“I Dare You to Underestimate Me”: A Narrative Inquiry of Women Student Veterans’ Transition into Higher Education Institutions

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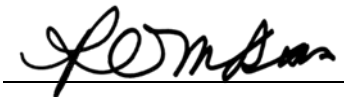
Signature 

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ABSTRACT

Women are the fastest growing population of veterans in the United States. When asked why they joined the military, women have overwhelming indicated they were seeking educational benefits; as such, the number of women veterans attending higher education has risen. While women veterans face many challenges, including physical and mental health challenges, at a greater proportion than male veterans, they also struggle when they return to the classroom. Previous research has shown that in higher education institutions, women student veterans often feel marginalized and invisible as a group and struggle with who they are due to identity dissonance. However, when transitioning into higher education, they tend to excel within their respective institutions.

Though research has focused on the challenges women veterans face, few studies have sought to identify the attributes that help women student veterans succeed—more so than male veterans or their female non-veteran peers. In this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with five diverse women veterans who attended higher education institutions, creating an overarching narrative of their time in the military, their transitions to higher education, and their beliefs about their futures after graduation. Participants' stories identified the challenges, support strategies, and factors related to their military service and their successful college persistence and graduation. The findings from this research may help administrators better understand the needs of this growing population of women student veterans and the practical steps higher education institutions can take to assist in their success.

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INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), in 2022, women were the fastest growing veteran population. Yet, women veterans continue to face greater challenges than their male veteran counterparts; for instance, they are twice as likely to suffer posttraumatic stress (Resnick et al., 2012), twice as likely to be homeless (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics [NCVAS], 2015), and six times more likely to commit suicide. Additionally, education benefits based on military service have enabled more women to attend higher education institutions (Frydl, 2009), helping them be more successful in their transition to the civilian sector. However, women student veterans are still at higher risk of suffering from mental and physical challenges and unemployment compared with non-veteran female peers and male veterans (Albright et al., 2019). According to the NCVAS (2023), 11% of student veterans are women, though Albright et al. (2019) estimated that the percentage is much higher, at 21%–27%.

In a 2011 Pew Research Institute survey of 1,853 veterans, 83% of women respondents indicated they had joined the military for education benefits (Parker & Patten, 2011). Boyd et al. (2019), using VA data from a national survey of veterans (n = 1,848), identified a significant difference between male and female veterans regarding the importance of education benefits. Boyd et al. found that nearly 90% of female veterans surveyed indicated education was important for achieving their goals. By contrast, only 42.8% of male veterans believed education was extremely important, with 15% of male

veterans indicating education benefits were not relevant to reaching their goals. Although the sample sizes for the Pew Research Institute and VA's national surveys were relatively small in relation to the actual population of almost 2.1 million women veterans in 2022 (NCVAS, 2023), research has shown women veterans attained education and pursued higher education at a much higher rate than both male veterans and non-veteran women: 11.9% versus 3.9% and 11.9% versus 9.7%, respectively (NCVAS, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the number of women veterans attending higher education institutions and their relative success as a group, many women student veterans feel marginalized and invisible on campus (DiRamio et al., 2015). Research using narrative inquiry has the potential to give women student veterans a voice to tell their story about their experiences. Additionally, research is needed to fill a gap in the literature about women veterans transitioning into higher education and what contributes to their success.

Situation and Need

Before exploring the subset of women student veterans, it is important to understand the larger student veteran population. With the advent of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, which provided education benefits to more veterans based on their length of military service, the population of student veterans grew, and in turn the number of veterans programs on U.S. college and university campuses increased (American Council on Education [ACE], 2012). However, generally, higher education leaders possessed a limited understanding of the needs of women student veterans due to a lack of empirical research (ACE, 2012; Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Iverson et al., 2016; Street et al., 2009). Although women veterans entered higher education at a much higher rate than

male veterans (Albright et al., 2019; Iverson et al., 2016), the rate was likely underestimated because many women veterans do not self-identify as veterans (DiRamio et al., 2015). Some qualitative studies have shown women veterans believe they were marginalized both within the service and in the classroom, facing both a crisis of identity and an unwillingness to ask for help (Baechtold, 2011; Iverson et al., 2016). DiRamio et al. (2015) found college veterans' programs and initiatives tended to target the 85% of veterans who were male, which left women veterans feeling isolated and lost (Iverson et al., 2016). Most research on women student veterans has focused disproportionately on this isolation, painting a picture of the woman veteran as broken by focusing on unemployment, mental and physical health challenges (Resnick et al., 2012; Rivera & Johnson, 2014). As the population of women in the military grows, along with their opportunities to pursue an array of careers, the overarching assumption is these negative indicators will rise (Asszony, 2015).

After historically male-only combat positions were opened to women in 2013 (Editorial Board, 2015; Task & Purpose, 2017), opponents to women serving in all combat roles continued to opine about the increased horrors women faced, forecasting a rise in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for women veterans (Asszony, 2015; Eden, 2013). Research on the negative impacts of military service on women veterans, such as higher rates of PTSD, homelessness, and suicide, attributed these consequences to gender (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Street et al., 2009; VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans, 2016). A limited amount of research has explored the positive aspects of women student veterans and the factors that make them more likely to enter higher education, persist, and graduate than both male veterans and non-veteran women

(NCVAS, 2015). Therefore, there needs to be a greater recognition and understanding of women veterans in higher education to both assist them during their oftentimes difficult transition to higher education (DiRamio et al., 2015) and to learn from those who have been successful (NCVAS, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The intent of this narrative inquiry was to convey the experiences of women veterans in higher education institutions—in their own words and through the lens and shared culture (Merriam, 2002) of their military experience. As a woman student veteran who struggled to transition not only from the military but also into an institution of higher education, I wanted the results of my research to encourage college and university administrators to understand women veterans as an important part of the student population and to improve services to meet their challenges. In an effort to challenge much of the research that has focused on deficit thinking or that has blamed women veterans for their higher rates of PTSD, homelessness, and suicide (Street et al., 2009; VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans, 2016), my goal was to solicit the stories of women student veterans and through their narratives attempt to understand how they overcame challenges and subsequently succeeded in the military and in transitioning to higher education (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015).

Problem Statement

Despite the significant number of women veterans nationally and the large percentage of these women who have used education benefits, there is a dearth of research on this population, and there persists a "military and veteran's culture that is not

perceived as welcoming to women and does not afford them equal consideration" (Disabled American Veterans [DAV], 2014, p. 2). As the number of women student veterans continues to increase, the gap in the literature differentiating their needs from male student veterans has become more salient. Researchers should therefore seek to identify and explore factors contributing to the successful transition of women student veterans into higher education institutions. Indeed, the gap in the literature has left many college and university administrators oblivious to this growing student population, unaware of the tools needed to assist them and lacking knowledge of what has helped women veterans succeed so institutions can guide other women in the transition process. This study sought to address these concerns and offer insights into women student veterans' needs and successes.

Goals of the Study

In my role as the researcher, I used the standard narrative format of a beginning, middle, and end (Merriam, 2002) in examining interviews with women veterans about their experiences in the military, their transition from the military into higher education, and their experiences in higher education institutions, capturing their reflections on what they believed contributed to their educational success. As an advocate for fellow women veterans, I understood that these narratives could be powerful in spurring change; however, even with a compelling story, researchers should define discreet goals for their qualitative studies (Maxwell, 2013).

According to Maxwell (2013), the researcher must consider three types of goals when conducting a study: personal, practical, and intellectual. My personal goal for the study was, as a woman student veteran, to help other women student veterans and to

assist higher education administrators in their efforts to attract and support this population. My practical goal was to interview women student veterans who had multiple levels of higher education starts, stops, and progress in attaining their terminal degrees. I selected participants attending public institutions because, according to Student Veterans of America (SVA; 2016), 79% of veterans attend public institutions, with 67% receiving certificates or associate degrees. Additionally, the majority of veterans who struggle in their transition into higher education ease into their college experience at 2-year institutions (Persky, 2010; Rumann, 2010; Wheeler, 2012). Research on student veterans as well as initiatives by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) have advocated for studies centered on women student veterans, especially as this population continues to grow (ACE, 2012; Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; D. DiRamio, personal communication, April 27, 2017; DAV, 2014; Iverson et al., 2016; Ly-Turnbull, 2010; Runco, 2016; Street et al., 2009). This focus represented the intellectual goals of this research. At a 2017 conference on the roles of colleges and universities in integrating veterans, the president and CEO of SVA, Jared Lyon, pointed out that though 27.31% of student veterans identified as women (SVA, 2016), he believed the number was underestimated because women were less likely to self-identify as veterans (Lyon, 2017). Combining all three of these goals, this study focused on a purposeful sample of five women student veterans who represented multiple races, branches of service, academic degrees, and degree attainment. To accomplish these goals, I established multiple research questions to guide the study.

Research Questions

The results of this study give "voice" to women student veterans enrolled in higher education institutions, offering school administrators valuable insights into the needs of this student population and what makes these women central to—rather than marginalized from—conversations about the needs of student veterans more broadly. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How does a woman veteran's experience in the military shape their experiences in higher education?
2. What factors support the academic success and program completion of women student veterans in higher education?

Significance of the Study

The population of women student veterans is expected to continue growing, and with recent changes to the G.I. Bill, which increased eligibility to Reserve and Guard members and eliminated the expiration of benefits, the expectation is that more veterans will take advantage of the G.I. Bill's benefits (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [USDVA], 2017a). At the same time, overall enrollment continues to decline at many colleges and universities in the United States. Nationally, four out of every 10 private institutions and three out of every 10 public institutions have experienced declining enrollments (Rudgers & Peterson, 2017).

Student veterans have brought tremendous financial benefits to higher education institutions, with up to $24,476.79 (USDVA, 2020) available per student each year for private tuition. Therefore, student veterans represent a desirable market for recruitment. Yet, many of the top educational institutions for military personnel, such as the

University of Phoenix, Corinthian Colleges, and ITT Technical Institute, were banned between 2014 and 2019 from receiving federal and USDVA benefits due to predatory practices and deceptive recruiting (Douglas-Gabrielle, 2015; Hodges et al., 2022; Veteran Education Success, 2016), leaving students to search for other, more reputable institutions where they could further their education. Public, regionally accredited institutions known for being veteran-friendly met this need.

This research gives voice to women veterans, who have largely been invisible as veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008; Heitzman & Somers, 2015), and helps college administrators (ACE, 2012) better understand the convergence of identities among this population (Anchan et al., 2013; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Iverson et al., 2016). This in turn will inform educators and institutional leaders about providing appropriate support to women veterans, helping them succeed academically and, later, professionally as they transition from higher education into future careers. This growing group of students, who voluntarily chose to serve the United States and, in many cases, returned from service with visible and invisible wounds (Iverson et al., 2016), deserves assistance as well as the attention of researchers committed to determining what helps them succeed.

Conceptual Framework

According to Maxwell (2013), a conceptual framework consists of "the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs" (p. 39) the research. In developing the conceptual framework for this study, I explored the current literature, my own experiences, and relevant theories.

Theoretical Framework

The published qualitative research on student veterans comprises several different theoretical models; however, most researchers have relied on Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory as the foundation of their theoretical framework (Diamond, 2012; DiRamio et al., 2008; Dutnell, 2014; Williams, 2016; Wilson, 2015). Schlossberg defined a *transition* as any event or non-event resulting in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. The individual's perception determines whether the transition is an event or non-event as defined by the individual experiencing it (Schlossberg, 1984). Schlossberg identified four factors influencing a person's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies—also known as the "4 S's." The situation precipitates the transition; self consists of personal and demographic characteristics that influence how individuals view life and change; social supports include those individuals and communities who help the individual with transition; and strategies refer to coping mechanisms that result in reduced stress (Schlossberg, 1984). In the context of military transitions, Schlossberg's model is quite linear and does not take into account the fluidity of the transition process, since veterans do not neatly "move in, move through, and move out" (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002, p. iii) of the military and into higher education. While Schlossberg's theory considers one's relationship with a transition, the setting of the transition and the impact of the transition on daily life does not account for the processing of experiences through overlapping and sometimes conflicting identities, or intersectionality, which is better framed by veteran critical theory (VCT), introduced by Phillips in 2014 and later published as a theory by Phillips and Lincoln (2017).

Student veteran research drawing on VCT has considered the systems and structures through which veterans transition as complex and varied rather than homogenous (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). The VCT framework supports veterans, an important segment of the student population, and recommends prioritizing or getting to know student veterans before making suggestions, decisions, or characterizations, and acknowledging their unique experiences. Phillips' (2014) theory diverges from current paradigms of deficit thinking that posit that all veterans are broken or that focus solely on veterans who require mental health and support services, when research has shown that most student veterans do not need mental health and support services (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). VCT helps researchers navigate away from this negative and inappropriate focus. Moreover, because this study focused on women student veterans, the VCT framework was particularly relevant because it combines multiple critical theories such as critical feminist theory, critical race theory, disability theory, and border theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). While VCT is a fairly new theoretical framework and certainly not as ubiquitous as Schlossberg's (1984) theory of transition, it does provide an overarching framework and lens for researching veterans. Zhou et al. (2022) conducted a study using VCT as a lens for both understanding and meeting veterans' needs via social media. Table 1 offers a brief description of the intersecting critical theories that make up VCT.

Table 1

Veterans Critical Theory

Theory	Central Tenets
Feminist Theory	Women are unequal to men based on gender
Critical Race Theory	The relationship of power based on race; endemic in the United States
Queer Theory	Marginalization of individuals who do not comply with sexual norms
Disability Theory	Oppressive and deficit-based approach to people with disabilities
Border Theory	Collision of identities, cultures, language, where one side of the border is privileged, and the other side oppressed

The connection among the latter theories becomes more evident when one considers the central tenets of veteran critical theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). One tenet is civilian privilege, or the marginalization of veterans as a group (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), which relates to White privilege, a focus of critical race theory (Sleeter, 2017). Critical race theory views race as a social construct and a way to counter White privilege and its assumption of superiority over people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Taylor, et al., 2009). Similarly, civilian privilege suggests that civilians are superior to veterans (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017); thus, because higher education institutions are largely civilian structures administered by civilians, with courses taught by civilians and designed for traditional college students (civilians), a veteran critical theorist assumes that veterans are disregarded (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). Further, according to VCT, veterans, like many diverse groups, experience oppression through micro-aggressions (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017), or subtle but consistent messages meant to degrade, insult, and invalidate an individual or group (Wilson, 2016).

Additionally, in consideration of the participants selected for this narrative inquiry, an important subset of VCT is critical feminist theory (CFT).

Critical feminist theory poses the sociological idea that women are not individuals, but a group with specific skillsets and orientations (Marshall, 1994). CFT proposes that society writ large subverts women, with their marginalization assumed. Based on the premise of hegemony and patriarchal culture, CFT highlights the marginalization of women based solely on gender. While VCT, CRT, and CFT are all applicable theoretical frameworks for structuring an inquiry around women veterans, another relevant social critical approach is intersectionality. Intersectionality centers on the interconnectedness of people and ties together the other critical theories, which, in this study, allowed participants to express themselves as individuals, not a homogenous group, based on the confluence of their race, gender, and veteran status (Collins, 2019).

Personal Interest

In the tradition of qualitative research, it is important that I share my personal interest in understanding the experiences of other women student veterans. As a 25-year active-duty military woman veteran returning to school, I struggled transitioning from the military into higher education. After leaving the military, my identity was in flux because I was recognized neither by my rank or position, nor as a veteran. I received no assistance from my university, despite it touting itself as military-friendly; I struggled to connect with other students; and I had difficulty understanding expectations because they were not clearly laid out in the detailed checklists with which I was familiar. I did not know if my experience was common, so I became interested in others' experiences. Initially, following Vagle's (2018) suggestion, I turned to autobiographical accounts to better

understand other women veterans' experiences. For instance, I watched movies such as *Megan Leavy* (Liddel et al., 2017), *The Invisible War* (Barklow et al., 2012), and *Courage Under Fire* (Davis et al., 1996), and read the book *Undaunted* (Biank, 2013). Suddenly, I realized for the first time that I shared many of the experiences contained in these accounts. While I navigated my military career, I simply had not focused on the fact that I was a woman in a man's world. I endured the insidiousness of a culture in which I was expected to adhere to masculine norms, not seek help, work harder and longer than my male co-workers, and repress my other identities as mother, wife, student, and friend. While this persona helped me to succeed professionally, it saddled me with guilt over the constant conflict of my roles and priorities and weakened the support structure I needed once my military service ended.

As I reflected upon my time in the military and my transition out of the service into higher education, I experienced an "unexpected encounter" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 18). I understood for the first time the cultural and structural components of both institutions through the lens of my individual experience. In 2014, I left the Air Force as a colonel and the vice-commander of a military installation and then, in 2015, entered higher education. Since leaving the military, I have run a statewide organization whose mission is to help military personnel, veterans, and their spouse's transition from service into education, employment, and entrepreneurship.

In preparing to conduct this study, I completed self-reflection exercises from Maxwell's (2013) *Qualitative Research Design* enabled me to perceive meaning where I had not earlier. Previously unaware of my biases—such as believing that success in the military as a woman requires one to give up her identity, develop more masculine traits

(e.g., being unemotional, mission-focused, and driven), work harder than male counterparts to prove a woman can make it in a male-dominated world (Iverson et al., 2016)—I discovered that this identity had been stripped when left I the military, making it difficult to connect with non-military women. My awareness of the military cultural norms that had been imposed on me as a woman ignited my passion for this topic. I wanted to dive deeper and embark on a journey with other women student veterans, exploring their experiences and their perceptions of both the military and civilian higher education cultures. Narrative inquiry provided the research structure for not only gathering the stories of other women veterans in their own words, but also using critical theory (Kim, 2016) to understand the military and of higher education cultures impacting this population.

Patton (2015) stated that the "researcher must have personal experience with an interest in the phenomenon under study" (p. 119). As a woman veteran who has experienced the phenomena of military service, the transition to higher education, and, currently, college persistence, I have a vested interest in giving women student veterans a voice. In the subsequent chapters, I discuss the evolution of women in the military, the research on student veterans and their transition into higher education, the demographics and challenges of women veterans, and research on women student veterans. The literature review set the stage for using narrative inquiry as my research method and components of veteran critical theory as my framework.

Overview of the Literature

To help understand women in the military and their transitions into civilian life and higher education, I conducted a literature review that examined the history of women

in the military, the overall demographics of military women, the creation and evolution of military and veteran education benefits, student veteran initiatives, and research on women student veterans. Each topic is discussed in Chapter II.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In reviewing the literature related to women in the military and their transitions into civilian life and higher education, several topic areas were of importance, including the history, demographics, and challenges of women in the military; the creation and evolution of military and veteran education benefits; student veteran initiatives; and women student veterans. For the purposes of this study, the literature review offered critical insights into matters involving current women veterans, beginning with the long and storied history of women in the military and ending with existing research on women student veterans.

