by the university include priority registration and the Veteran Student Life center, with the programs and amenities it offers student veterans. Student veterans can choose whether or not take advantage of priority registration and engage with the programs the VSL offers. These themes are seen in the four components of the CIPP model for evaluation.

Context

The participants of the study were currently enrolled or recent graduates of the university. The subjects included nine males and three females. All had been enlisted servicemembers, with one retiring as a Chief Warrant Officer. Half the participants had spouses, and one had a minor dependent. Ten attended this university for undergraduate degrees and four were enrolled for graduate degrees. All participants were using or had used the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Four of the participants enlisted specifically for the GI Bill benefits. Of the 12 participants, five were first-generation college students.

The participants discussed their experiences regarding academic and social connections while attending the university. Their satisfaction with the university's academic programs varied depending upon the area of study. Those in the humanities programs had the greatest satisfaction, while those in the engineering programs had the least satisfaction with their academic experiences at the university. Social interactions with traditional students were similar among the participants, with most feeling a disconnect. The participants stated they did find more satisfying social connections with other veterans, often through the VSL, or in some cases away from campus entirely.

Input

This researcher considers the following to be services for student veterans as they control how they make use of the services. The first is priority registration, all of the participants take advantage of the opportunity to register for courses before non-veteran students. Priority registration allows the student veteran a better chance to enroll in courses that may not be offered every semester, particularly when they are registering for

upper-level courses. This helps facilitate degree completion within the thirty-six-month limit of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

The Veteran Student Life center houses many different services and programs. It also provides a lounge for student veterans that provides a place to get a cup of coffee and a snack, print papers, study, and socialize with other student veterans. Several of the participants stated they were able to meet people who were similar in age and experience by visiting the VSL lounge. VSL also hosts a mentoring program known as Battle Buddies, where they set up incoming student veterans with a student veteran that has been enrolled in the university for a few semesters. Many of the participants went on to become mentors in the program. There are other social events for student veterans though the VSL center, some of these include outings off campus to local venues, veteran nights at university sporting events, and partnering with local chapters of VSOs to hold events.

Two of the services offered through Veteran Student Life center are scholarships for veterans and no cost tutoring. The participants repeatedly stated the VSL goes above and beyond to help student veterans find and apply for scholarships to help offset the cost of attending university. As of this writing, there are seventy scholarships available for student veterans. Tutoring was another service rated very highly among the participants. The participants had been out of a traditional school setting for many years, those who had used the tutoring services were impressed by how quickly the VSL could arrange a tutor. While most took advantage of the STEM tutors, tutors are available for all subjects.

Many students could benefit from the accommodations that disability services can set for students who qualify. While traditional students are usually aware of and transfer their accommodations to university from high school, veterans may not have had nor

needed accommodations prior to their military service and are unaware of how accommodations can facilitate degree completion. Several participants mentioned the lack of information regarding how to access disability services and what, if any, services they could receive. Most of the participants only found out they might be eligible for accommodations from other student veterans already receiving services.

Process

Application and admission, especially to STEM programs, were discussed often in the interviews. Some students had problems with the application requirements such as required letters of recommendation and obtaining old standardized test scores, others stated there were no problems and their application fee was waived. Several participants stated they did not receive university decision letters until several weeks before the semester started, leaving them scrambling to move and find an apartment. Those who applied for admission to STEM programs experienced the greatest frustration, regardless of their background and transferred courses, none were admitted directly to a STEM program, they had to wait at least a year and complete or retake some pre-requisites before admission. One participant stated, "...[the] engineering program here at this university apparently has a lot of very well constructed academic barriers to getting into the program..." while another said the same pre-requisites are not required for students who apply to STEM programs directly out of high school.

Transfer credit evaluation was not consistent among the study participants. Few participants had all their credits transfer in course for course. The majority had their college credits transfer in as general electives. Those who had completed an associate's degree did not have to repeat any of the core general education courses. While this

university does give college credit for military training, some participants received three hours, others six hours, and couple did not receive any credit hours.