History of Women in the Military

Before one can understand women student veterans, it is important to grasp, more broadly, the history of women in the military. Women have fought for the United States since its independence and in every war since (Task & Purpose, 2017; USDVA, 2007). Women have masqueraded as men, fought side-by-side their brothers in arms, and served as spies, nurses, and cooks (Task & Purpose, 2017; USDVA, 2007). In 1866, during the Indian Wars, the first known African American woman enlisted for military service disguised as a man. Women continued masquerading as men or serving in support roles until just after the Spanish American War, when, in 1901, Congress finally recognized the value of women's military service and established the U.S. Army Nurse Corps and, 7 years later, the Navy Nurse Corps (Task & Purpose, 2017). During World War I (WWI),

in addition to nurses and support staff, the Army recruited women as signal officers and sent them overseas as switchboard operators, mere miles from the front line (Cobbs, 2017). Despite women taking an oath to the Army and being subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (U.S. Congress, 1958), the U.S. government refused to consider women part of the military; therefore, they held no veteran status and received no benefits (Cobbs, 2017). Until 1948, with the passage of the Women's Armed Services Integration Act, women served only in times of war and were not recognized officially as permanent members of the armed forces (DAV, 2014).

In 1973, after the Vietnam War and mandatory conscription of men, the U.S. Congress finally lifted the 2% cap that had been placed on women's participation in the military, expanded women's access to additional career fields, and suspended the practice of forcing women to separate from service due to pregnancy (DAV, 2014; Mankowski & Everett, 2016). Women could now attend service academies, pilot fighter aircraft, and even become generals or admirals (Mankowski et al., 2015). For women in the military, the last decade and a half has brought even greater change (Task & Purpose, 2017). In 2008, the Army selected the first woman four-star general; in 2010, the Navy allowed women to serve on submarines; and in 2016, Air Force General Lori Robinson became the first woman combatant commander (Mankowski et al., 2015; Task & Purpose, 2017). Perhaps most significantly, on December 3, 2015, the Secretary of Defense announced that all military positions, including combat positions, would be open to women (Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services [DACOWITS], 2016), making way in 2016 for the first woman infantry officer, the first enlisted woman infantry soldier, and the first woman graduate from the Army Ranger School (Task & Purpose, 2017). While

women veterans have made remarkable strides in attaining career equality with men, it is important to delve into their demographics as their numbers continue to rise.

Demographics

Even with decades of integration, women are the fastest growing demographic in the active military and among veterans. In 2015, there were just over two million women veterans in the United States, comprising 9.4% of the total veteran population; however, the USDVA (2017a) projected this population will grow to 16.3%, or 2.4 million, by 2043. As suggested by statistics from the 2014 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, a higher percentage of women veterans have a disability compared with male veterans (22.1% versus 19.4%), and they are also less likely to use USDVA healthcare (28.9% versus 32.3%; USDVA, 2015). In addition, women veterans are more likely to live in poverty compared with male veterans (9.4% versus 6.7%) and more likely to have no income (7.1% versus 2.8%; USDVA, 2015). Women veterans are also more likely than male veterans to be ethnically and racially diverse, with higher rates of African American descent than male veterans or non-veteran women (USDVA, 2015, 2017a). They are also more likely than non-veteran women to be married or widowed (USDVA, 2007, 2017a). However, compared with male veterans, women veterans are less likely to be married and more likely to be widowed, divorced, separated, or never married (USDVA, 2007). In addition, a higher percentage of women than men serving in the military participated in the first Gulf War (22.4% versus 12.2%) and post-9/11 (32.3% versus 14%; USDVA, 2015). Another significant challenge that women veterans face is homelessness, with women veterans representing the fastest growing homeless

group, increasing from 1% to 7% of the total homeless population from 2016 to 2017 (Bennett, 2019).

Homelessness

From 2010 to 2020, average veteran unemployment in the United States was slightly lower than non-veteran unemployment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [USBLS], 2020). Among military personnel leaving the service—known as "separating military"—veterans aged 18 to 34 years, or those falling into the Gulf War-II according to the USBLS, have an unemployment rate 20% higher than non-veterans (USBLS, 2020). For women veterans, the unemployment rate is 26% higher than the rate for women non-veterans after adjusting for demographics (USDVA, 2016). In fact, separating military personnel spend, on average, 22 weeks unemployed after they leave the service (USDVA, 2016). As of 2018, 83% of service members had not served in the military long enough to earn a pension and therefore received no compensation from the Department of Defense (Schrager, 2017; Serbu, 2011). Many veterans also have difficulty translating military skills to civilian employment after leaving the military, though veteran education legislation has provided the opportunity for over a century for military members to achieve civilian skillsets through education and training (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009).

Women in the Military

Just as educational culture needs to adjust to increasing numbers of women veterans, military culture must evolve by modifying services to fully integrate women into combat (DACOWITS, 2016). Long before the Secretary of Defense's 2015 decision to open all military career fields to women, women veterans suffered twice the rate of

PTS than male veterans, often in conjunction with military sexual trauma, placing PTSD at the top of the list of service-connected disabilities for women veterans in 2009 (NCVAS, 2011; Reppert et al., 2014; Rivera & Johnson, 2014). In addition, Reppert et al. (2014) found approximately 70% of women veterans were the victims of sexual harassment, with 20% to 40% reporting that they had experienced sexual trauma. Women veterans are up to four times more likely to experience homelessness (Hamilton et al., 2011) and six times more likely to commit suicide than their male counterparts, and their risk of suicide mortality is higher because they are 1.6 times more likely to use a firearm when attempting suicide (Rivera & Johnson, 2014; Thomas et al., 2016). Women service members are also more likely to marry another military member, but Reppert et al. (2014) found that their marriages failed three times more often than those of other women.

The U.S. military mobilized women for the first-time during Operation Desert Storm, including women who were single mothers (Vogt et al., 2005). This was the first war during which military living quarters and offices were integrated, resulting in increased incidences of sexual harassment and assault (Vogt et al., 2005). During the Global War on Terror, over 30,000 single mothers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan (Reppert et al., 2014), causing increases in stress brought on by maternal guilt for leaving their children (Vogt et al., 2005). Additionally, the two million women veterans in NCVAS's 2011 study were shown to have a 50% higher risk of unemployment compared with non-veteran women of the same age. Likewise, Iverson et al. (2016) interviewed 20 women veterans about their experiences on campus and found that 80% of the women experienced stressors brought on by PTS, depression, the threat of unemployment, and the possibility of homelessness, all while being a single parent. When researching women

student veterans, it is also important to understand the history of veteran education legislation because education has been a significant equalizer for women veterans (Thelin, 2004).

Veteran Education Legislation

Legislation creating education benefits has had a significant impact on women's motivation to serve in the military (Albright et al., 2019; Parker & Patten, 2011). The expansion or contraction of education benefits, based on one's era of service or the conflict/war in which one has served, has continued to influence women's service, resulting in a continued increase in the numbers of women veterans exiting the military and transitioning into higher education. First introduced in 1918, veteran education legislation has evolved over the last 100 years based on the military's needs and prevailing public opinion.

Hallmark veteran education legislation includes the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (or the G.I. Bill), the Veterans Readjustment Act, the Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 1984, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, and the Colmery "Forever" G.I. Bill. The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918 supported vocational training for approximately 670,000 disabled, honorably discharged WWI veterans (USDVA, 2006) and was passed in lieu of pensions being granted to wounded veterans. The Vocational Rehabilitation Act paved the way for future veteran education legislation (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009).

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly referred to as the G.I. Bill) was an innovative piece of legislation that expanded the social benefits available to veterans (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; Frydl, 2009) and was backed by President Franklin

D. Roosevelt. The G.I. Bill granted over 12.4 million veterans an opportunity to get 4 years of education or training at a school of their choosing, including ivy league schools, and included books and fees along with a monthly subsistence (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; USDVA, 2006). College enrollment increased from 1.6 million to 2.1 million in 1945, with veterans comprising almost half of all college students (USDVA, 2006). The G.I. Bill afforded many first-generation students, including women, the opportunity to attend college, ushering in a new era of knowledge acquisition in the United States (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; Frydl, 2009; Greenberg, 1997). The G.I. Bill had a significant impact on higher education institutions as administrators had to ensure flexible admissions for more—and more diverse—applicants (Thelin, 2004). This shift in college student demographics drove the development of and the need for standardized testing, such as the Scholastic Achievement Test. The increase in student veterans also encouraged colleges to grant academic credit for military training and military-based education (Thelin, 2004).

The Veterans Readjustment Act of 1952, or the Korean G.I. Bill, followed the Korean War (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). This bill scaled back previous education benefits, supporting those whose college plans were interrupted rather than promoting higher education for veterans. However, the Korean G.I. Bill reestablished vocational training for the 2.7 million combat veterans and expanded benefits for the additional 5.6 million who served only during peacetime. While the Korea G.I. Bill included all veterans, it reduced benefits from 48 to 36 months, covered mostly only public institutions, and required more time in the service (Altschuler & Blumin 2009; USDVA, 2006). During this time, the USDVA finally recognized veterans' difficulties with

reintegration as well as the effects of PTS (USDVA, 2006). Subsequently, the USDVA began opening offices where veterans could become informed about the benefits available to them (USDVA, 2006).

The Vietnam-era Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 1977, otherwise known as the Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP), altered previous education benefits by requiring a monetary match by military recruits up to $2,000 a year (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009). This dramatic departure from past benefit programs led to a decrease in veteran enrollment rates. With this change, education no longer had an "equalizing effect," creating a barrier for military members with a lower socioeconomic status since the USDVA required a dollar-for-dollar contribution. However, in 1984, Congress enacted a more generous education bill, the Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 1984. This bill, referred to as the Montgomery G.I. Bill, was also a matching program. After the Montgomery G.I. Bill, it was nearly 25 years before the USDVA significantly increased education assistance to incentivize and reward military service after the events of September 11, 2001.

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, also known as the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, became law on June 30, 2008 (Steele et al., 2010) and granted eligibility for all who had served at least 90 days of active duty in the military after September 10, 2001; however, the USDVA prorated benefits based on time in service (USDVA, 2015). The USDVA provided student veterans with a stipend for textbooks and housing, and full-time students with at least one in-residence course per semester received 100% of the housing allowance (USDVA, 2015). The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill covered tuition and fees at public institutions, and private institutions were allowed to supplement tuition through

the Yellow Ribbon Program. Despite the generous benefits of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, nearly half of veterans did not take advantage of it (Kofoed, 2020). Since this bill was passed, the USDVA had, as of 2019, paid over $65 billion in education benefits to 1.6 million veterans (Holland, 2019).

Less than a decade after Congress passed the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, veteran advocacy groups sought expansion of the bill's benefits, leading to the passage of the Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act (USDVA, 2017b), commonly referred to as the "Forever G.I. Bill", which is the most generous education incentive to date. Passed in 2017, the Forever G.I. Bill abolished the 15-year time limit, expanded eligibility to reserve and guard members, and provided full benefits to Purple Heart recipients (Kofoed, 2020).

Without the benefits of the G.I. Bills, many veterans, especially women veterans who joined the military primarily to reap these benefits, would not have had some of the career opportunities they had after separating from the service, such as becoming lawyers, physicians, or teachers (McGrevey & Keher, 2009, Parker & Patten, 2011). While Congress expanded education benefits for veterans to help with the post-military transition, veterans also needed mental and behavioral health services (McDermott et al., 2017).

Veterans, Mental Health, and Posttraumatic Conditions

Veterans suffer from mental health issues at significantly higher rates than the general population (Zinzow et al., 2012), specifically concerning depression and PTSD (Forney et al., 2016). Immediately after a traumatic event, individuals may experience both a physiological and a psychological response, both of which may diminish over

time; however, traumatic events lead some individuals into prolonged PTS (Mattson et al., 2018). In a study of student veterans, McDermott et al. (2017) found that military culture promotes self-stigma, or the thought that others "think less" of those who seek help. As Forney et al. (2016) noted, student veterans have greater demand for mental health services brought on by depression, anxiety, and PTSD due to multiple wartime deployments. Many veterans, particularly those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, do not seek psychological help due to self-stigma and the military culture of self-reliance (Forney et al., 2016; Hoge et al., 2006).

Considerable research has focused on postwar PTS symptomology and the hardships associated with the condition (Mark et al., 2018; Martz et al., 2018). As Angel (2016) noted, PTSD symptoms are normal responses to trauma which resolve over time for most people. In a review of over 40 publications on mental health and traumatic physical injury, Wiseman et al. (2013) found PTSD to be the most heavily researched topic, appearing for the first time in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1980 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Typically, PTSD is associated with a lower quality of life and a more difficult transition into civilian life for veterans (Martz et al., 2018). However, some veterans who experience trauma may recover and even grow from their experience (Tedeschi, 1999).

Tedeschi and Calhoun coined the term "posttraumatic growth" (PTG) in 1995 to refer to positive reactions to negative events. In 1999, Tedeschi found that reports of PTG after traumatic events outnumbered those of psychiatric disorders. The idea of PTG attracted more interest since it was a relatively new psychological concept (Angel, 2016; Habib et al., 2018). Martz et al. (2018) acknowledged PTG is not a direct result of trauma

but a byproduct of an individual's struggle with the traumatic event; thus, they defined PTG as a "positive personal change that result from the survivor's struggle to cope with trauma and its psychological consequences" (p. 1).

Martz et al. (2018) focused on factors that support veterans' mental health and improve their quality of life. According to Mattson et al. (2018), PTG involves "developing an increased appreciation for life, greater sense of personal strength, renewed appreciation or relationships, and positive spiritual changes" (p. 475). Yet, PTG differs from resilience because those living with PTS do not return to their pre-trauma baselines (Habib et al., 2018; Martz et al., 2018) but have a greater appreciation for life, express more enjoyment and happiness, and experience improved interpersonal relationships, self-perception, and emotional expression (Martz et al., 2018). Martz et al. also argued that highly resilient individuals have lower instances of PTSD and PTG (Levine et al., 2009), making PTG rather than resilience the goal. According to Martz et al. (2018), PTG does not eliminate struggles and distress; it allows stress and growth to coexist.

Two groundbreaking studies (Kulka et al., 1990; Martz et al., 2018) connected the PTG literature to the veteran population. In their National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study, Kulka et al. (1990) found that 85% of male veterans and 92% of female veterans diagnosed with PTSD no longer suffered from PTSD 15 years after their military service. Subsequently, Martz et al. (2018) studied veterans' resilience and the ways PTG eliminated PTS. Pietrzak et al. (2012) conducted the National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study, finding a positive correlation between PTG and life-

threatening illness or injury, but a negative correlation between PTG and national disasters.

Martz et al. (2018) used data from the National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study (Pietrzak et al., 2012) to evaluate quality of life (QoL), a multidimensional construct covering three components: well-being, physical/cognitive functioning, and social/economic functioning. Higher levels of QoL on both subjective and objective measures were associated with being employed, attaining education, not abusing alcohol or drugs, having no recent hospitalizations, and having lower pain levels, along with strong emotional and social support (Corrigan et al., 2001; Dijkers, 1997, 2005; Mortenson et al., 2010). Researchers have found that PTG was a positive predictor of QoL, having the most impact on those with higher levels of PTS (Martz et al., 2018; Mattson et al., 2018). In an earlier study (Elder & Clipp, 1989), WWII and Korean War veterans with the most combat exposure and psychosocial dysfunction showed the most growth. Mattson et al. (2018) also found greater PTG in relation to a veteran's most traumatic situation was linked to greater resilience in subsequent traumatic situations.

Posttraumatic growth is an individualized and personalized experience, making qualitative measures particularly useful in studying the phenomenon. Habib et al. (2018) reviewed previous studies in which researchers investigated PTG in military and ex-military personnel. After locating and analyzing data from nine articles, three themes emerged and were organized into the domains of individual, family, and community. A key finding was that PTG improved relationships, especially in the family domain. Social support was shown to protect against PTSD as those who experienced PTG showed improvement in social relationships and had a greater appreciation for life.

Weiss and Berger (2010) found that most servicemembers who experienced PTG wanted to reintegrate into civilian life, including desiring more education and improved employment prospects. As younger veterans experience higher rates of unemployment (BLS, 2020), PTG has direct implications for a veteran's reintegration into civilian life. Weiss and Berger noted that PTG positively impacted the transition to civilian life and that viable employment facilitated recovery from PTS. However, Habib et al. (2018) found that no transition interventions incorporated PTG. They also did not find data regarding the time since a traumatic event occurred and transition out of the military. Since PTS is moderated by time (Habib et al., 2018; Martz et al., 2018), it is arguable that time would allow strength-based growth experiences to lead to positive outcomes (Martz et al., 2018).

Personality traits can also affect both PTS and PTG (Mattson et al, 2018). Linley and Joseph (2004) found that neuroticism or negative personality traits such as anxiety and emotional instability negatively influenced PTG and PTS, while positive personality traits (e.g., optimism, extraversion, openness to experiences) predicted PTG (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009). Garnefske et al. (2008) determined personality, specifically neuroticism, extraversion, and optimism, explained 18% of the PTG variance. Mattson et al. (2018) evaluated the relationship between PTS severity and PTG, using various inventories to measure trauma, PTS, PTG, coping, personality traits, and optimism through a series of hierarchical multiple regressions to form predictions. Results showed adaptive coping was significantly correlated with PTG, as were optimism, extraversion, agreeableness, and openness (Mattson et al., 2018). The personality traits of openness and adaptive coping were most predictive of PTG, whereas

neuroticism significantly predicted PTS. Mattson et al. suggested focusing on PTG during treatment led to overall better outcomes for individuals with moderate PTS.

Mark et al. (2018) reviewed the PTG literature and found that the more frequent the deployments and severity of PTS symptoms, the greater the PTG as re-experiencing trauma resulted in deliberate attempts to understand and cope. While these results might seem counterintuitive, there is precedence in literature. For instance, Locke and Taylor (1991) found a positive relationship between PTS and recovery (later termed posttraumatic growth by Tedeschi and Calhoun in 1995), identifying individuals who reported both positive and negative changes experienced a higher degree of PTG. Mark et al. (2018) also showed early life experiences had a positive association with PTG as minorities were likely to be socioeconomically disadvantaged and experience multiple stressors prior to military service. Prior experience with growth after previous hardships may contribute to PTG. Additionally, emerging research has correlated religion and spirituality with a greater understanding of traumatic experiences, thus increasing personal strength and appreciation of life.

Of veterans diagnosed with PTSD, 75% show PTG (Angel, 2016; Tsai et al., 2015). Mark et al. (2018) suggested individuals may build their tolerance to stress by improving their coping mechanisms. Servicemembers who were more frequently exposed to combat experienced greater growth, while those who infrequently deployed (e.g., reservists) had low correlations of PTG with combat experience. Although increased deployments and combat exposure appeared to result in greater PTG, Angel (2016) found that those with the most severe PTS had low PTG development. However, despite the frequency of one's exposure to traumatic events, Habib et al. (2018) and Martz et al.

(2018) suggested that therapy should include a PTG focus in an effort to alleviate PTS among veterans. In studies of women as a subpopulation, researchers have found that PTSD occurs not only from combat exposure, but also, and primarily, from military sexual assault (Turner et al., 2020).

Military Sexual Assault and Trauma

Within the research on women veterans, considerable attention has centered on military sexual trauma. The USDVA defined *sexual trauma* as psychological trauma resulting "from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the former member of the Armed Forces was serving on duty, regardless of duty status or line of duty determination" (38 U.S. Code § 1720D, 2021). More broadly, the Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention Office (DoD SAPRO, 2021. p. 1) determined that sexual assault includes a "range of crimes, including rape, sexual assault, forcible sodomy, aggravated sexual contact, abusive contact, and attempts to commit these offenses as defined in military law." Turner et al. (2020) expanded the definition to include unwanted sexual contact and intimate partner violence. Though sexual assault is a violent crime that has lasting effects on its victims (Harrell et al., 2009), it is the most unreported crime in the United States (Harrell et al., 2009; Karjane et al., 2002; Turner et al., 2020).

In 2014, the RAND National Defense Research Institute surveyed 170,000 service members concerning gender discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment, using the RAND Military Workplace Study (Farris et al., 2021). The survey participants included a higher proportion of women respondents, which may have influenced the results; however, 34% of men indicated they were sexually assaulted (Morral et al., 2016).

According to Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) criteria (to which the RAND Military Workplace Study referred), sexual assault is perpetrated by anyone who:

1. commits a sexual act upon another person by threatening or placing that other person in fear;
    a. causing bodily harm to that other person;
    b. making fraudulent representation that the sexual act serves a professional purpose; or
    c. inducing a belief by any artifice, pretense, or concealment that the person is another person;
2. commits a sexual act upon another person when the person knows or reasonably should know that the other personal is asleep, unconscious, or otherwise unaware that the sexual act is occurring; or
3. commits a sexual act upon another person when the other person is incapable of consenting to the sexual act due to—
    a. impairment by any drug, intoxicant or other similar substance, and that condition is known or reasonably should be known by the person; or
    b. a mental disease or defect, or physical disability, and that condition is known or reasonably should be known by the person; is guilty of sexual assault and shall be punished as a court-martial may direct. (UCMJ, Article 120).

Military sexual assault disproportionally impacts women, as one in four female veterans are victims compared with one in 100 males (Turner et al., 2020). Public focus on sexual assault has led to military reform efforts, especially in the 1990s when the

military began revising its policies and addressing sexual assault as a serious problem (Harrell et al., 2009). The Tailhook scandal of 1991, in which naval aviators harassed and assaulted women during an annual convention, prompted this change. However, sexual assault received no additional focused military attention until a sexual assault investigation at the Air Force Academy in 2000 prompted the DoD to establish a Sexual Assault Task Force (Harrell et al., 2009). For the last two decades, the DoD has promoted sexual assault awareness, prevention, and response (Farris et al., 2021). Yet, despite the focus on sexual assault prevention, rates have not decreased (Farris et al., 2021).

Estimates of female victims of military sexual assault have ranged from 2% to 51% of the population, since such crimes are often unreported (Harrell et al., 2009; Martin et al., 1998; Sadler et al., 2003; Skinner et al., 2000; Turner et al., 2020). According to the DoD's (2021) *Annual Report of Sexual Assault in the Military for Fiscal Year 2020*, sexual assault and rape increased by almost 40% overall from 2016 to 2018, and for women it increased 50% to the highest rate since 2006. Researchers have linked underreporting to victims' fear of retaliation (Davis et al., 2017; Jaycox et al., 2015). In 2018, 76.1% of victims did not report the crime (DoD SAPRO, 2021). Based on reports filed in 2019, of every 10 sexual assault victims, eight were women serving in the military.

Studies have examined prior sexual abuse as a predictor of military sexual trauma (Bostock & Daley, 2007; Sadler, et al., 2003; Siegel & Williams, 2003; Söchting et al., 2004; Tirone et al., 2020). Schultz et al. (2006) surveyed 465 female Navy recruits during their first year of military service and discovered that women with a history of childhood sexual abuse were 2.5 times more likely to be raped, and those with a history of pre-

military rape were 3.5 times more likely to be raped. Those with a history of both were six times more likely to be raped. Bostock and Daley (2007), in their survey of 2,018 active-duty Air Force women, found lifetime prevalence rates of sexual assault in this population were twice the national average. Schultz et al. (2006) found that of the 223 female military veterans they surveyed, female veterans reported much higher rates and levels of sexual assault than the 81 civilian women surveyed and were more likely to have been abused by a father figure.

Research has suggested entering the military at a younger age, having a lower socioeconomic status, and being of African American descent are additional risk factors for victims (Baker et al., 2023b; Harrell et al., 2009; Sadler et al., 2003). Risk factors for sexual abuse also include age, being unmarried, and being enlisted (Coyle et al., 1996; Tirone et al., 2020). In addition, Lipari et al. (2006) found that women in the Army, more so than those serving in the other branches of the military, were more likely to experience sexual assault, with 75% of assaults occurring on a military installation and not during deployment.

Researchers have also investigated perpetrators of military sexual assault (Abbey et al., 2003; Abbey & McAuslan, 2004; Carroll & Clark, 2006; Harrell et al., 2009; Smith & Freyd 2013; Zawacki et al., 2003). Previous studies have suggested a significant predictor of whether a man would commit a sexual assault was if he exhibited hostile masculinity or adhered to aggressive sexual beliefs (Harrell, 2009). Over half of all perpetrators were reported to have used alcohol or drugs during the time of assault (Abbey et al., 2003; Abbey & McAuslan, 2004; Zawacki et al., 2003). In a survey of 430 college and military academy males, Carroll and Clark (2006) reported that college males

more often attributed the rape to the perpetrator, while military academy males more often blamed the victim and thought the man was wrongly accused and simultaneously displayed rape-supportive attitudes.

Additionally, researchers have indicated that intimate partners, not strangers, most often perpetrate sexual assaults (Harrell et al., 2009; Street et al., 2019). In a 2003 survey of 616 active-duty military women, Campbell et al. (2003) found 30% of those interviewed had experienced a lifetime of interpersonal violence (IPV), and 22% experienced IPV while in the military. A total of 22% of respondents reported experiencing sexual, emotional, and physical abuse (Campbell et al., 2003). However, generally, IPV is rarely identified. Within the USDVA health care administration, providers do not ask about IPV for fear of offending patients (Street et al., 2019) which makes it difficult to identify victim.

Most of the research around military sexual trauma has primarily focused on physical and mental health concerns (Harrell et al., 2009). Marx (2005) described sexual assault as a life-altering event, with the physical and emotional damage extending well beyond the incident. Social reactions to victims and attitudes surrounding sexual assault in general have been explored in the literature (Harrell et al., 2009; Nagel et al., 2005). Sexual assault victims face an array of health challenges both in the short and long term, including mental health issues, suicide attempts, and negative career impacts (Farris et al., 2021; Monteith et al., 2016). In studies examining these challenges, female sexual assault victims have typically been compared with other groups, that is, victims of other types of crime (Campbell & Soeken, 1999), other veterans (Zinzow et al., 2008), and other women more generally (Cloutier et al., 2002). Researchers have documented sexual

assault victims' propensity to develop physical health problems such as sexually transmitted diseases (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2005, gynecological or reproductive problems (Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Frayne et al., 1999), hypertension, high cholesterol, obesity (Cloutier et al., 2002), and heart attacks (Frayne et al., 1999). Other studies have described victims' physical ailments in more general terms, such as their risk for chronic health problems (Sadler et al., 2000) or poor physical functioning (Surís et al., 2004).

In several studies, assault victims' mental health and psychological difficulties have been of particular interest (Borja et al., 2006; Brener et al., 2002; Campbell & Raja, 2005; Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Frazier & Haney, 1996; Monteith; 2016; Orth & Maercker, 2004; Padden, 2008; Street et al., 2019; Surís et al., 2004; Turner et al., 2020; Ullman et al., 2006; Ullman & Filipas, 2001; Ullman & Siegel, 1993). There has been a particular focus on revictimization and retaliation in the literature (Davis et al., 2017; DoD, 2016; DoD SAPRO, 2021; Dubois et al., 1999; Farris et al., 2021; Jaycox et al., 2015; Smith & Freyd, 2013; Starzynski et al., 2005).

A military institutional organization is founded on trust since those affiliated with this institution rely on each other for their safety. The importance of this trust and reliance has also been documented in literature (Harrell, 2009; Smith & Freyd, 2013). Military sexual trauma is the ultimate violation of this trust. Smith and Freyd (2013) found that military sexual trauma survivors felt betrayed by the military institution not only because the trauma typically occurred on a military installation, but also because they had to continue functioning within this institution, in many cases living and working with the perpetrator. Respondents to a 2005 survey of 260 women veterans seeking medical treatment at a USDVA clinic indicated that requests for either legal or medical

assistance, especially from civilian law enforcement, were more likely to be questioned regarding the women's attire and sexual history, making them feel more guilty, anxious, depressed, and therefore reluctant to seek help (Campbell & Raja, 2005). For those victims who reported a sexual assault to the military, they were more likely to be told the assault was not a serious enough matter and were dismissed.

As Farris et al. (2021) maintained, revictimization causes more harm to the victim as a result of not being believed or being blamed or stigmatized. In 2014, 30% of female military sexual assault victims reported social and professional retaliation, including administrative punishments (Jaycox et al., 2015). Administrative punishment included poor performance evaluations, restricting the individual to the military base, forfeiture of pay, admonishment, or reprimand. For those bold enough to file an official report with the DoD, 62% felt retaliated against. The evidence has suggested victims who engage the system, therefore making their sexual assault known to more people, are more likely to face retaliation than those who keep the assault private (Farris et al., 2021). Dubois et al. (1999) found victims who took formal actions within the military were more likely to be harassed and have higher status perpetrators. Retaliation for 73% of victims occurred within their chain of command, and a third of the victims were discharged after filing a report (DoD SAPRO, 2021). However, not filing a formal complaint did not shield victims from social and professional consequences (Farris et al., 2021).

In 2015, Jaycox et al. surveyed service members over the course of a year and found 29% of those who had experienced a sexual assault perceived either social or professional retaliation. For those who had filed an official report, and accounting for any administrative action taken concerning the event, this rate increased to 62%. Responding

to the 2016 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey, 32% of military sexual assault victims experienced “ostracism, maltreatment, or reprisal” (Davis et al., 2017, p. 3). For female victims, the decision to disclose the assault was based on whether they were retaliated against and whether they believed they would receive the support needed (Fisher & Sloan, 2003; Starzynski et al., 2005). As the number of retaliatory actions taken by the military increased, the victim’s perception of justice decreased (Farris et al., 2021).

Previous researchers have found that struggling to maintain professional lives in the workplace because of military sexual trauma is especially pronounced among military personnel, who experience frequent stress, live in close proximity with each other while deployed, and rely on one another in life-threatening situations (Harrell et al., 2009; Smith & Freyd, 2013). Farris et al. (2021) found that a military unit with an alleged victim or perpetrator (or both) suffered reduced military readiness or effectiveness in the aftermath of the incident. Often the entire unit was impacted because a military commander is much more involved than a supervisor from the civilian sector. When a military victim filed an unrestricted report, this prompted an investigation and notification to the member’s commander. In 1996, Post et al. (2002) calculated that the cost of one rape or sexual assault was over $94,000, accounting for the medical and mental health costs to the victim, loss of work productivity, police, prosecution and correction costs, and the intangible costs such as psychological pain and generalized fear (Harrell et al., 2009).

A survey of 3,632 female veterans who received care at USDVA medical facilities indicated those who reported sexual harassment or assault experienced more problems related to their military service (Skinner et al., 2000). These women reported

greater personal isolation and difficulty transitioning to civilian life compared with women who had not reported any sexual harassment or sexual assault. Not only did they have difficulty transitioning from the military, but these women also reported difficulty maintaining employment and increased drug or alcohol abuse. Hankin et al. (1999) found that women veterans who suffered sexual abuse were twice as likely to meet the criteria for alcohol abuse. While some studies have examined the efficacy of interventions to minimize alcohol or drug use among sexual assault victims, the interventions were only considered moderately effective (Resnick et al., 2005; Resnick et al., 2007; Rheingold & Acierno, 2003).

In 2014, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel came out strongly against retaliation and implemented new procedures to help sexual assault victims and to better educate and prepare commanders and others within the military chain of command (Farris et al., 2021). Secretary Hagel (Farris et al., 2021) stated "retaliation directly contradicts one of the highest values of our military—that we protect our brothers and our sisters in uniform. When someone reports a sexual assault, they need to be embraced and helped, not ostracized or punished" (p. 2). Congress echoed this sentiment by passing the National Defense Authorization Act of 2016, which directed the armed services to create a strategy for building a culture in which retaliation is not tolerated and leaders are held accountable for preventing retaliation (DoD, 2016). Indeed, sexual assault is not an issue of sex but of culturally driven gender roles involving the masculine (e.g., strong, dominant, controlling, powerful) versus the feminine (e.g., weak, subordinate, inferior, emotional) (Baker et al., 2023b).

Grit and Resilience

Angela Duckworth (2016), in her bestselling book *Grit*, uses as her first example cadets in the U.S. Military Academy, better known as West Point. Only the best of the best are admitted into West Point—those with exceptional academic achievement, the highest standardized test scores, incredible athletic ability, physical fitness, and leadership potential. According to Duckworth, all these measures were combined into a Whole Candidate Score to predict which high school graduates would excel at West Point and become soldiers. However, according to the staff psychologist, even though the Whole Candidate Score was the most important factor for admissions, it did not reliably predict success. Rather, what determined success was not talent but the determination to never give up, despite overwhelming odds. According to Duckworth et al. (2007), the measure for success is grit, the "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 1087).

The teaching of grit in schools was officially recommended by the DOE in 2013 (Shechtman et al., 2013). Grit has been associated with academic achievement (Lee & Sohn, 2017; Pate et al., 2017; Wolters & Hussain, 2015), retention in the military, workplace, and marriage (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014; Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014; Saunders-Scott et al., 2018), and student motivation and engagement (Hodge et al., 2018; Usher et al., 2019). However, not all researchers have subscribed to Duckworth's notion of grit as an accurate predictor of academic success, especially if students were in distress as identified by academic probation (Caporale-Berkowitz, 2022). Caporale-Berkowitz (2022) and others found that grit study findings have been mixed and that resilience or the ability to recover from stress (Smith et al., 2008) was a better predictor of college student retention.

Instead of discrete characteristics, such as grade point average or standardized test scores, academic researchers have turned their focus to more malleable characteristics such as grit or resilience, changeable through intervention (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). While the concept of grit or resilience might seem interchangeable for the most part, they differ in one important way. As Caporale-Berkowitz (2022) argued, grit is often viewed as a fixed personality trait, whereas resilience is situation-dependent. One may see resilience in certain circumstances, such as an individual succeeding academically or recovering from trauma, but this characteristic may not be employed in other areas of one's life. In a previous study, resilience predicted effective and positive learning and coping strategies (de la Fuente et al., 2017) and thus grade point average (Droppert et al., 2019; Reynolds & Weigand, 2010; Street et al., 2019). Resilience has also been linked to positive outcomes for students academically or psychologically at risk (Hartley, 2013; Obradović et al., 2009).

Caporale-Berkowitz (2022) compared grit and resilience in 4,023 undergraduate students at 10 diverse higher education institutions across the United States. The schools and students were selected using stratified random sampling. Students were measured using the Short Grit Scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) and on resilience using the Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008). One component of the grit scale measured perseverance of effort, and this specific component predicted college retention across the entire student sample. When evaluating students on academic probation, the researchers found that resilience predicted positive outcomes, not grit (Caporale-Berkowitz, 2022). For students at greater risk, including student veterans (Blaauw-Hara, 2016), resilience is a stronger predictor of college retention.

Due to the increasing number of student veterans within community colleges, faculty training has tended to focus on remediation of what student veterans lack rather than on their unique strengths (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). This focus has contributed to higher attrition and poorer academic outcomes. However, college interventions built on student veterans' resilience and grit have been found to be more effective than those stemming from a deficit mindset.

Gender Roles in the Military: Women and Military Masculinity

A primary factor in research concerning women veterans has centered on military culture and the tolerance—if not encouragement—of masculinity resulting in the harassment and sexual abuse of women (Barrett, 1996; Blum, 2013; Bulmer & Eichler, 2017; Hunter, 2007; Leatherman, 2011). Hunter (2007) described the masculinity promoted in military culture as extreme, or "hypermasculinity." Bulmer and Eichler (2017) maintained that hegemonic ideas about masculinity are central to the recruitment, training, and deployment of military members.

Society largely considers combat and military service as a space for masculinity to thrive (Hunter, 2007). Bulmer and Jackson (2015) described the link between masculinity and the military as not just an idea, but also an experience and an identity. The military's patriarchal structure has fostered military hypermasculinity along with the perpetuation of violence against servicemembers exhibiting feminine traits (Robertson, 2016).

Belkin (2012) also described military masculinity, noting the emphasis on self-control and ruggedness that mirrors evolving conceptions of military professionalism and the deepening of the public's glorification of the military as an institution. American

society has historically revered and respected the military as a professional occupation, portraying soldiering and war as opportunities for all eligible men to prove their manhood. Military masculinity deepened and widened the inequality divide and, until fairly recently, prohibited minorities and women, considered second-class citizens, from officially and legitimately serving in the Armed Forces. When the women's auxiliary Army corps was created, one congressman challenged the idea, stating there would be no one to cook, wash, and perform other household tasks if women served in the armed forces (Hunter, 2007). This same congressman asked what had become of Americans' manhood (Hunter, 2007). Unfortunately, as Bunch (2013) observed, where there is patriarchy, there is sexism and the devaluing of women, resulting in violence and an inability to appropriately adjust to evolving environments.

The negative impacts of masculinity are not restricted to women in the military. Masculine norms of self-reliance and emotional control contribute to decreased self-worth in both men and women (Vogel et al., 2006) and decreased help seeking, especially for student veterans who have had warzone service (McDermott et al., 2017). Bonar et al. (2015) found that almost half of student veterans needing mental health treatment while attending school did not seek help. Controlling for gender, PTS, depression, and warzone experience, McDermott et al. (2017) looked at the model of masculine role norms (e.g., not seeking psychological help, self-stigma) and suggested that deploying to a warzone solidified military-masculine norms and exacerbated guilt and shame while promoting self-stigma.

Many veterans with warzone experience return from war feeling personally responsible for deaths or injuries they witnessed or perpetrated, contributing to their

moral injury (Hoge et al., 2004). However, as Eichler and Smith-Evans (2018) argued, gender norms, specifically those associated with masculinity, are a protective factor for psychological health during military service but pose a risk for decreased well-being during civilian life transition. Certain masculine behaviors, such as avoidance, have been linked to the development of PTS, hindering health-seeking behaviors in both men and women.