Participant interactions with advisors varied, all participants stated they knew what they wanted their degree in and did not need to be directed toward a program. One participant, an engineering major, upon their initial experience with course advising had a peer advisor who told them "...to go with plan B and not engineering," this participant felt the peer advisor "...did not know how to deal with veterans." Two participants stated their advisor helped them map out the quickest path to graduation to meet the thirty-six-month timeline of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Many more stated they would pick their classes and just have the advisor sign off on it so they could register.

The study participants were using the GI Bill to fund their education; in order to do so they must certify/recertify each semester and submit the required forms. Several participants stated initially there was a delay of a few months, most stated after the initial payment as long as "stay on top of things" there was no delay. There were also comments on how few certifying officials there are for the number of student veterans enrolled at the university. One university official was named repeatedly as the best source for assistance with the GI Bill and other veteran pay issues. Overall, the GI Bill process while not perfect does work very well at this university, according to the participants.

Product

The final evaluation component looked at admission to graduation procedures and their success. This study considered success to be measured not only by degree completion, but also the level of satisfaction the veterans felt with their university experience. Overall, the participants were highly satisfied with the Veteran Student Life

center, from the lounge to the scholarship program the veterans stated their experiences with the VSL were highly positive. The VSL allowed veterans to connect with other veterans and share information about university programs and policies not readily available to student veterans, particularly regarding the office of disability services.

Although the VSL does maintain a list of veteran knowledgeable contacts across the campus, the participants were critical of the lack of a centralized, one-stop office for veteran services on campus. Additionally, they felt some advisors were not always aware of the time constraints of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and were especially discouraging to veterans interested in pursuing an engineering degree. Participants felt there were additional hurdles for entry to an engineering program that traditional students did not have. Also noted by several participants not all staff at the bursar's office were aware of how tuition payment was remitted regarding users of the GI Bill, and inadvertently created situations where the participants almost withdrew from the university due to financial limitations.

Student veteran satisfaction is one measure of success, the other is degree completion within the thirty-six-month time limit of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. In this metric, the university is outpacing the national average of 54% completion within thirty-six months or four traditional school years. The data provided to the researcher shows that veterans who transferred into the university between the years 2015 and 2020 graduated at a rate 75.74% after 4 years. First time undergraduates between the years 2015 and 2019 had a graduation rate of 54.66%. slightly higher than the overall 54% graduation rate of GI Bill users. It appears the university is doing well with veteran graduation rates, but less so with the rate of a satisfactory college experience for the student veteran.

Recommendations

In order to facilitate the veteran's path to graduation, this researcher has several recommendations based on the interviews and data collected. The first recommendation is to ensure student veterans are regarded as a special population within a campus community. While they share some traits with various groups on campus, their experiences as combat veterans set them apart from other first-generation students, first time students, and other non-traditional students. Their needs regarding usage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill should be addressed by a knowledgeable staff highly familiar with its regulations and limitations, to include the bursar's office, advisors, and the financial aid office

It was made clear to this researcher through the interviews that not all servicemembers leave the military having been briefed in the usage of the Post-9/11 G Bill. With that in mind a second recommendation that would benefit student veterans is upon acceptance a packet which provides the student veteran detailed information regarding their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, other financial aid specific to veterans such as Chapter 31 Vocational Rehabilitation funding, classroom accommodations for which they may qualify, and the services provided through the VSL at this university.

Several of the participants stated they were not fully prepared for the academic rigor of their programs. Although they were able to use the tutoring services provided by VSL, several thought short refresher courses in the basic skills of writing, advanced math, and statistics would have been beneficial as well. As with many non-traditional students these skills are not used often when performing their military duties and dull with time, a no cost refresher course for veterans would have been used and appreciated by several of

the participants. A final recommendation would be to offer student veterans upon acceptance an informal short review course to brush up on basic skills if needed to prevent taking remedial courses not covered by their GI Bill.