In the aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, veterans' experiences offered an understanding of gender differences in war (Bulmer & Eichler, 2017). Veterans—more frequently, women veterans—struggled with their transition to civilian life due to the conflict between military and civilian gender norms. The transition process involved the negotiation of masculinities and femininities across both the military and civilian sectors, often in complex and contradictory ways. The boundaries between military and civilian masculinities and femininities were fluid and called into question the boundaries and the notion of masculine identity. Female veterans faced additional gender-specific challenges (Eichler, 2016). While women in the military and combat were seen as force multipliers (Chapman & Eichler, 2014; Mathers, 2013), female veterans often lacked recognition in civilian society. Dominant norms of civilian femininity were typically viewed as always already feminized and non-militarized, making it difficult to recognize and represent female veterans as veterans (Eichler, 2016). Perhaps civilian gender norms, more so than military gender norms, made female veterans invisible; thus, the focus on a militarized identity worked to obscure more than it revealed (Bulmer & Eichler, 2017).

Demers (2013) highlighted that a lack of societal recognition and support poses difficulties for female veterans who "must struggle with what it means to be female in a society where civilians are perplexed by them and do not know whether to treat them 'like one of the guys … [or] like a lady'" (p. 505). At the same time, gendered experiences of military service and norms of militarized masculinity have encouraged women's premature departure from the military (Dichter & True, 2015) or discouraged female veterans from seeking help (DiRamio et al., 2015). The U.S. government was slow to develop female-specific veterans' policies and programs, and only in the last few years has the USDVA begun to address gender-specific needs other than those specifically related to health (USDVA, 2019).

Studies have found that masculine norms of self-reliance and emotional control resulted in decreased self-worth for both men and women (Vogel et al., 2006) and decreased help-seeking, especially for student veterans with warzone service (McDermott et al., 2017). In another study, nearly half of student veterans needing mental health treatment did not seek help (Bonar et al., 2015). Eichler and Smith-Evans (2018) found that gender norms, especially those considered masculine, were a protective factor for psychological health during service; however, poorer well-being during the transition to civilian life was also noted. In addition, certain masculine behaviors (e.g., avoidance) have been linked to the development of PTS, hindering health-seeking behaviors for both men and women.

Little attention has been given to militarized masculinity upon separation from the service (Bulmer & Eichler, 2017). Feminists have treated military masculinity as something to be explained, positing no inherent connections between masculinity and

militarization. However, if masculinity is militarized, then it can potentially be demilitarized (Enloe, 2000). Feminists have argued that the pervasive cultures of militarized masculinity explain the resistance to the integration of women and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) personnel into the service. From a political standpoint, militarized masculinity has been enforced as the masculine defender of women and children.

As Bulmer and Eichler (2017) described, women veterans have struggled with their transition to civilian life, creating conflicts between military and civilian gender norms since transition involves the negotiation of masculinities and femininities across both the military and civilian sectors, often in complex and contradictory ways. Female veterans face additional gender-related challenges (Eichler, 2016) as female veterans are often unrecognized in civilian society. Dominant femininity norms among civilians are almost always feminized and nonmilitarized, making the recognition and representation of female veterans more challenging (Eichler, 2016). Perhaps not so much military gender norms, but civilian gender norms made female veterans invisible; thus, the focus on a militarized identity worked to obscure more than it revealed (Bulmer & Eichler, 2017).

Simultaneously, gendered experiences of military service and norms of militarized masculinity encourage women to departure from the military prematurely (Dichter & True, 2015) and discouraged female veterans from seeking help (DiRamio et al., 2015). The U.S. government was slow to develop female-specific veterans' policies and programs, and only in the last few years has the USDVA addressed gender-specific needs other than those specifically related to health (USDVA, 2019). Gendered norms

and the lack of recognition for women in the military is not new, and to better understand the current environment for women veterans, it is important to understand the past.

Veterans as College Students and Veteran-Supporting Initiatives

In the limited research on student veterans, women have only represented subsets of larger studies, not the population of primary interest. In a small phenomenological study, Jones (2013) applied student identity development theory to student veterans. According to Jones, veterans struggled to self-regulate and adapt to the university culture. They were also annoyed by other students' obsessions with issues that they considered trivial. Jones argued that understanding the ways student veterans make meaning during their transition into higher education could help educators offer appropriate support and benefit veterans in the shift from a structured, authority-based military environment to a more open culture designed to promote self-authorship, and aid in the development of a post-military identity.

The one female who participated in Jones's (2013) study acknowledged a dichotomy between her values and those of other students that motivated her to accelerate her course load to finish college and quickly move into the workforce (Jones, 2013). All participants expressed the need for more or better services to help them navigate the admissions and financial aid processes as well as the need to be supported by someone who understood the "life-altering effect" of combat (Jones, 2013, p. 2). Jones found that student veterans created and recreated their identities while transitioning into higher education, resulting in multiple and often conflicting identities. For these participants, leaving the service involved rethinking not only their careers, but also their beliefs about who they were outside the military.

Van Dusen (2011) identified and analyzed factors that contributed to student veterans' intent to persist and used the study results to create the veteran-friendly environment model (though the findings did not show causation). In VanDusen's study, 35 of 165 student veterans were women. Van Dusen found *campus environment or culture* was the only statistically significant predictor variable influencing a student veteran's intent to persist. Campus culture was defined as the institution's military heritage combined with the veteran's perceptions of the attitudes held by students, faculty, and administrators. When student veterans perceived a campus culture receptive to their needs, they were more likely to persist (Van Dusen, 2011).

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) combined the transition and retention models of several leading theorists, namely Schlossberg, Tinto, and Chickering, and applied this combined framework to student veterans to help administrators at higher education institutions identify student veterans' issues and improve retention and graduation. Notably, Schlossberg offered input into the adaptation of her model for this study (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011)—also known as the 4S model (i.e., situation, self, support, strategies)—as well as suggestions about supporting student veterans throughout their transitions into higher education. While DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) addressed challenges faced by women veterans working in male-dominated environments, they did not discuss the factors that contributed to women veterans' success as students.

Griffin and Gilbert (2015) used Schlossberg's (1984) 4S model to analyze barriers and institutional support for student veterans, finding that veterans' transitions into higher education were challenging because higher education (a) is not as structured as the military, (b) does not function via checklists, (c) lacks the chain of command to which

veterans were accustomed, and (d) does not simplify or emphasize the time-sensitive nature of financial-aid processes. The authors identified a few universities equipped to address veterans' mental or physical disabilities and also acknowledged the benefit of veteran support groups because veterans usually do not fit into the "typical" college crowd. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) recommended best practices in disseminating information to student veterans, namely via a veteran office, because college support staff are usually unfamiliar with veteran benefits like the G.I. Bill.

In a qualitative study that included six female student veterans, DiRamio et al. (2008) used the "moving in, moving through, and moving out" transition model as well as Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory approach to identify themes. Female participants stated that they had joined the military for economic and education reasons, not due to patriotism or the 9/11 attacks, as claimed by their male counterparts (DiRamio et al., 2008). Regarding campus culture, participants expressed a desire for increased faculty knowledge of military service and consistent support services. DiRamio et al. highlighted the clear need for comprehensive, holistic veteran support services and for further research into women veterans as a special population.

Kirchner (2015) held that some of the unique challenges veterans face stem from stereotypes and differing veteran experiences, which sometimes lead to difficult transitions into college. Support services centering on retention and completion are critical as many veterans are also first-generation college students (Kirchner, 2015). While universities do have student veteran resource centers and organizations, the effectiveness of these services should be supported by evidence (Kirchner, 2015). Additionally, Kirchner stressed the importance of educators' awareness of the services

available for student veterans and the need for more supportive classroom environments. Kirchner (2015) recommended that acknowledgment of the veteran–civilian divide is the first step in reducing veterans' stress levels. However, gender differences were rarely noted in Kirchner's study.

Veterans face increased challenges navigating higher education, and colleges and universities have adopted initiatives to help veterans make this transition. Examining student veteran initiatives established from 1999 to 2009, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) found stark differences between male and female veterans and that existing literature revolved almost exclusively around male student veterans. However, higher education institutions were not the only entities seeking ways to provide better support for student veterans. The U.S. Department of Education [USDOE] (n.d.) published "8 Keys to Veterans' Success" to help colleges and universities tackle difficulties related to veterans' transition into higher education and their persistence:

1. Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans.
2. Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
3. Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
4. Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space for them (even if limited in size).
5. Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.

6. Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention, and degree completion.
7. Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.
8. Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.

In addition, over 2,100 institutions pledged support to receive federal financial aid. The USDOE (n.d.) established 32 centers of excellence for student veterans, investing $11 million dollars in this initiative. Morrison (2021) found that students typically had positive perceptions of the eight keys, despite noting that the keys were poorly implemented. However, women student veterans have tended not to use veteran resources at their higher education institutions (Heitzman & Somers, 2015; Iverson et al., 2016).

Women Veterans as a Population in Higher Education

Veteran education benefits have allowed more women to afford higher education (Frydl, 2009). In fact, education benefits and/or training has been cited as the main reason most women join the military (Mankowski et al., 2015; Parker & Patten, 2011). Although military enlistment has dwindled to pre-WWII levels, women are the fastest-growing population of military personnel, with over a half million now serving in the active and reserve component (Connor & Miklaszewski, 2014; ICF International, 2014).

As a result of the considerable education benefits offered via the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, as of 2017, over 1.6 million veterans attended colleges and universities across the United States, with women comprising over 27% of students even though they represent only 9% of the veteran population (SVA, 2017). Yet, despite these growing numbers,

little research is available to help education leaders identify the unique challenges of women student veterans (Reppert et al., 2014; Rivera & Johnson, 2014) and support them in more effective ways. Just as military culture must evolve—for instance, to help women fully integrate into combat (DACOWITS, 2016)—education culture also needs to adapt to increasing numbers of women veterans. Iverson et al. (2016) found that 80% of women veterans on a college campus had experienced PTS, depression, and potential unemployment or homelessness—all while being single mothers. Research such as Iverson et al. which is specific to women veterans, is crucial to deepening understanding of the needs of women veterans in higher education.

Women Student Veterans

As discussed earlier, many women do not openly identify as veterans, in part because society still struggles with viewing women as veterans (Anchan et al., 2013; DAV, 2014). Research on veteran transition into higher education has overwhelmingly indicated that both male and female veterans struggle with leaving the military's structured environment and navigating the often complicated and confusing maze of academia (DiRamio et al., 2008). Markle (2015) found that, in addition to this stress, women veterans often felt a crisis of identity as they transitioned from a male-dominated environment to a more nontraditional student female role as they tried to balance school, work, and family. Markle interviewed 25 female veterans who had children and who had returned to school and found that they were more likely to feel guilty about attaining their education than men and struggled with spending time away from family and work, which made them more likely to consider withdrawing. Additionally, the married women in Markle's study rarely saw a reallocation in household chores when they attended school

and were overwhelmed with the convergence of responsibilities of wife, mother, and student, while male students simply did not have these same responsibilities.

DiRamio et al. (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study investigating why student veterans were not using student resources, what their help-seeking attitudes toward both psychological and academic resources were, and if women's behaviors differed from those of their male veteran counterparts. The researchers conducted an online survey of 167 students out of an estimated population of 1,800 veterans from four research universities and three community colleges in one southeastern U.S. state (DiRamio et al., 2015). The survey consisted of 20 questions, and the responses showed that there were no significant differences based on gender, despite 40 years of research suggesting women showed greater help-seeking behaviors both academically and psychologically (DiRamio et al., 2015). During the second phase of DiRamio et al.'s study, the researchers interviewed 13 women student veterans, eight from a public research institution in the southeastern United States and five from a university in the north-central region of the United States (DiRamio et al., 2015). The results of these interviews revealed that the women veterans often shared like attitudes with the male veterans, which they attributed to coming from a male-dominated culture and possessing a conflicted identity that dissuaded them from asking for help because, in the military, this was seen as a weakness (DiRamio et al., 2015).

In Elliman et al.'s (2021) study of 856 Army drill sergeants, researchers examined the stressors, behavioral health challenges, and morale due to working long hours in an effort to identify mitigating factors. A logistic regression model was used to determine any association with time as a drill sergeant, behavioral health challenges, and low

morale. Increased time as a drill sergeant increased low morale and mental health issues, with an elevated burnout rate after 18 months in the position. While 76% of those interviewed were male, similar to DiRamio et al.'s (2015) study, the researchers did not find a difference in outcome data based on gender.

In 2016, Iverson et al. conducted a qualitative study to understand the experiences of women veterans transitioning from the military into higher education institutions. The research team interviewed 12 women student veterans from two public research universities: one located in the South and one in the Midwest (Iverson et al., 2016). The researchers found that the participants struggled with a crisis of identity, likely the result of coming from a hypermasculine culture where they felt unworthy and undeserving of veteran status benefits because of non-combat tours and being further isolated at school because there were so few women veterans (Iverson et al., 2016). That is, the participants felt marginalized as women in the military and as women student veterans; they believed they had to work harder than other students and be self-sufficient (Iverson et al., 2016). The researchers recommended that educators tailor their approaches to identify and engage women veterans, specifically because women veterans were less likely to self-identify and because efforts to reach them through veteran services may be less successful than with men (Iverson et al., 2016).

Women Veterans and Issues of Identity

The literature has clearly demonstrated that women in the military and women veterans face unique identity-related challenges, which affect their identities as students (DiRamio et al., 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Iverson et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2022). As noted previously, many women do not identify as veterans, in part because society

still struggles with viewing women as veterans (Anchan et al., 2013; DAV, 2014). However, research has indicated female veterans struggle just as males do in navigating the complicated structures and processes of academia (DiRamio et al., 2008). Markle (2015) found that women veterans often experienced an identity crisis during the transition from the male-dominated military to more nontraditional female student roles as they juggled school, work, and families. Markle noted that women were more likely to feel guilty about furthering their education for several reasons, making them more likely to consider school withdrawal. Women reported feeling overwhelmed by household chores and the convergence of responsibilities as wife, mother, and student, while male students did not.

DiRamio et al. (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study to identify the reasons student veterans did not use student resources, their help-seeking attitudes toward both psychological and academic resources, and the reasons women's behaviors differed from those of their male counterparts. Despite 40 years of research suggesting women exhibited greater help-seeking behaviors, DiRamio et al. (2015) found no significant gender differences. The qualitative phase of DiRamio et al.'s study involved 13 women student veterans, and the findings supported the quantitative data by revealing similar attitudes among women and men veterans. The researchers attributed these attitudes to the male-dominated military culture, adding that conflicted identities dissuade women from asking for help, which is seen as a weakness in the military.

Iverson et al. (2016) examined women veterans' transitions from the military into higher education, finding that identity crises indeed affected these women and that these crises likely stemmed from a hypermasculine culture that led women to feel undeserving

of veteran benefits due to noncombat tours. Women veterans also felt further isolated at school because they are so few of them. Iverson et al. recommended educators make special attempts to engage women veterans, specifically because women may not self-identify as veterans, making it hard to reach them. A lack of positive female role models has also been reported by women veterans (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009) along with a need for women student veterans to connect with others like themselves and for strategies to promote these connections. As Summerlot et al. (as cited in Baechold & DeSawal, 2009), shared "once [student veterans] are on campus [they] will look to replace the cohesion of their [military] unit by seeking out others that had similar experiences" (p. 72). This suggests strongly that having access to mentors or peer groups comprising other women veterans either within the higher education institution or elsewhere in the community would help veterans replicate the social connections they experienced in the military and aide in the transition to higher education.

Chapter III

RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter describes the rationale for this study's methodology, the overall research design, the target audience, and details regarding participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter also discusses the researcher's potential biases and underlying assumptions, and it addresses data coding and efforts to ensure the overall quality and validity of the data collected. The current study was designed to probe one of the most perplexing issues in veteran education: the invisibility of women veterans, a unique population of student veterans, in the literature. Despite significant and growing numbers of women student veterans, there is little research available to help educational leaders identify the unique challenges of this population—such as increased rates of posttraumatic stress, military sexual trauma, suicide risk, and homelessness (Baker et al., 2023a; Reppert et al., 2014; Rivera & Johnson, 2014; VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans, 2016)—and support them in more effective ways.

The literature has shown women student veterans have higher college persistence and graduation rates than male veterans (Cate et al., 2017) and other female students (NCVAS, 2011). Yet, women veterans are virtually invisible on college campuses, due perhaps to their lack of self-identification as veterans or the absence of a tracking system if these women are not using Department of Veterans Affairs military education benefits (DiRamio et al., 2015). This invisibility results in these women's voices being unheard. The current study sought to identify and understand the factors contributing to women

student veterans' success in higher education, especially since most of the literature has focused on women veterans' challenges and problems. Additionally, the study aimed to identify best practices or support structures for higher education institutions to use in facilitating the success of women student veterans.

Qualitative research was the best approach to understanding these women's experiences without reducing them to impersonal pieces of data. I used narrative inquiry as the primary methodological tool, allowing the women student veterans to express their experiences via stories (Creswell, 2014). According to Clandinin (2013), the "focus of … narrative inquiry is not only valorizing individuals' experience but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individual experiences were, and are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted" (p. 18). Narrative inquiry allows participants to tell vibrant, detailed stories and, more importantly, gives voice to the voiceless in scholarly literature. The stories collected as data in the current study will help make women student veterans visible to higher education leaders, with the ultimate goals of improving their worlds (van Manen, 1990).

Perspective

Over a quarter of women veterans nationally are non-White (Schultz et al., 2022), and in Georgia, where the research was conducted, more than half of women veterans are women of color (NCVAS, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to understand the intersectionality of race and gender, and the way "racism and sexism are institutionalized in all aspects of life" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. ii). According to Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022), it is difficult to determine the true sources of oppression because "race, gender, class, sexuality, and other identities are entangled" (p. 2). Intersectionality

has no single analytical focus; thus, it is an important method and lens for investigating matters related to Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) who are also women student veterans (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

Intersectionality as both a methodology and intellectual tool allows for multiple perspectives and offers unique and potentially divergent views of racial and gender oppression. Those complexities were anticipated in this study. The "messiness" of understanding intentionality and meaning in the face of fluid, interwoven perceptions, cultural influences, and structural marginalization (whether conscious or subconscious) can result in meaning that is ever-changing (Vagle, 2018). Combining approaches recommended by Kim (2016), and Esposito and Evans-Winters. (2022), this study aligned the narratives of the participants with other critical theories (e.g., veteran oppression and marginalization, critical race theory, feminism, deficit thinking, intersectionality of identities), including veterans critical theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). Critical theories were used to underpin participants' experiences via the narrative methodology construct (Kim, 2016). Ultimately, women student veterans highlighted their past (e.g., military service), their present (e.g., college), and their future by sharing their stories (Kim, 2016).

Participant Selection

Women student veterans were recruited to participate in this study via purposive and snowball sampling (Maxwell, 2013). Participants who could provide a breadth of experience were intentionally selected from multiple branches of the Department of Defense, including active-duty and Reserve. Five women student veterans who were pursuing or had recently completed their degrees at higher education institutions located

in the southeastern United States were selected to participate in interviews. Participants were initially contacted through military affairs coordinators at their public institutions and other military and veteran researchers. I sought participants who also had multiple levels of degrees (associate, bachelor's, master's, doctorate). Additionally, my intent was to select a majority of participants who identified as non-White and to choose participants who were both enlisted, officers, or both, so as to avoid a homogenous group to explore individual experiential differences.

Once prospective participants were identified, a participation request was sent via email (Appendix B), which included the researcher's contact information. It is important to note that none of the participants was aware of the researcher's occupation and position. When a potential participant responded to the invitation, the researcher contacted that individual and scheduled an interview. Those who indicated interest in participating in the study were sent a brief survey to capture their demographic information. Because the study sought deepen understanding of the complexities of the intersectionality of race, gender, and military service among a diverse group of women student veterans, women of color were purposefully included as well as women from as many higher education institutions as possible (Creswell, 2014). In addition, the number of participants was limited in effort to explore each participants' narrative in depth and to generate rich data.

Data Collection

Prior to the collection of the data, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from Valdosta State University (appendix A). In alignment with Seidman's (2013) recommendations, data were collected in a series, and each interview was video

recorded and transcribed. All participants provided informed consent for interviews to be videotaped, and the risks and benefits of participation were explained prior to data collection (Terrell, 2016).

Compensation and Data Storage

Participants received a $10 Amazon gift card, provided by the researcher, for each interview (maximum $30 per participant). Participants were informed that no expenses would be reimbursed by the university. (Appendix C details participant payment procedures; Appendix D includes a payment log.) Receipts, payments, and all other private information were kept confidential and maintained in a secure, locked drawer in the researcher's home office; this information was filed with the signed informed consent documents and participant codes. This information will be retained for 7 years and then destroyed. Interviews were videotaped using Microsoft Teams and transcribed within Teams. Any errors from the software were corrected by the researcher after reviewing the video and audio files to ensure accuracy. The videotaped interviews are being stored digitally in a password-protected file folder on Microsoft OneDrive. Digital files will be permanently deleted from the computer 3 years after completion of the study.

Data Coding

During each interview session, if any questions appeared to trigger symptoms of posttraumatic stress or depression, the counselor at the higher education institution where the participant was enrolled would be contacted by the researcher (see Appendix E for consent form explanation). However, none of the interviews required the involvement of counseling services. Upon completion of the data collection process, interview transcriptions were analyzed by the researcher manually, using color coding of the

interview data to signal the most frequent responses. Since there were only five participants, the researcher opted not to use software for analysis; manual coding and analysis were deemed to be sufficient. Using framework analysis, the researcher organized key topics into a matrix of thematic summaries. Additionally, the researcher linked demographic data to the interviews while maintaining interviewee confidentiality. Codes were grouped and arranged based on prevalence and consistency across all interviews. To help eliminate personal bias, anonymized findings were shared with fellow researchers of student veterans for review. Common responses and themes are identified and discussed in this dissertation.

The researcher manually coded (Saldaña, 2015) keywords or phrases throughout each participant interview, specifically highlighting descriptive coding-cycle keywords or phrases (Gizzi & Rädiker, 2021). Additionally, the researcher highlighted common themes in the second coding cycle and superimposed the themes onto the descriptive codes (Gizzi & Rädiker, 2021). Lastly, the researcher added context from the participant's interviews to each theme that emerged, such as describing the hyper-masculine culture of the military that the participants experienced. Specifically, the researcher integrated each participant's narrative with corresponding themes.

Participant Confidentiality

Each study participant was assigned a pseudonym that was used throughout the research process. Due to the increasing number of women veterans attending higher education institutions, it was highly unlikely that participants could be identified through the basic demographic data they provided such as branch of service, career field, and ethnicity. Thus, study participation did not place any individuals at risk of criminal or

civil liability or damage to their financial standing, employability, insurability, or reputation. Profiles of the five participants and their identities were masked using pseudonyms known only to the researcher. As such, there were minimal risks for participants in this study because they were in control of the information they shared. Data collection and security protocols protected the confidentiality of the participants and their data. The risks of participation were no more likely or severe than those encountered in everyday activities. However, because discussions of one's military experiences can lead to the revelation of sensitive issues (e.g., military sexual trauma), these narratives were only shared when the participant was willing. In their informed consent forms, all participants indicated that they understood the risks of participation (Terrell, 2016).

The video and audio recordings were stored in a password-protected site only accessible by the researcher. Participants' identities were only known to the researcher, and this information was located in the researcher's personal home office, which remained locked when not in use. The data were also secured in a locked filing cabinet, of which only the researcher held the key. Additionally, the computer was password-protected, and the password was also only known by the researcher.

At the time of the interview process, the nation was experiencing high rates of COVID-19 and influenza; therefore, all participants—who were located throughout the Southeastern United States—elected to be interviewed virtually via Microsoft Teams. Subsequent post-interview clarification was conducted via email and through virtual meetings.

The Three-Step Interview Series

The researcher used Seidman's (2013) three-step interview process combined with Clandinin and Connelly's (2004) "three-dimensional narrative inquiry space" (p. 54), which allowed participants to look backward, inward, and outward. The interviews were not timebound and gave participants the opportunity to reflect first on their past military experiences. Using Seidman's structure, the first interview captured linear stories of women student veterans' experiences by centering each participant's personal and military history. Data from the participants looking inward focused on their motivations for joining the military and for pursuing higher education. The second interview involved the participants discussing their transition into higher education institutions and related experiences. The third interview focused on the participant's future to deepen understanding of the student veteran's motivations and ultimate goals (Kim, 2016). In look outward, the participants provided data that explored what had made them successful in pursuing higher education and their future goals once finished with their respective degrees. Another goal of this study centered on the inquiry, or what comes after the story, to link participants' narratives to the broader social context, supporting the rationale for investigating this group (Kim, 2016).

Interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended prompts to elicit responses (see Appendix F for sample interview questions). The researcher-interviewer established herself as an insider (Tisdell, 2002)—that is, as a woman student veteran who had transitioned from the military into higher education and was familiar higher education institutions and various veteran programs. Because of time constraints, the need for social distancing, and participants' location across the southeastern United States, all of

Seidman's three-step interviews were conducted during a 2–3 hour block. The participants determined the length of the interviews, and because the researcher sought to counter deficit models that assume women veterans have many challenges to overcome, to include being poor students, despite data to the contrary (Valencia & Solórzano, 2012). Thus, the interviews focused on the participants' successes. Specifically, the intent was to highlight participants' experiences, support structures, and the methods women student veterans used to transition from the military into higher education.

The first two components of each interview allowed for an exploration of the ways participants identified themselves. The third component gave interviewees an opportunity to reflect on their past, present, and future (Kim, 2016), which provided deep insight into participants' present experiences (Seidman, 2013). After the interviews were transcribed, participants were allowed to offer feedback on the transcriptions to ensure their intent was captured. All interview transcriptions were reviewed in their entirety by the researcher to capture the essence of the participant, painting with words a picture of their story.

In alignment with Maxwell's (2013) distinction between qualitative research goals and variables in quantitative research, the data provided insights into the experiences of women student veterans at three distinct times in their life: during the military, as a student, and in the future after graduation (Kim, 2016). Using the biographical approach, analysis of the stories concentrated on "turning point experiences" (Merriam, 2002, p. 287), gender, and race. Additionally, the researcher's construct ensured the individuality of each participant instead of lumping all of them into a homogenous group (Maxwell, 2013).

As noted, in eliciting responses about participants' experiences and motivations, the researcher asked open-ended questions (Seidman, 2013) while also remaining open to any "unanticipated phenomena" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 692) or discoveries that did not fit the researcher's experience. Through the data captured, the narrative structure, and the interpretation of experiences, stories and meaning were constructed (Merriam, 2002). Because interviews were conducted over several weeks, interview questions were refocused as needed, and the theoretical framework and research design were slightly modified (Maxwell, 2013). Once data collection was complete, results were overlaid with the theoretical framework—comprising the tenets of veterans critical theory (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017) and pulling out specifically critical race theory (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017), critical feminist theory (Goodman, 2019), and intersectionality (Esposito & Winters, 2022). Data analysis followed, allowing the creation of meaningful constructs to convey women student veterans' experiences.

Data Analysis

Throughout the detailed review of the interview transcripts, data were reduced and bracketed, allowing for the identification of recurrent perspectives (Merriam, 2002). Bracketing forces the researcher to suspend their own biases and beliefs on the subject through the use of analytical memos. The memos were used to record biases or contradictions to ensure appropriate representation of each participant's experiences. Seidman (2013) recommended approaching the data with an open attitude to identify issues of importance instead of extracting information that fits a predetermined hypothesis. Bracketing aided in the identification of similar—and significant—experiences and trends among participants (Seidman, 2013). Maxwell (2013)

recommended categorizing or coding data into substantive ideas while making efforts not to lose sight of the experience by focusing solely on subjective groupings. Maxwell also suggested connecting strategies to identify relationships and prevent the data from becoming fragmented.

Validity

To enhance replicability of the current study, interview questions are available in Appendix F (Maxwell, 2013); however, as this was a semi-structured interview, the researcher allowed the participants to tell their own story using the questions as a framework. To ensure that data were not interpreted based on preexisting hypotheses or the researcher's experiences, Maxwell's (2013) safeguards against assumptions and inherent biases were considered. While the researcher's own experiences fueled interest in the study, her perceptions and goals did not drive the study results or cloud her judgment. As mentioned previously, bracketing and memos were used to remain true to what the participants divulged. Additionally, after interview transcription, study participants validated their information and confirmed the accuracy of the data contained within the transcripts (Seidman, 2013).

Study credibility and dependability were girded by rich data, triangulation, and member checking, and bias and assumptions were reduced or eliminated through self-reflective memos. While generalizations were difficult, this study's rich descriptions should persuade future researchers to investigate this topic further. The overarching goal is for leaders of higher education institutions to use the meaningful information generated from this and similar studies to better identify and support the growing number of women student veterans. By sharing the participants' experiences, the researcher is confident

others will benefit from lessons learned and that the findings will help other women student veterans identify and form the social bonds needed for support.

Conclusion

Although 12 participants initially expressed interest in the study, only five were able to complete the entire interview process, which was lengthy (i.e., 2–3 hours per interview). The researcher adhered to established procedures, namely the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) when conducting the interviews. Specific service demographics (DoD, 2020) for participants were chosen to mirror the regional military population of the southeastern United States; the interviewees included three Army veterans, one Air Force veteran, and one Marine Corps veteran.

Chapter IV

NARRATIVES OF WOMEN STUDENT VETERANS

The participants in this study provided detailed background narratives about their motivations for joining the military, their military experiences, and their experiences with higher education. The semi-structured interview process used prompting interview questions (Appendix F) to guide the overall discussion; however, the researcher allowed the participants to share their own stories and highlight what they thought was important rather than leading them through an exacting series of questions. Clarifying questions and prompts for elaboration were used. The interview protocol was designed to address the following research questions:

1. How does a woman veteran's experience in the military shape their experiences in higher education?
2. What factors support the academic success and program completion of women student veterans in higher education?

Profiles of Participants

Five participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling. As indicated in the list of participant demographics in in Table 2, four of the five participants identified as African American, and one identified as White. Four of the five participants started with an associate degree, with three earning their master's degree; of these three, one had recently completed their doctorate, one was in her last semester of her doctoral studies, and the third was pursuing medical school. The participants' descriptions of their

academic pursuits and accomplishments provided robust data. Three interviewees had served in the active-duty Army, with one of the three remaining in the Army Reserve while attending school. One had retired from the active-duty Marine Corps, and one had retired after serving in the active-duty Air Force and then the Air National Guard. The branch-of-service demographics were important as women may have different experiences based on their military branch and component. Additionally, four of the women had enlisted in the military, with three of the four later commissioning into the officer ranks and one serving as a warrant officer. The fourth participant who remained enlisted achieved the highest enlisted rank (i.e., E-9). Two of the five had retired from military service, one was still on active-duty, one was still in the Reserve, and one had been medically separated after 4 years. All had served after September 11, 2001.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Military Branch of Service	Component(s)	Era of Service	Years Served	Level of degree pursuing/ pursued
Stephanie	Black or African American	Marine Corps	Active Duty	Pre- and Post-9/11	21	Doctorate
Erin	Black or African American	Army	Active Duty	Post-9/11	22 (still serving)	Doctorate
Destiny	Black or African American	Army	Active-Duty Reserve	Post-9/11	14 1 (still serving)	Graduate, applying to doctoral programs
Kim	Black or African American	Air Force	Active Duty Guard	Pre- and Post-9/11	6 19	Under-graduate
Kelsey	White	Army	Active Duty	Post-9/11	4	Doctorate

These five women provided rich data based on their unique yet in many ways similar experiences. While this small sample is not representative of the entire population of women student veterans, their lived experiences were, in several cases, similar to my own and those of other women I have associated with during and after military service.

Stephanie

I interviewed Stephanie just after her workday while she was still in her office. She had recently transitioned to a new job and city, a large metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. She had only been in her current position a few months and was introduced through a fellow veteran. In many ways, Stephanie was a trailblazer. She

had enlisted in the Marines in the mid-1980s, when approximately 2% of the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) were women (USMC, 1986). She was the only woman in her career field that she knew of and one of the only enlisted Marines of color regardless of gender. A demographic study by the Center for Naval Analysis (Lien et al., 2008) found that only 0.14% of Stephanie's career field was Black, regardless of gender. She had a full career in the Marines and, after earning her undergraduate degree, became a warrant officer, serving a total of 21 years, ultimately retiring from the service.

Stephanie exuded strength and confidence. Her no-nonsense demeanor suggested a life full of structure and rules. She wore eyeglasses and had short, natural hair, and although she had retired from the Marine Corps almost 20 years earlier, she still had the bearing of a Marine. She sat up straight, focused on the questions being asked, and did her best to lay open her life and her experiences to be heard and visible. "It's the one word I have grown to dislike when it comes to women veterans, but it's a reality for us. It's the invisible part … I call it the lack of respect. I'm a Marine." She bristled openly when describing a scenario in which she had encountered male Marines adorned in their service ball caps and exclaiming "Oorah," the call sign of the Marine Corps, only to be questioned about what she knew about the Marine Corps. When she relayed that she was a retired Marine, she was then asked to show her identification card. Stephanie recalled vehemently, "[I] served 21 years, and then for [them] to have the audacity to ask me, 'Well, let me see your ID' was an afront." These encounters marginalized her service to her country and highlighted the fact that, even within her own branch of service, she was still perceived as an anomaly. She related another experience at a student veteran event where all the veterans were asked to stand: "We all stand, and everyone turns around.

They shook everyone's hand in that row but mine. That's invisibility. I mean, we're in plain sight and are invisible. When are we going to stop that?" She considered her participation in this study as a first step as it was obvious that being the center of attention was not easy for her. However, she now worked with fellow veterans and conveyed how important it was to study the experiences of women veterans and include them in the body of research on student veterans.

Stephanie was a self-proclaimed nerdy kid who grew up in a large diverse urban are in the Midwest as one of eight children (the second youngest) to a single mother. Her exposure to what she termed "the world" was limited since she lived and attended school with individuals who looked like her. Her closest friends were her many brothers and sisters. She was smart, performed well academically, and was selected to attend what would now be termed a magnet school for those excelling in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Her high school was very diverse, and it was not until she entered the Marine Corps that she suffered culture shock at both the racism and sexism she experienced as a Marine.

She entered Marine Corps bootcamp right after her 18th birthday since her mother would not sign the paperwork for her to enlist at 17 years old. When asked why she joined the Marine Corps, Stephanie stated that her brother had joined 6 years previously; she was "overly shy" and because of her brother's transformation, she decided it was something she wanted to do, too. She had an older sister who had joined the Army for 4 years, but Stephanie relayed that she did not "feel the Army." Although she was physically fit, she explained that her brother had tried to talk her out of enlisting in the Marines because he felt she could not handle it. However, she "wanted to prove him

wrong." She trained to the male standards for physical fitness, which prepared her for bootcamp.

Stephanie explained that when she joined the Marine Corps, it was not like it is today. They "didn't have the political correctness … so a lot of times you heard, 'Women don't belong in the Marine Corps.' I probably heard that every day." When she married and had children, she was told that if the Marine Corps had wanted her to have a husband and children, they would have issued them to her and that she "belonged in a kitchen somewhere." "There was a lot of racial discrimination and sexism going on … and a lot of sexual assault." She explained that after she married and had her two kids, the Marine Corps kept her and her husband apart. Even though they had served six years together, they would send him overseas, and she would remain state-side. "When he got back from overseas, they wanted to send me overseas, so it was very stressful for us both with two kids. So, we decided that he would end his career at 6 or 7 years."

In reflecting on her experiences as a Marine, she shared that her brother had contributed to her success. He said she would never be a staff sergeant, but she did. He also told Stephanie to set a goal for herself and challenged her to figure out where she saw herself in 20 years. She did "set a goal for [herself] … being a female officer, and the only way to get there is by the warrant officer ranks, so [she] was going to put on warrant officer." Her brother cautioned that serving as a warrant officer was a whole different world, but every year she put in her application, yet she was not selected. Stephanie "had a great mentor who was a sergeant major. He said to add something more to my package each year, which I did, whether it was taking another class, increasing my teacher peer score, or taking on different responsibilities." It took 10 years for her to make warrant

officer; however, in the 10th year, she was not the one who submitted the promotion package because, by that point, she was so discouraged. She had found out that one of her previous commanding officers served on the promotion board during all the years she had been denied promotion:

> He would let the guys have naked photos of women pinned around the office and have conversations about innuendo and sexuality, and you know it was a lot…. [It] was reported back to me that every time my name came up for promotion, it was an automatic no.

However, the 10th time, her then-current commanding officer, also a woman, saw her potential. This commanding officer "said, 'We know you did it all these years, so we went ahead and submitted [the package].'" The year Stephanie was selected for warrant officer, she felt it was her against the world as "none of the warrant officers wanted to have anything to do with me." She deployed, and there was "a lot of pushback and no support in the field. It was a challenge, and I just stood up to the challenge and kept pushing forward."

Despite her fortitude and grit during her military service, she admitted she was not prepared when she retired. Initially, upon retiring, she moved into a military community where she was last stationed. Stephanie said,

> The transition was not really a big deal because you're still surrounded by the military, and you still have access to the base and all the facilities, and you're still with the same people that you served with over the last 6 years. So, it wasn't a real deal.

She earned her bachelor's degree while in the Marine Corps and attended a master's degree program on a military base after she retired. She described this time as "still in my element." She finished her master's degree and went to work in the same military-affiliated community, where she had considerable support. However, when she moved home to take care of her brother,

> that's when my eyes opened to the transition process. I didn't even know anything as our transition assistance program was only, like, 3 days, and not a whole lot of information was provided as what to do when you get to your home state or what organizations [were] out there to support you…. [T]here was nothing.