Connection to Previous Research

This researcher found several areas in which responses from the participants in this study align with the research previously completed. Osam et al. (2016) found veterans enrolling or returning to college experienced several barriers traditional students do not encounter. These barriers include injuries, academic preparedness, relocation, balancing familial obligations, and navigating different bureaucracies. One of the participants in the study had physical injuries which slowed their trips to the different buildings on campus. Many of the student veterans interviewed mentioned they were not fully prepared for the rigor of academia. Several mentioned it would be a good idea to have some informal “brush up sessions” for any non-traditional student, not just veterans. All the participants thought the free tutoring was great, although not all had used the service. Most of the participants willingly relocated to the university city, although several had no choice but to relocate from a nearby state to receive in-state tuition. Several participants mentioned the late acceptance created logistical issues regarding relocating to the university. Half of the participants had spouses and families whose needs they needed to consider during their time at the university. Many of the participants experienced problems with university policies, offices, and personnel. It was not uncommon for them to receive conflicting responses from different offices on campus, especially regarding tuition payment and the GI Bill.

The social disconnect veterans experience when they matriculate into a full-time on campus university has been written about extensively by DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008), where they note veterans comment on the lack of responsibility they see in the coursework and participation of traditional students. This was also noted by the participants in the study with one participant stating, “Younger students were ok...but were not participating in discussions in class.” Regarding the work ethic of traditional students one participant said “...acted like they were still in high school regarding getting work done and studying.” Another participant noted “Younger students have a different focus, not so much on education.” As Livingston et al. (2011) noted veteran students often have families and are not there to socialize and party which creates a disconnect between traditional students and veteran students. Several participants stated they did not participate in many of the events put on by VSL as they occurred during the hours they needed to spend with their family. A few of the student veterans from this study who relocated found a better social fit by joining local gyms in nearby communities, a trend noted by Falkey (2016) in *An Emerging Population: Student Veterans in Higher Education in the 21st Century*. In the gyms the participants said they were able to form friendships in their new communities.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill, according to Sportsman and Thomas (2015), is a tool to help veterans reintegrate into the civilian world while providing funding for higher education or a trade school. While generous it is also limited to 36 months of financial funding. The GI Bill also comes with many rules, regulations, and processing times which can delay disbursement of funds. All of these are worrisome and can be distracting for student veterans and impact their grades and degree completion (Dasarathy, 2016).

There were several participants in this study that considered withdrawing or disenrolling due to disbursement issues with processing their GI Bill. One participant was asked to write a check for the semester's tuition at the bursar's office, before speaking with a certifying official who assured them, they were not required to meet the fee payment deadline. Many spoke of having to use their savings to pay for daily necessities before they received their monthly stipend, while others relied on their spouse's income until their stipend started. Part of this problem occurs from not having properly trained or enough certifying officials at the university, an issue Kirchner (2015) discussed.

Disabilities and seeking accommodations for them is an issue for many veterans. In addition to visible injuries and disabilities there are invisible injuries, such as TBI, PTSD, depression, hearing loss, which can lead to learning disabilities. Kraus et al., (2017) estimated that one fourth of veterans have some type of disability incurred while in the military. Whether the student veteran has a visible or invisible injury most will not seek out assistance (DiRamio, (2017)). Among the participants in the study, there was one with a physical disability, several with hearing loss, and a few with learning disabilities. Several participants in the study only sought out accommodations for a learning disability after being told it could help them improve their test scores and grades by other veterans.

The literature also discussed advising and prior college transfer credit and how an advisor's lack of knowledge about the GI Bill and its limitations can impede a veteran's path to college completion. Parks et al., (2015) state academic advisors have a large role in the persistence and success of a veteran graduating. It is a good practice to have advisors who are familiar with the military and GI Bill policies. Richardson et al. (2014), states a degree map, which lists all the courses needed to complete a degree, given to the

student veteran at the start of the college career is a valuable tool to finish within the allotted time of the GI Bill. The participants in the study were generally self-sufficient when it came to scheduling their courses. Several stated their advisors worked with them early on to lay out all the courses they needed to complete their degree in the shortest amount of time. Currently, this university does not have advisors only for veterans, but they are working to set up liaison advisors well versed in the needs of veterans who can better serve student veterans. Registration for classes is often determined by your grade level in the university. Ventrone and Karzewski (2015) noted many student veterans have not been enrolled in the university long enough to qualify for priority class registration, which can leave veterans to enroll in classes they do not need so they can maintain eligibility for their GI Bill. This university in the study has instituted priority registration for all student veterans from the first semester they enroll.

The Veteran Student Life office at the university in this study maintains a lounge for veterans only. In *Grateful Nation: Student Veterans and the Rise of the Military-Friendly Campus*, Moore (2017) wrote that veterans benefit when they have an area only for their use. The lounge at this university was used by participants for free printing, getting a cup of coffee, and most importantly to socialize with other students, who like them were veterans. The VSL also offers peer mentoring in the form of their program Battle Buddies. According to Tveten (2015) peer mentoring serves two purposes: one, to help veterans transition more efficiently, and two, the development of peer support among veterans.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study was conducted at a large Mid-Atlantic university with the intent of learning what barriers student veterans face on their degree path and what this institution does to mitigate those barriers. Using the CIPP model with a qualitative approach to evaluate the processes and services in place for veterans allowed this researcher to identify what works, what needs improvement, and what is not working for the student veterans at this university. The veteran's input could provide insight into how well the student veteran feels supported by the university on their path to graduation. This study can also provide some guidance to the university when making decisions regarding programs and services for student veterans.

My first suggestion for further research addresses the small number of participants in this study which limits the generalizability of the findings to other universities. I would suggest a similar study using quantitative methods which allows for a larger study population, looking more closely at transfer credit, advising, and admission processes. This might provide more generalizable findings that could help form new policies at this and other universities.

Additional research should be undertaken to review if universities with dedicated veteran lounges and offices not only improve the college experience for combat veterans but facilitate persistence. This research could focus on the social disconnect combat veterans experience with the traditional student body. Understanding if veteran interaction with other veterans on campus increases persistence and ultimately degree completion could lead to recommending implementation of such lounges to universities considering veteran only spaces.

A final suggestion for further research would be to look at the time to completion rate for combat veterans. This would consider more than completing within the thirty-six months allowed by the GI Bill. It would include the length of time to completion from enrollment, the veteran's previous education—secondary and post-secondary—their motivation to attend college, i.e., did they enlist primarily for the GI Bill, did they plan to extend their enlistment career field to their college education and civilian career goals. It would also consider the role of the college, admission requirements to programs, advisors, degree maps, as well as the acceptance and application of transfer credit. This would provide a more in-depth study of combat veteran college completion.

Summary

This study was conducted using Stufflebeam's Context, Input, Process, Product evaluation framework. A case study approach was used to collect the data through one-on-one interviews with the participants of the study. The data was then analyzed using thematic analysis which generated the main themes discussed in chapter four. The main themes were divided into the categories of processes and services. Processes consist of requirements which must be completed by the student veteran, while services are offered to the student veteran, but they are not required to participate nor complete.

The veterans who participated in this study while having many similar experiences at this university also had very different approaches to the similar barriers they faced. It is clear to this researcher that there is not currently one path to successfully navigating the bureaucracy that surrounds usage of the GI Bill at the university in the study, nor is there a direct pathway for transfer students to meet the academic requirements for some programs at this university. Funding the GI Bill in all its iterations

is expensive for the taxpayer, veterans should not have falsely constructed academic barriers to overcome in their academic careers, facilitative processes should be instituted to enable degree completion within the time limits of the GI Bill.