Stephanie shared,

> I was pretty much on my own. I didn't have any connections to the military, I didn't. If it wasn't my brother talking about serving in the Marine Corps, no one paid attention to me being a female. My mother still only talks about my brother's service. Still talked about him having served in Japan, but she never mentioned my service in Japan or even asked, so it became hard.

Commenting on services after leaving the military and her previous military-affiliated community, Stephanie said, "I didn't know where to go. I was used to going for any medical issues to the hospital on base…. [I] had to find optical services, dental services." No one knew about the benefits Stephanie had or where she should go to receive those benefits. She did not even know she *had* benefits with the Department of Veterans Affairs:

> We weren't told or taught, and it was really hard those first few years I started teaching Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps [i.e., cadets] because even though

> I was around a few other [prior military] instructors, they were men, and I was the only female. So again, I'm in this by myself.

With hesitancy and resignation, Stephanie admitted that "it became obvious that I needed help, and I didn't know how to do this by myself. I couldn't reach back to my [last military base] because, you know, states are different, and the USDVA hospitals are different." As with her previous experiences while in the military, she found that the USDVA had assumed she was not a veteran:

> When I finally did go to a USDVA hospital with an appointment, I sat there for 3 hours. And then when I finally inquired a third time, I was told that, like always, they thought I was somebody's wife waiting for [my husband].

Stephanie told the USDVA representative,

> "My name is on your roster. Come on." So, I thought to myself, "I am not bothering with the USDVA if this is the treatment I'm going to get." I had to go out and find my own private health care.

Ultimately, through the help of a mentor, Stephanie found her way into the veteran's space. She began working with military and student veterans and for the director of the state Department of Veterans Affairs. Once Stephanie made this crucial connection, the director "started guiding me and directing me and telling where I needed to go, who I should be talking to, and where I should be getting involved in community and events to reach out to the military community." Stephanie was introduced to the broader veteran community, to which she then referred students who came to her seeking help:

> We had this system and people to connect with. [The mentor] told me, "Don't think you need to do this alone. Did you serve alone?" I answered, "No, I did not." He said, "Then why do you think you need to do this transition alone?" That was my eye opener.

Now, one of the first questions Stephanie asked her students was, "'Did you serve alone?' Especially to those students that don't want to be bothered with the military community or are hesitant because of all of the stigma attached to it…. We don't self-identify."

Stephanie glanced down slightly then admitted that when she was looking for a career after the military and was not receiving any callbacks, she removed her military service from her resume. As soon as she did, "I started getting calls back." She eventually transitioned into the job she currently served in, helping military and student veterans at a large public 4-year institution in the southeastern United States. She stated, "It's what I want to do. I really want to help. There are other people transitioning [from the military], and I want to make that transition as seamless as possible for them."

> One of the things we keep talking about is that the veteran and their family needs to learn how to transition. I said, "Why is it? It's always a two-way street. Why can't the community leaders have a bridge without such a gap between the veteran and the community?"

Stephanie spoke wistfully about her new role meeting the community into which she just moved and helping establish those bridges and eliminating gaps so veterans and their families could more easily integrate into the community.

When discussing her transition into higher education, Stephanie explained that she had received her bachelor's degree while still serving in the Marine Corps. Her master's

degree program was located on the military base she retired from, so she did not struggle integrating into higher education for her degree program. However, when she pursued her doctoral degree at a midwestern university, she soon discovered that:

> there was no organization, no student organization, and people didn't understand. My only saving grace was a young lady who worked in the registrar's office, and she learned I was a veteran from another student.

Stephanie was told she needed to see this specific person in the registrar's office:

> She started laying out everything, and she asked, "How did you not know?" I said no one here has told me, even though I checked on the admission application that I was military-connected. After that point, she would make sure every semester; she would check in with me and ask how it was going and make sure I had all my paperwork.

However, when Stephanie engaged with the USDVA, she did not understand the differences among healthcare resources. She asked another military veteran about the two USDVA hospitals in the surrounding area. When she went to the larger one, she stated,

> It was horrible. It was … I was like, "I can't do this." … There were hundreds of male veterans getting the resources they needed but nothing specific to women veterans, so I just stopped going. That transition was very hard for me.

Stephanie added, "I was trying to put the military behind me at this point because it seemed like it was harder to hold onto that and move forward." While others might transition easily into mainstream life, she found it extremely difficult:

> I just wanted to not identify at all as military. I didn't even want people to know. No, I'm not in the military and some people would look at me and say, "Did you serve?" And I would say, "No, why would you ask that?"

It was offensive every time she participated in a parade and was booed. Stephanie did join a national women veteran's group, and one of the things they talked about was "how women, we just don't identify, and then we don't get what we're entitled to, you know, what we have a right to; we don't identify because everything is so male-focused."

It took Stephanie 8 years after retirement to get involved as a veteran coordinator at a university while pursuing her doctoral degree. She thought helping veterans would be a good role for her because "there's going to be somebody in there that will understand me because I served, too." In that role, Stephanie learned about other organizations and benefits for veterans; she also made more connections in the community and grew the veterans' program she coordinated. If a homeless student veteran came into the program office, she could "actually give them a resource, not just a place to go, but a name. 'Go talk to this person and they're taken care of.' Or if they're short on cash and just need something to get by until next month, we had a person or an organization that would help them." She continued,

> I'm helping people like me get the services and the resources that they need to be successful and graduate because that's the whole thing for a lot of us. You know, life hits and then we drop out. Now, it's my goal to make sure we have resources in place to make sure that doesn't happen, and if you have to take a break, take a break. But we want our students to continue to graduation and into careers in the community. So that was my segue into higher education. I love what I do because

it is giving back. Someone picked me up when I didn't know which way to go or who to talk to and what to do when I needed something.

Stephanie was now visible as a veteran, a term she no longer shunned. She stood proud when introduced by her university president as a Marine veteran and hoped her experiences and connections helped make other veterans' transition from the military to education and ultimately the civilian workforce smoother than her own.

Erin

At the time of the study, Erin was still on active duty and stationed at a large military base in the southwestern United States. We met during her lunch break since that was the only time she had during a very busy work schedule. Although her focus shifted a few times to work during the interview, she remained excited to tell her story in hopes it would help other women, especially women of color. Erin had an easy laugh; several times when recalling her experiences, she would smile then chuckle. While some of the challenges she faced during her life and in the military were not obvious, it was clear that she kept her experiences in perspective.

During her interview, Erin was in uniform, with her hair tightly braided and off her collar, which belied her years in the military since standards had recently changed for women's hairstyles and she could have chosen a more relaxed hairdo. Erin worked in the healthcare industry and, at the time of the interview, had served 23 years in the Army, but she looked decades younger than her age—certainly not old enough to have served an entire career in the military. Erin explained that I simply could not see her gray hair on the video screen.

Erin was originally from an island in the Caribbean, but only when listening closely could I make out a slight accent. Erin remembered moving to the United States when Atlanta hosted the Olympic games in 1996. Because her sister had a health issue, she and her family traveled back and forth from her home in the Caribbean to the United States so her sister could receive medical care. She attended high school in the Caribbean but came to the United States for her undergraduate degree.

When Erin was in nursing school, she "was bored," so when Navy recruiters came to her institution, the interaction started her thinking about other pursuits—an encounter that changed her life, as it has for many others. She said, "If I wasn't in the Army, I would be in the Peace Corps." She went on to explain that:

> Growing up in a Third World country, I've always had that giving spirit. There's just a lot of illnesses and stuff there, so I always wanted to be able to help, so I thought I could do that in the military.

When the Navy recruiters described the mercy ships deployed to different parts of the world to provide medical care, Erin thought, "That's perfect, thinking she would be able to go to Third World countries like her own and help. However, when "I saw their unforms, I was like, 'No, I don't think I can do that.' They had their names and buttons, and it was just a big turnoff."

No one in Erin's family had served in the military, but after considering the possibilities, she started looking at other branches of the service. Erin saw a recruitment video for the Army with "people going through swamplands and doing all this great stuff ... and being very much an outdoor person," she decided to try the Army. She explained that "they don't tell you that's not your job," but the video piqued her interest and

responded to her desire to serve, so she joined to find adventure. She originally intended to just take a sabbatical from school but ended up staying in the Army.

Erin enlisted in the Army Reserve, and her school was supportive of her taking a year off to attend basic training especially since she had completed all the course requirements for her nursing degree. She thought she would attend basic training and then simply step back into her previous life and schooling. However, she did very well on the military assessment exam (i.e., the Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Battery [ASVAB] test) and was encouraged to enlist in the active-duty Army. The Army wanted her to become a licensed nurse practitioner, but she thought, "That makes no sense, I'm like two classes away. Why would I do that?" so she chose radiology and became an X-ray technician. It was a yearlong program, and during her training, she learned she qualified for the Army's commissioning program since she only had to complete her bachelor's degree within 2 years. The Army commissioning program was a pathway for enlisted soldiers to become officers and was the path recommended by her mentor. Therefore, she went to the education center, submitted her application package, and was accepted.

Erin completed her bachelor's degree, joined the Army Nurse Corps, and became a medical surgical nurse. Her job involved caring for all the patients that came out of surgery, but after about a year, she wanted a new challenge. Almost in passing, she mentioned that getting bored and wanting new challenges was a trend in her life. Erin decided to get her master's degree in nursing but could not get any support. She wanted to take courses but was told she had to establish herself in the medical facility before anyone would take her seriously. She kept asking to take additional courses and training but was repeatedly turned down. Her immediate supervisor kept telling her he could not

afford to let her go. However, the rest of the nurses were White and mostly male, and she observed that the white nurses were offered the same opportunities for professional development that she was denied. There were only two African American females, including her, on her floor. Erin began getting frustrated that the men could attend additional courses, but she could not. As a result, she considered leaving the military "because I was pretty tired of this. You know, I had goals, and I couldn't ever get any support, so I'm going to get out." Another Black lieutenant colonel talked to Erin about trying another path and applying to other nursing jobs in areas where the Army was encouraging diversity. Erin explained,

> Back then, it was a numbers game. So, if they needed a Hispanic male, they were more likely to get promoted. [The lieutenant colonel] said they needed Black females, and she was selling me on specializing in advanced perioperative nursing so I could get what I want. After going to the gym, I came back and told her I wanted to specialize as a nurse. "What do you have available?"

The quickest way to get out of her then-current specialty was by becoming a perioperative, or operating room, nurse. Erin relayed that a surgical nurse position was simply too boring. She was told the Army needed a lot of operating nurses, so she approached the chief nurse at the hospital to get her to sign off on Erin's transfer, but the chief nurse refused because she thought Erin would be wasting her talent. She also was told she was too junior and needed more experience. Her supervisors' underlying expectation was that she needed to pay her dues before switching specialties. Erin ended up going over the chief nurse's head to the hospital commander, taking advantage of his "open door" policy, which allowed anyone in the hospital to bypass the chain of

command and see him directly. The hospital commander supported her decision to become an operating room nurse, which, when others became aware, opened other doors for other nurses.

Erin worked in the operating room for 3 months, but her leadership needed a nurse to deploy to Iraq. Erin took the opportunity and was deployed for a year. When she returned, she qualified for her specialty but wanted the national certification, which required 2 years' experience and 5,500 hours. Therefore, she submitted for the rotations and coursework, hoping the Army would fund her certification; however, the Army refused, so she paid for the certification out of pocket. "That was OK. I submitted for that certification and sat and earned that. And then, because of the way I prepared for my vocation, you know, allowed to be somewhat of an expert in the perioperative section," she was offered other opportunities. Erin explained that because of her initiative and expertise, the hospital commander and chief nurse at her new location began tasking her out for additional duties, including assigning her as a liaison to the Veterans Administration hospital:

> This is when doors really started to open for me. I went to Iraq again for a little more than a year, and when I came back, I got a phone call one day from a random person saying that I was being considered as an aide-de-camp for a general.

Erin admitted she had no idea what the job was and had to Google it. After an extensive interview process, she was selected and moved to a new duty assignment. Working for the general opened even more opportunities, including finally receiving the support she required to pursue her master's degree.

As Erin reflected, “It took years and years to get someone to support me. Then I had to do the rest. School is horrible, and I’m never doing it again. It took almost 3 years to complete a master’s in nursing along with a specialty.” At the same time, Erin did not leave active duty and conducted missions all over the world. After her degree was conferred, she spent a year in Afghanistan. According to Erin, during deployment,

> You’re either doing missions or you just sit around and watch television. My thing was, I was going to catch up on a movie or read a book, so I did a great deal of reading while I was there and realized, “Maybe I’ll pursue my terminal nursing degree.” So, I submitted applications to several schools while I was in Afghanistan.

When Erin returned the United States, she went to work in a trauma center as an instructor and completed her doctorate at a major university in the same city.

Erin was a combat veteran with multiple tours. She indicated the first deployment was not too bad but admitted to “blocking a lot of that stuff, though because it’s just a lot mentally to think about all the time.” She worked in a combat support hospital equivalent to a Level 1 trauma center that was “inside the wire” but where enemy engagement and danger was commonplace. The hospital had six operating rooms; when describing how busy it was, she recalled an instance when they were operating for 2 days straight. She noted that she dealt better with this deployment because “I internalized a lot of the events that happened.”

Erin relayed that she “was a lot more focused on taking care of everybody else around me and the patients, and not so much myself, but I think diverting my energy allowed me to keep my mind off of things.” She described working no less than 12 hours

a day, 6 days a week, so when she was not working, she was sleeping. Erin recalled that the hospital was frequently mortared:

> [I remember] having these images of, "Wow, this is my life. This is not a movie." So, you're always trying to run, run somewhere to take cover or, you know, basically trying to save your life. It was intense. You see a lot of young soldiers that you're in charge of … a lot of them end up leaving the military because of mental health issues or unfortunately a few have successfully committed suicide since then because they were just struggling with the amount of things that we saw and death on any given day. Literally either carrying people's body parts to a burn pit or returning them if they were local nationals. It was a lot to deal with that first deployment.

Erin did have the opportunity to complete a few missions outside the military compound. As she described, one was inside an Iraqi hospital; being from a Third-World country, she understood their different challenges, considering the strict regulation of American medical care. Erin and the other Army doctors and nurses tried to build relationships with the people in town. They asked the local Iraqi medical team what they wanted the American team to do for them:

> One of the things they asked for was to have a surgical team to help educate them, so I was sent as an OR nurse on that trip. It was overwhelming because even though no one was supposed to know the American team was going in, the entire hospital was surrounded by people.

As the Army team was trying to get into that facility, people were literally passing their children through the crowd "because they just felt, they thought if we could even just

touch their children, they would somehow be healed." To Erin, this experience of parents bringing their children to be healed (primarily of birth defects) was eye-opening and stood out in her memory, even with all the death to which she was exposed.

Another recollection that Erin shared related to a "sort of Health Lottery for the week." The medical staff at the hospital had to choose whom they would operate on and could not choose surgical procedures with extensive follow-up or the need for subsequent surgeries because they were only there for a week:

> It's so wrong, I know why we were there ... but the fact that we just had to select a few people to work on and then, just seeing all the suffering in that community, I think that's one of the things that even to this day still bothers me, like we should just be doing more.

Erin remained troubled by her experiences in Iraq: "These are some of the memories that, at any point of the day, I am triggered by, just seeing a child that falls or is crying, and my life goes back to that point in time." She laughed and then said, "This was my first deployment and my second and third deployments were a lot worse."

When asked why subsequent deployments were more difficult, Erin explained that she was more senior and had more responsibilities other than working in the operating room. She spoke about the difficulty of pulling out of Iraq, closing medical facilities, and the uncertainty of operations and the mission. She was one of only two females in her unit, and the other woman had not deployed before, so Erin "felt like [she] was responsible for her. And you know, there's all this sexual harassment and assault so, I just felt like I really needed to keep an eye on her." She described flying all over the country, travelling at different times of the night and day to minimize the opportunity for

the enemy to shoot down their helicopter. Also, as a biproduct of the hectic schedule, she never knew when they would eat next. Some of her difficulties also had to do with the Iraqi people knowing when they were showing up to shutter a facility and pilfering whatever was useful beforehand. She was always concerned they would be attacked while on the ground or when leaving.

Her third deployment involved supporting special forces missions, which was different from her previous deployments because they "were usually for either search and rescue or for recovering bodies." She described the special forces missions as "being right there with them and in the fight." Because they lost people regularly, Erin remarked that she simply did not establish relationships or get close to anyone. She described herself as "emotionally separated"—a mentality that had followed her even after returning home from deployment. She did not like being too close to anyone, and always remained distant. To cope with her military experiences, she kept busy and did not allow herself any downtime to think about the past. She had found herself overly worried about everything and suffered from "insomnia, a lot of anxiety" and tended "to be angrier than normal and irritated by complaints, especially coming from a culture that has so little." In describing a scenario she termed a "First World problem," she overheard someone complaining that they asked for mustard and got mayonnaise: "I'm like, 'Dear God!'"

At the time of this study, Erin was a single mother to a young son and was contemplating retirement to spend more time with him during his formative years.

Destiny

Destiny was currently in the Army Reserve, and we met for her interview after her military workday on a Saturday, commonly known as drill weekend. A year earlier,

Destiny had transitioned from the active-duty Army after 14 years to pursue her degree full time. I immediately noted the sparkle in Destiny's eyes and her beaming smile. This radiance made her appear as if she was from a skincare commercial and just happened to put on a military uniform for the interview. She apologized for scheduling the interview over the weekend, explaining that she did not have much flexibility with her time. She was currently enrolled in an accelerated education program for pre-med students and was preparing for her final exams the following week. She was also applying to a number of medical schools throughout the eastern United States in preparation to attend in the fall. While one might assume this brilliant woman had always been on a trajectory toward greatness, this was not the case. Destiny was excited to tell her story, which was one about overcoming obstacles and excelling.

Destiny described herself "as a troubled teenager … who was a three-time high school dropout, but [she] is very proud of it." Destiny moved up and down the East Coast as her parents tried to get her through high school graduation. At her third high school, where she was about to be expelled, she met an Army recruiter outside the guidance counselor's office. The recruiter asked Destiny if she wanted to take the military entrance pretest (i.e., the ASVAB test) just to see how she would do. Destiny did "very well with the pretest, ultimately taking the ASVAB, and I remember [the recruiter] was so excited about my score. I think it was like the 90th percentile." Destiny decided to pursue the Army because "based off [her] high school grade point average, there probably would not have been a college that would have accepted [her]." Destiny was 17 years old at the time and convinced her mother to sign the paperwork so she could enlist in the Army. Destiny said proudly, "And here I am 15 years later with multiple combat tours. I've had a career.

It took me overseas to different continents, then to Afghanistan three times, and all while serving." She went on,

> I'm honestly in awe about my story and my situation because the odds were just always against me. And to see where I'm at now, I'm still kind of in a little bit of disbelief. Of how doors have been opened for me. And I think a little of that can be my personality because I can be positively outspoken, you know, to speak to people, to greet people, to want to network with people, to want to mentor people. Had I not looked to the left and saw a person in an Army uniform, I don't know where I would have been in life, so I'm still actually kind of in awe of how everything played out.