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Appendix A - Recruitment Script

I am a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. I am conducting research on the services provided and specific programs offered on campus and if they have an impact on student veteran degree completion. I am recruiting individuals who are combat veterans enrolled at or recent graduates from this university to complete a short interview. The interview should not take more than 60 minutes to complete. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may cease participation at any time. I will ask a series of questions in a semi-structured conversation format regarding your experiences while attending this university. These questions will begin with demographic questions, followed by questions about your experiences while attending university. I will not use your name in the data analysis or final dissertation project. Recording this session will ensure I capture your responses accurately. Once the interview has been transcribed, I will ask you to review it for accuracy and inform me of any needed corrections. Please consider sharing this email with any student veterans or recent graduates from this university.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to C. Michelle Brock at cmbrock@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu

Appendix B - Research Statement

You are being asked to participate in a survey entitled “*Combat Veterans and College Completion*,” which is being conducted by **Carolyn Michelle Brock**, a *student* at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is **to understand what programs and policies were beneficial to your college experience, and which ones inhibited your path to degree completion.** You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about **what programs and policies were of benefit to you in your college experiences and could allow your concerns/compliments to be acknowledged and potentially improve the college experience for other veterans.** There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately **60 minutes** to complete. This survey and your participation are confidential. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may print a copy of this statement for your records.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to **Carolyn Michelle Brock** at cmbrock@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Appendix C - Demographic Questions

1. Are you
 - Female
 - Male
 - Prefer not to answer
2. What is your ethnicity?
 - African-American
 - Asian/Pacific Islander
 - Biracial/Multi-ethnic
 - Caucasian
 - Hispanic
 - Native American
3. Which branch of service were you in
 - Army (USA)
 - Marine Corps (USMC)
 - Navy (USN)
 - Air Force (USAF)
 - Coast Guard (USCG)
4. Were you
 - Active duty
 - Reserves
 - National Guard
5. Did you deploy to a combat zone while serving?
 - Yes
 - No
6. How many years did your serve?
 - Less than 3.5 years
 - Less than 6.5 years
 - Less than 11.5 years
 - More than 12 years
7. What was your rank?
 - E1-E3
 - E4-E6
 - E7-E9
 - Warrant Officer
 - Commissioned Officer

8. What age group are you in?
 - 24 or younger
 - 28 or younger
 - 32 or younger
 - 40 or younger

- Over 41
9. Do you have any dependents?
- Yes
 - No

10. If so, how many?

The United States Marine Corps (USMC) has active duty and reserve components for their total force composition. The United States Army has active duty, reserve, and National Guard components for its total force composition. The United States Navy has active duty and reserve components for their total force composition. The United States Air Force has active duty, reserve and National Guard components for their total force composition.

Active Duty refers to a service member who serves full-time in the military and is among the first to be deployed for combat operations.

Military Reserves refers to a service member who serves part-time (one weekend a month, two weeks a year) and can be activated to full-time service by the United States federal government when the need arises.

The National Guard refers to a servicemember who serves part time (one weekend a month two weeks a year) and can be activated to full-time service by their state government as well as the United States federal government when the need arises.

Enlisted - An enlisted member is one who has joined the military or "enlisted." A minimum of a high school diploma or GED is required. Pay grades are E1- E9 ("Military Ranks," n.d.)

Warrant Officer - A warrant officer is a highly trained specialist. One must be an enlisted member with several years of experience, be recommended by his or her commander, and pass a selection board to become a warrant officer. Pay grades are WO1-CW5 ("Military Ranks," n.d.)

Commissioned Officer - A commissioned officer's primary function is to provide management and leadership in his or her area of responsibility. Requires a bachelor's degree and later, as one progresses through the ranks, a master's degree for promotions. Specific commissioning programs exist (e.g., military academies, Reserve Officer Training Corps [ROTC]). Pay grades are O1-O9 ("Military Ranks," n.d.)

Appendix D - Interview Protocol and Questions

Interview Protocol (Student Veterans)

Place digital recording device on table between interviewer and participant. The digital recorder will be pre-tested and extra batteries will be present.

Script: Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I am interviewing you as part of my PhD research on military veterans and college completion. Your identity will not be revealed in the transcription. The audio recording of this interview is for my use only and will be kept in a secure place during the period of analysis. It will be erased upon completion of the project. I have chosen to study how colleges and universities are prepared to meet the needs of military veterans who enroll college following completion of their military service or while serving in the active guard or reserves. Please tell me exactly what you think and feel and not what you may think I want to hear for the purposes of my project.

(Context)

Q1. Let's start by having you give a little background about yourself.

Prompts:

- Upbringing
- Educational background/experiences prior to joining military and/or during military service
- Will you be the first person in your family to graduate from college
- Reasons for joining the military
- Military experiences
- Deciding to enter or reenter college e.g. first time attending college or transferring
- Family obligations e.g. childcare, financial concerns
- Expectations prior to entry

(Context/Input)

Q2. What contributed to your decision-making process in choosing this particular university?

Prompts:

- How did you find this university?
- Particular qualities or services or options that this particular institution advertised
- in general or specifically geared to Veteran students
- Program of study
- Program delivery options e.g. classroom, on-line, alternative calendars, primarily day, primarily night, hybrid, etc.

(Process)

Q3. How was the process of enrolling in this university including:

- a) making the decision to attend this university,**
- b) applying for admission,**
- c) acceptance decision, and**
- d) registering for your first semester of coursework?**

Prompts:

- Admissions application process
- Navigating the system
- Transfer of credit
- credit for prior learning and training
- New student orientation (appropriate for older student)
- Registration for classes

(Process)

Q4. Describe possible challenges you thought you might encounter while attending university.

Prompts:

- Other obligations e.g. family/dependents, work
- Academic concerns e.g. readiness, rigor of program, delivery mode
- Physical limitations; ease of getting around campus
- Possible mental or cognitive limitations
- Disclosure of Veteran status or possible needs

(Input)

Q5. What expectations did you have as to the kinds of support services that would be available to you? (Process) and What did you experience?

Prompts:

- Dedicated services for Veteran students on campus; if so, types?
- Academic support services e.g. tutoring, study groups, academic advising, support
- Did your advisor hear you when you discussed your education goals
- Services related to disabilities or special accommodations, major
- Exploration/career planning/post-bac assistance
- Social support services e.g. student life activities, student organization, ability to connect with other Vets, wellness services
- Financial/bureaucratic e.g. financial assistance, assistance with benefits paperwork

(input)

Q6. What were your expectations, as a Veteran, as to what your experiences might entail when interacting with others on campus? What was your experience?

Prompts:

- Faculty, staff, students, other Veterans, the university campus in general
- Enrolling with students with different ages and life experiences
- Establishing study/project groups with classmates

(Input/Process)

Q7. How would you describe your experiences with faculty in the classroom?

- Did they make allowances when you had Military obligations Weekend Drill/Annual Training (if applicable)
- Allowances for VA appointments
- Classroom seating and orientation
- Single you out for your military service

Q8. To what extent, including your participation related to your academic coursework, have you been actively involved on campus outside the classroom?

Prompts:

- Activities primarily designed for Veteran students or to promote Veterans on campus
- Extracurricular-intramurals, athletic events, student organizations;
- Study groups; Student Life programming

(Process)

Q9. What student services have you used or are currently using? How have they met your needs?

Prompts:

- Financial/GI Bill benefits processing
- Student Advising
- Transfer Credits
- University-sponsored benefits/services dedicated to Veterans
- Delivered what was advertised
- Possible services lacking or needing improvement particularly for Veterans
- Post-bac Planning/Assistance
- Tutoring or mentoring programs
- Veteran Student Life Office

(Input)

Q10. How would you describe your level of engagement/involvement in the classroom and on campus?