Destiny followed a circuitous path to her current position. She enlisted in the Army and was in communications (i.e., signals). She aspired to be the first female sergeant major of the Army (the highest enlisted position) because, in her words, she was very "hooah," or, in this context, very dedicated to being in the Army as a career. When asked if there were many women in her career field, she explained that there were not and that, "especially in the units [she] served in, the women did not do too well. You had to be very physical fit … so a lot of people were just not cut out for that environment." She clarified that when she entered the Army in 2007, it was a different time, and women did not have as many protections as they have now, especially concerning equal opportunity. Destiny served with very few women in the beginning of her career, and there was no "professionalism in our language use," implying that women soldiers were often denigrated. When asked if she had experienced issues related to being a minority woman in the Army, she stated that she had not:

> I feel like, some days I'm an anomaly, but at the same time, you know it. Things may have been said differently, but I cannot say that someone has openly said something to me that I've had to correct or speak to my leadership because I feel like I've been in really good units that combat those types of situations.

Destiny's dream of becoming the top enlisted member in the Army changed over time through the urging of many mentors who believed she was destined for even greater things: becoming an officer. She was offered an opportunity to attend college through the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program near the Army installation where she was stationed. Since this transition was within a military community, Destiny related it was not a difficult one. The school was very military-friendly and was used to educating soldiers. Attending ROTC allowed her to shift her academic focus from communications to psychology. After graduating with her bachelor's degree, she became a medical logistics officer, which she described as doing "everything that the physicians or clinicians do not do." Now, Destiny was again in school with a new dream of becoming a physician. She transitioned from the active-duty Army to the Reserve so she could attend full time. As she explained,

> It's just been a long road as far as pursuing medicine. But I can say I had a lot of great leadership that told me, "You know, take a three-credit course here" or, you know, "Go to a public speaking course" or things like that. So, I can say from my experience, I've had a lot of great leadership to show me that, having scholastic aptitude is very important.

When reflecting on her transition into higher education, Destiny considered this most recent transition different because she was pursuing pre-med. She explained that her

degree in psychology did not provide a foundation in STEM, making her upper-level science courses challenging. She said, "I have an internship. I have research. I have a lot of requirements on me to include still serving. So, I think from my experience it's a little more complicated than most." Her university "looks highly upon veterans," but she noted that she still had issues with civilian jargon versus military jargon. She described an interaction she had had with a fellow student regard the term "geographical bachelor," which is commonly used in the military to denote a service member living in a separate location from their family, typically in an effort not to uproot the family for a short duration:

> I remember I asked a guy whose wife lived in New York and he's here [in another state], and I was like, "Oh, so you're a geographical bachelor?" And he was like, "What are you saying? Like, I'm cheating [on] my wife?"

When asked if she thought there were any unique challenges for women in the military, she revealed that healthcare was one she was experiencing: "I think everyone in the military has this issue when it comes to health; we kind of sideline that. We put the mission first." She explained that now, being in the Reserve and having the time to focus on school, she could also focus on different aspects of her health. "All the things I did not pay much attention to … sleep, health, [and] mental health." She stated that her primary care physician was phenomenal and encouraged her to undergo routine screenings that she would have simply neglected if she were still on active duty with a mission-first attitude. She explained that women's health made male soldiers uncomfortable:

> I remember I was in a very high OPTEMPO [operations tempo] unit and I fainted. There was a situation where my platoon sergeant was like, "I don't know, maybe

> [she is] on [her] menstrual cycle, I think it was just overly aggressive." And I remember there was a team sergeant that was like, "I don't know, get her some aspirin or something."

Destiny added that people are not comfortable talking about female reproduction: "A lot of [women] are having issues with fertility…. As much as we vocalize sexual assault prevention and equal opportunity, we need to vocalize a lot of these other things that make people uncomfortable to talk about."

Destiny switched identities frequently. She was currently serving in her reserve unit for the next 9 months in individual deployments. She would:

> jump into the uniform and then close off the uniform and then jump back into the educational part. So, that in itself is a challenge, but that's what I will do for the next 9 months, focus on my Army career. And then, because of the medical school application process, I have to wait … it's just a waiting game at that point. But unfortunately, it's like I have to live in, in fear of the unknown again.

Destiny reflected that a big part of her identity was the military and that she identified as a veteran. However, with her transition into the civilian sector,

> that's an opportunity in itself to educate them about military service members. We're all not veterans stricken with PTSD and a lot of these other myths. We can be normal human beings like everyone else. So just having that opportunity again to educate and be educated because I still don't know a lot of civilian terminology. I can't even say I have fully immersed myself in the civilian world because I'm a student. So just reciprocating that educational opportunity [is important].

Kim

Kim was a striking Black woman with long braids and an easy smile. She was tall, very fit, and looked like she had stepped out of a magazine in her professional but fashionable attire. She laughed frequently, and it was clear why people were drawn to her. Kim was unapologetically herself wearing a nose ring and multiple earrings. She served on active duty for 6 years in the Air Force then transitioned to the Air National Guard for another 19 years. Kim was now working full time and pursuing her bachelor's degree at a historically Black university in the southeastern United States. She attended college for a couple of years after high school, but when the funding ran out and it became difficult to remain a student, she joined the active-duty Air Force. Kim worked initially in the communications field. After 5 years in the Air Force, she was given an unaccompanied assignment to a remote location, meaning she could not be accompanied by her family, and her first child was not even 2 years old. Her husband was also given a remote assignment, which meant neither parent could keep their child while serving overseas, so she decided to separate from the military. She lamented that she was

> clueless. There was a [Transition Assistance Program], but it was not nearly what it is today…. There were no resources, there was nothing like veteran service officers; all I was told to do was go to the unemployment office. I was completely lost; I had no idea what I was doing. My disability claim was submitted, and it came back, I think as zero on everything. So, I floundered for a while.

Kim and her daughter had to live with her husband's parents while he was overseas. Even though she was a military spouse and a veteran, she stated there were no resources available to her. When her husband returned, she worked as a substitute teacher

and then as a childcare provider, ultimately joining the Air National Guard. When asked why she had reenlisted in the military, she stated that she

> desperately missed serving. [She] was told the Guard had education benefits, like service-cancelable loans and things that I could use to finish my education, because at that time, information on how to use the G.I. Bill was pretty much nonexistent.

She spoke to an Air National Guard recruiter because her Air Force time would count toward retirement, and there was a unit at the same installation where her husband was assigned. At the time, the Air National Guard did not deploy, so she believed she had stability for her family. Therefore, she enlisted but then found out that the positions open at the base did not qualify for education benefits. However, soon afterwards, she found a full-time, active guard position that would enable her to receive G.I. Bill benefits. She reflected that she felt lost without serving in the military; she did not know "what to do or who she was."

Kim relayed that when she had to separate from the military—or risk leaving her child with no parent present—it devastated her. Her husband's follow-on assignment was to Hawaii, and they struggled financially. They were down to one car and had to ride their bikes everywhere, and even though Kim found work, she did not earn enough to have a measurable impact on family finances. They "were in a lot of debt" because, by the time she opted out of taking a remote assignment herself while serving, the Air Force separated her within a month, leaving her and her family no time to plan for only one income.

Kim spiraled into “a deep depression, to be honest with you, because I just wasn’t prepared … there was no preparation at all.” She expressed that without resources and someone to help her navigate the programs or assistance available to her, she “felt like I had basically been put out. Even though I had served 6 years honorably, I felt like I had been fired.” The quick transition not only impacted Kim and her family financially, putting them on the brink of bankruptcy, but also strained her marriage. Kim and her husband ended up divorcing “because I just didn’t have a clue, I had no direction. I was seriously depressed.”

Though rejoining the military did not necessarily give her the direction she sought, it did give her goals, mainly to become financially stable by having her own career and allowing her the opportunity to finish her education. When she rejoined the military through the Air National Guard, she spent 14 years at one duty station, providing her children with the stability she wanted for them. Her one deployment was to Germany for a couple of months. Being in the Air National Guard allowed her to change career fields, starting in communications then transitioning to human resources.

Kim’s main takeaway from her experience in the military was its “male-dominated and male-centered culture, with regard to—and even down … now this is going to sound silly, but it was even down to how the uniforms fit us. It was like we were an afterthought.” Kim felt that from start to finish, there was more support for male veterans than female veterans. This included finding jobs even after she rejoined the military and was a single parent: “It just seems like there was so much more support for guys.”

When asked if she had experienced sexual harassment, she stated, “Absolutely, on numerous occasions.” At first, Kim was uncomfortable talking about this subject, but she eventually admitted that she had been raped in the dormitories at her first duty station. Kim stated,

> I thought I wouldn’t be believed, and I did not want to be identified. I didn’t want everyone to know.... I didn’t want that to happen…. I came from a very poor home; failure was not an option for me. And that … to disclose, that probably would have ended what I thought was going to be my career at the time, and it would send me back home. And that just wasn’t an option. So, I chose to deal with it the best way I could.

In discussing the military’s pervasive hypermasculine culture at the time, Kim recalled that her first sergeant told her roommate that “women had no business being in the military.” Now, “there is much more awareness and less tolerance,” but she still maintained that women did not speak up because there were never any repercussions. “One might ask why did I rejoin after such a traumatic experience? I felt like I had failed so miserably as a civilian, that was my best option—my only option.” Kim dealt with her assault through running:

> I run like crazy now, and I’m on Zoloft and I see a therapist twice a month. It was every week for a while. I will tell you, over the years, I didn’t deal with it. I just started dealing with it in the last 2½ to 3 years.

Kim felt very proficient in her job, and despite changing career fields when she joined the Air National Guard, she had won multiple awards. She explained that she performed very well in her military career but not so much in her personal life. She

remembered being told that it was hard making chief master sergeant (or chief), the highest enlisted rank. However, even as a junior airman, she recalled

> telling the chief to order really nice furniture because his office was going to be mine someday [Kim laughs]. He laughed at me, and that was my goal. The funny thing is, I might have been joking a tiny, tiny bit, because someone told me I'd be lucky to make tech sergeant.

All branches of the military have enlisted ranks, from E-1 (enlisted, level 1) to E-9, the highest level a military member can obtain without going through the process of becoming an officer. In the Air Force, technical sergeant is the enlisted rank, level 6, and a chief master sergeant is a level 9. Only 1.25% of the enlisted corps makes E-9, as defined by congressional mandate ("Authorized Enlisted End Strength," 2021).

Adding to the difficulty ascending the ranks are exams and review boards for selecting only the best in the service. When discussing why others thought her potential was limited, Kim explained,

> In the Guard, as you get higher and higher in rank, positions are few and far between. When I got there, the number of female senior NCOs [non-commissioned officers], oh gosh, you could count on one hand. At the squadron level, there were none above the rank of master sergeant [E-7] and certainly not an African American female. And so, when they told me I'd be lucky to make tech [Sergeant], I think I had resigned myself to make tech sergeant, and I was good with that because I had a full-time job with benefits [she laughs], and it provided for my need to be able to take care of my children. And I was good with that.

Ultimately, Kim attained the elusive rank of chief master sergeant (E-9): “I was the first African American female to do so in the 40-something year history of my squadron.” Even in achieving this great milestone in her career and in the history of her unit, she explained that she was “treated like I had slept my way to the top. I was treated very badly at first, very badly. There were people who wouldn’t even refer to me as ‘chief’.” When asked what had finally won people over, she explained that even though being dismissed “bothered me to my core…. I had to suck it up … and do the best job I knew how to.” She also earned the position of superintendent of her squadron, even though her group commander (a colonel) tried to keep her from getting the position:

> I wasn’t his pick … one of his good old boys. He even told me to my face I wasn’t his pick. What could I do? So, he tried to keep me from making rank. He even told me that if he had his choice, I’d never make chief.

Kim noted that there was extreme favoritism at play; the group commander sat on the selection board for the superintendent position and thought he would be able to sway the other members. However, as Kim explained, the group commander did not have veto power, and since all the packages came to the entire selection board, he could not simply select whom he wanted. Kim explained that, while there was not blatant retaliation, the repercussions of her being selected for the position included his non-support and his blaming her for everything that went wrong. In meetings, for instance, he would ask Kim questions and would “snicker at my answer.” He was finally forced out, and another group commander was promoted into the position.

Kim commented that the new commander was “absolutely, way more supportive,” not just of her but of her role. He had been a commander at a lower level,

and he understood the advantage of having a strong superintendent over his enlisted forces. “So that helped…. Then it became more of a personal relationship with being able to take off the uniform and have a conversation … which the new group commander respected.” Kim had a better reputation with her new commander who valued her philosophy that a “squadron only gets as much respect as its leadership. So, the squadron functioned better because we had a more supportive commander.”

However, even though at the time she felt respected and had earned her position, Kim felt it was time to retire because leadership is cyclical, and the good-old-boy mentality was still in force. She stated that she was:

> tired and ready to go … and then I don’t know what was going on, but I guess, close to retirement, I started getting really depressed because then I started having this, “Oh my gosh, what am I going to do when I take this uniform off,” and I was thinking back to when I separated the first time. I was ready to go but was terrified of what life was going to look like outside of the gate.

Although Kim was in control of her retirement, she was terrified of

> what I was going to become. So, I started seeing a counselor about a year out, and that helped tremendously with identity issues, and by then I was in a better place financially. I didn’t have to work, but I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up.

Kim was better prepared for her second transition from the military, especially around the USDVA process for securing disability benefits. While still in the military, Kim focused on learning to write better so she could construct her resume. She also went to practice boards to focus on improving her self-presentation: “I thought I could get a job if I

wanted one, but to look for a job, I had no clue because so many things had changed." During her transition from the military, she was surprised to learn that

> there are a lot of people who celebrate veterans and celebrate their service to their country, but it doesn't seem like they can say that [because] when it comes to hiring veterans in positions, and not just entry-level positions but in mid-level positions, I feel like we come out like we're starting from scratch. A lot of times our experience is not taken into account.

During her transition, Kim met with a mental health counselor and started exercising more. She joined a running group for Black women and became more involved in her church, which "helped as far as emotional support." Her running family and her church family comprised support structures during her transition. In characterizing her second transition, she reflected that it was a time of self-discovery. The most difficult part for Kim was figuring out what she wanted to do next. She knew she could get a job, but she wanted to do something worthwhile.

Although Kim joined the Air National Guard to finish her bachelor's degree, she found that, as a single mom to two children, her circumstances were

> absolutely, positively difficult because my divorce was difficult; my children were difficult as a result of the divorce. I was depressed, so I would start-stop, start-stop. And then toward the last few years, I decided to give the G.I. Bill to my children.

She went to a military-to-civilian transition center located in the Southeast to find direction in finishing her degree. She was also looking for "an assessment to help me home in on a second career that would not necessarily be about money but would be

fulfilling." Kim met a veteran success coach who sat down with her, looked at her transcripts, and spoke with her about the work she had done and about finishing her degree. The coach was "very, very, very clear about wanting me to do something for myself, even knowing I had a successful military career." They explored several options for several schools and several programs along with different ways to complete those programs. Once Kim chose a program, the veteran success coach helped her apply for school and routinely checked in about her progress. The coach also "gave me an assessment that matched my interests to actual careers and some of my personality traits." When asked if this program helped her, Kim stated,

> Absolutely, because the whole career coaching thing is something unheard of. It's more personal. When you get TAP [Transition Assistance Program], you get the Department of Labor … no offense to the Department of Labor, [but] they basically give you a drive by: "Here's some words to use on a resume or some numbers to call if you need something." But the success coach honed in on specifically, "What are your needs? Do you need to make a living right now? Do you need or are you in a place to go to school right now?" They also checked to see if there were other resources you need. "Are you okay with housing? Are you okay with food, childcare, money, that kind of thing? Are you OK with your USDVA benefits?"—so in being able to ask questions to a person face-to-face and knowing that those other resources are available in the same place, it's magnificent.

When asked about whether she felt there were unique challenges to being a woman in the military, Kim replied,

> Trying to balance being a mother and being a single mother and being in the military is very challenging, especially when, you know, kids, activities, and kids get sick. I would say that most men don't necessarily understand having to choose between going to work and taking care of a child.

Kim added that because the military is a male-dominated field, it was sometimes a "'boys will be boys' culture, and they just don't necessarily think about women in the things they say and do."

In reflecting on sexual assault, Kim said that even though there is education, there is "still this belief that if she's been drinking, or depending on what she's wearing, she brought it on herself." Kim said she would advise others

> to prepare to separate from the day you get in. Now, with there being so many resources available—financial planning, financial management—take full advantage of tuition assistance as much as you can. I'd even tell some of them to delay having a family until they are better prepared to take care of them. But I think the biggest thing is to prepare for separation the day you come in. That means … you see flyers on how to prepare for retirement and how to do this … separation can come suddenly; medical retirement can come suddenly.

As for her advice to other women in the military, she said it would be "to fight to be yourself even though it's very male-centric. Don't try to be one of the boys. Be intentional about building a good support system … be very intentional." Kim explained that in repeating the Air Force core values of excellence, integrity, and service, over and over, "you may not understand when people don't uphold them … and you can't do

anything about it … you can only do something about yourself … and you have to be true to yourself. Uphold them yourself, be responsible for yourself."

When asked if Kim identified herself as a veteran, she exclaimed,

> Absolutely, I'm proud of it…. It was a very huge part of my life, and I identify myself as a veteran…. I'm proud of it, and I am proud of my service to my country. Yeah, I'm proud of it, especially since I achieved what very few have.

Kelsey

Kelsey appeared young, as if she may have still been in high school. She was attractive, described herself as petite, and had a "girl next door" vibe. As with the other participants, she was not someone one would immediately assume had served in the military. During her interview, Kelsey was in her home office and taking a break from her own schoolwork. I could hear children in the background. Kelsey had completed a ROTC program at a university in the southeastern United States, and she entered the Army as a second lieutenant with her bachelor's degree. After separating from the military, she earned her master's degree in clinical psychology from a large university on the West Coast near where she grew up. At the time of the study, she had nearly completed a doctorate in military health psychology from a school in the Southwest.

When asked what had made her want to join the Army, she laughed and said she randomly received a letter from the Military Academy (i.e., West Point):

> I remember my mom looking at me and saying, "You know, you could never do that. You would hate that." And I remember saying, "Why? What makes you think I couldn't be in the Army? I mean, I played a lot of sports. I did well in school."

She recalled that the letter piqued her curiosity. None of her family members had served in the military, nor did she know anyone in the military. However, she learned that West Point had a summer leadership seminar for rising seniors in high school, so she applied and was selected. Kelsey said she "went for a couple of weeks to just sort of see what military life was like." She said she absolutely loved being there and knew going into the military was what she wanted, but she did not necessarily want to go to West Point. Kelsey began looking at ROTC programs. Her mother's comments about her suitability for the military sparked her interest, and in looking into it herself, she said, "I know it sounds cheesy, but eventually the idea of being part of something bigger than myself. And being able to, you know, join such an important group with people who are like-minded right after college." All these factors appealed to her.