Prompts:

- Level of engagement; Extent of interaction with non-Veteran students
- Campus life- any extracurriculars-intramurals, athletic events, student organizations;
- Activities primarily designed for Veteran students or to promote Veterans on campus'
- Student Veterans of America (SVA)
- Campus chapters of VSO's such as Team RWB, The Mission Continues, Travis Manion Foundation (TMF)

Q11. Do you have any final thoughts you would like to express about your experiences as a Veteran student?

Appendix E – Institutional Review Board and Site Approval Letters



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants**

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04468-2023

Responsible Researcher: Carolyn Michelle Brock

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Christopher Waugh

Co-Investigator: n/a

Project Title: *Combat Veterans and College Completion.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** the recording of interview sessions provided recordings are made to create an accurate transcript. Exempt guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings. Upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted from each recording and storage devices used.*
- *In keeping with established consent guidelines, interview recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming participant understanding, and establishing their willingness to take part in the interview. Participants must be provided with a copy of the research statement.*
- *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym list, email lists, transcript, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

Please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth W. Olphie

01.26.2024

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator

Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.



DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

ADELE H. STAMP STUDENT UNION
CENTER FOR CAMPUS LIFE

3247 Stamp Student Union
College Park, Maryland 20742
301.314.8502 TEL 301.314.7026 FAX
stamp.umd.edu

Site Agreement/School Permission

Date: *October 19th, 2023*

Re: Letter of Cooperation For Veteran Student Life, University of Maryland

Dear Carolyn Michelle Brock,

This letter confirms that that I, as an authorized representative of **Veteran Student Life, University of Maryland**, allow the Principal Investigator Carolyn Michelle Brock access to conduct study related activities at the listed site(s), as discussed with the Principal Investigator and briefly outlined below, and which may commence when the Principal Investigator provides evidence of IRB approval for the proposed project.

- **Research Site(s):** University of Maryland - College Park, Veteran Student Life, College Park MD 20742
- **Study Purpose:** Research study for Dissertation in Adult and Career Education. The study will look at the institutions programs and offices combat veterans found most effective while completing a baccalaureate program at this institution.
 - **Study Activities:** Information will be gathered through one-on-one interviews with participants. Interviews will be conducted face to face or via Zoom if necessary.
- **Subject Enrollment:** Subjects will be currently enrolled or recent graduates who are combat veterans that use the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The sample size should be at least 12 and not more than 20 subjects.
- **Site(s) Support:** The support I am seeking from the site is primarily sending out an email with a brief statement about the researcher, the study and the requirement of participants. If the participant prefers to interview in the Veteran Student Life area I would request the use of a room, otherwise I would hold interviews off campus in a quiet, public location.
- **Data Management:** Interviews will be audio recorded with the participants permission. Data will be stored in a password protected file on a computer only the researcher has access to. In an effort to preserve anonymity all subjects will be given a pseudonym. Some basic demographic data will be collected. The interview questions will focus on the participants' experiences at this university. Once the interviews have been transcribed, they will be sent to the participant to review for accuracy.
- **Anticipated End Date:** The anticipated start date is 20 October 2023 with an anticipated conclusion date no later than 31 January 2024.

We understand that this site's participation will only take place during the study's active IRB approval period. All study related activities must cease if IRB approval expires or is suspended.

Our organization agrees to ensure that the following requirements are followed in the conduct of this research, when applicable: Family Education Rights Act (FERPA) and Protection of Pupil Rights

Our organization agrees to the terms and conditions stated above. If we have any concerns related to this project, we will contact the Principal Investigator. For concerns regarding IRB policy or human subject welfare, we may also contact the Valdosta State University IRB office <https://www.valdosta.edu/academics/graduate-school/research/office-of-sponsored-programs-research-administration/institutional-review-board-irb-for-the-protection-of-human-research-participants.php>.

Regards,

Catherine Robinson

Signature

Catherine Anne Robinson

Full Name

October 19th, 2023

Date Signed

Coordinator, Office of Veteran Student Life

Job Title