She spent her first year of service overseas, in Korea, which she said she absolutely loved: "I felt very lucky to be there. It was a very unique experience. I love to travel. So just being there was really exciting for me." Part of what made her first assignment so positive, despite being so far from her own country and her family, was having

> a lot of great mentors at my first duty station that really took me in and helped me become what I felt was a true professional in my job. So, I had mentorship from multiple individuals who really went out of their way. Both male and female, who really just helped me be the best I possibly could.

Kelsey served in a division-level expeditionary sustainment command working with many senior individuals. This team "always kind of took me in and really gave me opportunities." Her first assignment helped her feel confident moving to her next duty

station in the southeastern United States. However, she did not have a similar experience in her next unit.

Although Kelsey was a human resources officer, she was part of an intelligence unit. She was the only lieutenant and therefore the most junior officer: “What was interesting, we had different individuals who didn’t understand what positive leadership was.” She explained that though she knew there is positive and negative in everything, she found it difficult to find support, especially in advocating for her soldiers. She stated that it was “definitely an environment where people were busy trying to please the people above them and didn’t think about taking care of soldiers.” She spoke of the constant battle and said it surprised her that, for the first time, “being a woman really kind of hindered me and my ability to speak up and advocate for my soldiers.... I was told many times to take my emotions out of it.” Reflecting upon this time, she articulated,

> If I was a male lieutenant, would you say that to me, too? And we all know the answer to that question. But, even with female leadership, which was surprising to me, they just wanted to fit in with the guys instead of advocating for what was right.

Though she described the experience as difficult, she added,

> I definitely made the best out of it, and it was a great learning experience to figure out how to stand up for myself. I know it is right to create personal and professional boundaries and stick to them. But it definitely was not the healthiest environment.

Kelsey was the only female junior officer in this unit, and while she was stationed there, she had a company commander and then a battalion commander who were also women.

She did not get a lot of support from the battalion commander and the command sergeant major (highest enlisted position) when trying to take care of her soldiers. Kelsey said that many small contributing factors had led to this assignment not being as fulfilling as her first one in Korea. First, morale was very low in her unit, and there was little unit cohesion because some of the soldiers operated on 24-hour shifts, and the rest were on different shifts in a different building: "There was a lot of separation … and rarely did we have all our soldiers together." This created a divide between leadership and the rest of the unit. Leadership was "so worried about how to check the block for those necessary Army things, like certain training, like going to the range [for weapons qualification]." She explained that due to the nature of her unit's mission, many soldiers were exempt from having to qualify with a weapon, but leadership insisted, pulling them from their duty of translating real-time intelligence. She also explained that during the middle of a 12-hour shift, her soldiers would have a mandatory physical training formation that fit leadership's schedule but not the operational schedule. She even commented that they were pulled from their duties for personal asset inventories when her solution was to meet with them one-on-one when they were available to do it herself. According to Kelsey, leadership was

> very stuck in "This is the Army, and we need to do it the Army way, and there is no flexibility," even though it was absolutely taking away from our soldier's ability to do their job, which I think is arguably more important than CONUS [continental United States] military installations because we were working in real time with deployed units 24/7 in the Middle East.

She said leadership was far removed from the soldiers and simply "didn't care." She kept advocating for the soldiers to not have to report to a formation after a 12-hour night shift, "that there were different ways we can meet them where they're at." Instead, Kelsey was met with resistance by her superior, for whom checking administrative blocks was more important.

Kelsey had always been told,

> "The best part about the military is that you will move every three years. So, even if you don't like somewhere, you will move soon. The worst part is that if you like somewhere, you will move every three years to go somewhere new." I was really planning on staying in a lot longer.

Kelsey was in a car accident and was medically retired, which shocked her. Since her separation from the Army came out of nowhere, she did not have any time to plan and think about what she wanted to do next. She said she

> was a little lost at first and know I didn't want to jump into some big career that I wasn't passionate about, and I knew I had to go back to school to do anything that I really wanted to do.

With Kelsey separating in November and graduate schools not starting until the following August, she "had a large chunk of time to kind of figure out who I was and what that looked like." After leaving her unit under less than favorable terms, she was separated from the Army in less than 120 days after her accident. It certainly left a bad taste in her mouth, and she was trying to find something to keep busy—most of which she was overqualified for—until she could start graduate school: "I definitely felt lost, so I started grad school at a period of time that was very difficult for me."

Kelsey had always been interested in psychology; she was a peer mentor in high school and, in college, was involved with the counseling center, advocating for students: "Psychology has always been a passion of mine…. I knew I wanted to pursue grad school in psychology, I just always thought it would be in the military." Kelsey applied to and attended a school where she separated from the Army since her husband was still in the service. When asked about her transition into the school, she stated that it was great due to the "very robust student veteran and military student success center there." Since her master's program was closely tied to the veterans' center, she was able to "really channel my passion for the military and servicemembers and veterans with what I was doing clinically." Kelsey helped other military members transition to student life, conducting many outreach programs and lectures, and she was glad she "got to channel my passion more, and I really got to help others through the same process that was difficult for me."

She then applied to and was accepted into a doctoral program in psychology centering on military research. In fact, hers is the only program in the United States focusing on military health psychology. Although the institution was a good fit, she struggled to acclimate to the scholastic environment due to COVID-19 since all her classes had moved online. Additionally, she had divorced and was single and on her own. While she described her situation as "definitely lonely at first" because she had no friends or family nearby, she also found "that what I was doing … and starting [her degree] was empowering." Even though she was not near friends, she had great support from all the friends she had made during her master's program and many from the Army. Kelsey described her support system as being "all over, just not locally."

Kelsey had emerged from the process stronger. She had remarried and was graduating and having a baby girl in the same month. She and her husband were also looking to move as Kelsey was applying for faculty positions somewhere in the eastern United States to be closer to her husband's family. Her husband had several job opportunities, but they were keeping their options open.

When describing her transition from the military, Kelsey indicated that she felt lucky not to have any overly negative experiences like some of her peers. However, she believed a big part of "why I got medically retired was because I was female. I definitely think they probably would have given me a chance … to rehabilitate me before pushing me out, had I not been emotional in the moment… I was in tears" after meeting with her doctor when she was told they were initiating a medical board. This was not what Kelsey wanted, nor was she prepared for it. The doctor simply told her, "'There's no need for you to be here.' I remember being like, 'Well, I wonder if I was, you know, a 6-foot-4 male sitting here. If you would say the same thing?'" Kelsey felt the treatment was unfair and questioned if she would have been treated the same way if she had been male. She also remembered

> always feeling like my male counterparts sort of got respect off the bat, and they really had to do things to lose it, whereas I had to earn it, and I was never really afforded the opportunity to just be given it based on my position or my rank. It was more like, "You want to play with the boys now? You're going to prove yourself."

While Kelsey "felt it was a little bit more unequal,"

> the other part of me knows that that's what I signed up for, and I kind of appreciated the challenge and didn't mind having to prove myself. I think it made me a better person and a better leader. So, all in all, I wouldn't say it's necessarily a bad thing.

Though, as she said, the military likes to think it has changed and become more open-minded,

> recent studies are still showing that, like, 70% of graduates from basic training say that their training was lower quality because women were there…. You can't get rid of those underlying feelings that people carry into their service. There is still lots of leadership out there that are the old military thought process. "Women shouldn't be in combat. Women shouldn't be in leadership. Women shouldn't be here."

Despite feeling grateful for her time in the military, Kelsey said she would "never go back." When asked if she identified as a veteran, she indicated she did:

> I think with a lot of us, our experiences kind of inform our research. So, a lot of my research is with PTSD and chronic pain and the overlap there … so if I'm applying for grants or looking for collaborations with researchers, being able to identify as a veteran myself, I think it helps more than it hurts, so I'm always happy to do that.

Kelsey said that if her daughter wanted to join the military, "I really think I would support her. I think it would depend on what kind of person she is, her own personality, and her own reason for wanting to do it. It would depend on her independence." However, Kelsey added that she would encourage her daughter to get a college degree

first so that she could be set up for success. Kelsey would recommend ROTC and said she felt “very lucky to have been an officer and not to have endured some of the things I know our enlisted female counterparts have to endure … but I definitely think I’d be supportive”:

> I really, I feel like my military experience is such a large part of who I am even still, and I'm really grateful for the opportunities they gave me to learn how to how to speak for myself, how to talk in front of groups of people, how to advocate for myself, how to work with groups, how to train, how to lead—just so many life skills that I've seen have paid off tenfold on the civilian side of things to help me really feel like I have a good handle on. You can do something like a dissertation. You know, it seems like such a benign, unrelated thing being able to be focused and to plan and to coordinate meetings with your committee and your advisors and knowing how to speak up for yourself but be respectful of the people in the room. And it's all been really helpful. So, I absolutely would be supportive. But probably more supportive if you wanted to go the officer route.
>
> The one thing I just thought of was, I think, I think maybe one of the telling pieces is kind of how or why somebody left the military and kind of what that looks like. As I'm thinking about it, you know, if I was able to leave on my own terms, how that would have changed how I felt about my transition, how it would have changed. How I kind of was able to plan for myself and what that looked like. I think that's a really, really big piece of my transition. And I feel like [I’ve] very much lucked out being able to go into programs pretty much off the bat.

> But there were many, many months where I didn't really know what that was going to look like, and I think the way that I was pushed out and the way that I was kind of faced with, you know, you're just equipment that's not working anymore. It impacted my mental health kind of moving forward, but also my physical health as well, like it definitely did not lend itself to me, really taking a handle on my physical health, looking for rehabilitative type programs. I kind of just, kind of felt like, "Well, I'm just broken and so there's nothing I can do about it." And it took me a while to switch my mentality [and] really advocating for myself within my own health and what that looks like, too. So, I'm biased because I'm coming from a health psychology program, right? But when I think about the health aspect of it, physical and mental health transition as well. So, for whatever network, that's kind of, that's the underlying person. I think is just my kind of battle with my medical providers and getting out and what that looks like, but I'm sure that's different for everybody.

Upon exiting the military, the participants felt broken or lost—a prominent theme that emerged from the interviews. However, when women veterans transition into higher education, this sense of loss can be an opportunity for them to find their purpose and their identity if only administrators know where to find women veteran students and what programs to implement to help ensure their success. The overarching themes relevant to practitioners within higher education are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION OF THEMES

From the analysis of the video and audio recordings of the interviews and the transcriptions, several themes emerged. Daiute's (2014) dynamic narrating data collection was used, in keeping with the recommended phases of coding. The data revealed individuality, a key component of veteran critical theory, which posits that no veteran is the same (Phillips, 2014). In addition to individuality, other themes were common to most if not all the participants. The emergent themes, while overt in some of the interviews, were implied in others. The research paid attention to not just what was said, but how it was said, as well as what was omitted. As the interview transcripts were coded, repetitious codes emerged. These consistent codes were then binned into categories and grouped thematically. Themes were substantiated with relevant data and participant quotes. These resultant themes are described in the following sections. While none of the participants shared the same experiences, the first salient theme within the participant narratives was the grit, or persistence, of these five women, not just in their military careers but in their educational pursuits.

Grit

All five participants had someone in their life who had challenged them in their pursuit of a military career—a theme codified in the title of this dissertation, "*I dare you to underestimate me*." Though the latter is not a quote from any of the five participants, being underestimated and then rising to the challenges of the military and education

represented a recurring theme. For instance, Stephanie's brother, who was a Marine, told her she would never make it in the Marine Corps: "So, I wanted to prove them wrong." When she joined the Marine Corps, her brother said she would "never make staff sergeant [E-5]." She explained, "It was a challenge, but I just stood up to the challenge and kept pushing forward." Stephanie went on to become a warrant officer in the Marine Corps, exceeding even her own initial expectations. For Kelsey, her mother had said she would never make it in the Army and would hate it. Yet, Kelsey loved the Army and serving her country, especially overseas. Destiny, "a three-time high school dropout [and] very proud of it," happened to see an "Army recruiter that was sitting outside of the guidance counselor's office." The recruiter challenged Destiny with the Army motto "Be all you can be … in the Army." She accepted the challenge and was now pursuing medical school. Destiny attributed her grit to her military experience:

> I would go back to the mentorship, sponsorship, and the tools that we learned in the military. So, like right now, I'm in organic chemistry, and we're all having mental breakdowns, but I just laugh. They're like, "We don't understand … how are you not, like …?" [Destiny chuckles]. I would say it's the tools that the military has taught me. So, like resiliency, I think all of those, all those tools are very important. All of the military training. We call it resilience training now, so that has helped.

Erin, a Caribbean native, originally enlisted in the Army to help with nursing school. After being stalled at many levels, she was finally supported in her pursuit of a master's degree and was now a commissioned officer with a doctorate degree and approaching military retirement. Kim, who was told she would never make technical sergeant (E-9),

achieved the highest enlisted rank of chief master sergeant (E-9)—the first African American female to do so in the history of her unit.

These five women were not dissuaded by the many obstacles and naysayers they faced but were determined and undaunted in striving for and attaining their goals. All the women could justifiably take credit for their successes, and all of them attributed their success to mentorship while in the military.

Mentorship

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the interviews was the importance of mentorship. While mentors did not have to look like the mentee, it did help if they shared a common background. Destiny explained,

> There were a couple of sergeant majors and a couple of officers. I had my battalion commander because I enlisted for a while, and my last job when I was enlisted, I was a signal [communications] soldier. So, I was on a two-star [general] communication team, and he told me, he said, "I have a scholarship for you to go to Reserve Officer Training Corps [ROTC]." I had this idea in my head that I was going to be the first female sergeant major of the Army. And I was just very, as we call it in the army, very "hooah." So, my education at that time came second. But he convinced me, and I'm so glad he did. I was able to commission as an officer and here I am years later.

Similarly, Erin commented that she

> had several mentors. I forced several people to help me. Yeah, I was lucky. It is strange that individuals are always seeing if you're not enlisted material, you are officer material. So, people were willing to help. Shockingly enough, they were

not people who were assigned to help, like my supervisor. But yes, I had several mentors and coaches that helped.

Erin now mentored and coached others: “They don’t ask me to. I kind of take people under my wing and offer a lot of advice.”

Kelsey stated that she “had mentorship from multiple individuals who really went out of their way. Both male and female, who really just helped me be the best I possibly could.” Stephanie also said she “had a great mentor; he was a sergeant major. He said to add something more to my package each year, which I did, whether it was taking another class, increasing my teacher peer score, or taking on different responsibilities.” She credited this mentor with helping her achieve her goal of making warrant officer. Likewise, Kim credited her new group commander with “being more supportive of the role of the superintendent and the senior NCO,” which allowed her to excel.

While having grit, being resilient, and finding mentors along the way are positive attributes, what appeared to still be an issue for all the participants was sexual harassment and in one case, sexual assault, while serving in the military.

Sexual Harassment and Assault

Kim was the only participant who admitted to being “raped in the dorms at my first duty station…. [I] thought I wouldn’t be believed, and I did not want to be identified.” However, the other four participants expressed the pervasiveness of sexual harassment in the military. Stephanie stated, “There was a lot of racism and sexism going on and a lot of sexual assault.” She described her work area as one where “the guys [would] have naked photos of women pinned around the office and have conversations about innuendo and sexuality, and you know it was a lot.” Destiny mentioned when she

enlisted in the Army, there was not "a lot of the protection that we have now with SARC [sexual assault response coordinators] and EO [equal opportunity]." Erin, who was still serving in the active Army, commented as "a female [she was] always worried about assault and sexual harassment," the threat of which made her "hypervigilant, aware of things, [and] overly worried about everything."

Identity as a Veteran

Though the literature has indicated most women veterans do not self-identify as veterans, this was not the case with the five participants. While Stephanie did not choose to self-identify early on because listing her military career on her resume resulted in no job prospects, she ultimately embraced her veteran identity. When asked if she identified as a veteran, Kim was vehement: "Absolutely, I'm proud of it. It was a very huge part of my life, and I identify myself as a veteran…. I am proud of my service to my country." Destiny declared, "I'm very proud and loud about my service. My fellow students and professors give us a lot of praise because of our experiences. And they're like, 'I'm sure you can get through this because you've served.'" Kelsey also "identifies as a veteran…. I think it helps more than it hurts." Erin was still serving in the military, so officially she was not a veteran.

Experiences as a Veteran Woman of Color

Four of the five participants were women of color who had served or were still serving in the military; therefore, their experiences were different than the researchers. Destiny stated,

> I still feel like, as women, we need to be more proud and more vocal about our experiences because what I notice is a lot of people simply don't know. Just like

> our backgrounds, we are both minority women, but I'm a woman of color, and we do have differences even as minorities…. So, people might not know what might be offensive to me or what could be offensive to you. So, I feel like … we are not given these voices for our stories to be heard, we need to ensure that we are educating people as well. And I feel like that makes our experiences better when we are doing a lot of education to our peers and to our colleagues.

Erin still faced the daily challenge of being a woman of color in the military:

> I think one of the tough things is when you ask people for help. I don't know if they don't take you seriously or it's a stigma that they don't really think you're going to complete anything. So, the people who actually helped me were people of color who were in positions of … I won't say positions of power, but they had a lot of power and influence. So they were, they were senior and had influence in the departments because you had to get paperwork signed. So, I had to get a memo from a nurse, a senior nurse, from the sergeant major. So, without those senior mentors and coaches of color to speak on my behalf, things would not have happened.

Stephanie alluded to issues related to her race as she was one of the only Black women she saw in the Marine Corps, implying that she had faced significant challenges. Likewise, Kim experienced considerable challenges as she rose through the ranks of the "old boys club" of the National Guard, but she did not specifically attribute any roadblocks to her race; rather, she implied it was the intersectionality of her race and gender. While all the participants faced difficulties and barriers within the military, all

three veterans who had transitioned completely out of the military stated that they had struggled with their transition to civilian life.

Transition out of the Military

Stephanie admitted that she "was not prepared when I retired." However, she retired in the military community where she was last stationed in the Marine Corps, so to her, "the transition was not really a big deal because you're still surrounded by military, and you still have access to the base and all the facilities. You're still with all the same people." However, when Stephanie's brother became ill and she returned home to care for him,

> that's when my eyes opened to the transition process. I didn't know anything from the transition assistance program; it was only three days and not a whole lot of information was provided on what to do when you get to your home state, or who to look up, or what organizations are out there to support you. There was nothing. So, when I came back [home], I was pretty much on my own. I didn't have any connections to the military.

Kelsey transitioned out of the military quickly because of an automobile accident and the Army's decision to separate her from service instead of rehabilitating her. She lamented that her transition

> kind of came out of nowhere, and even when the process started, I did not have time to sort of plan and think about what I wanted to do. Ever since my senior year of high school, I was joining the Army, and that was what I was going to do ... I was a little lost at first.

Kim noted that her greatest difficulty during her transition "was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. How to look for a job, and how to look for a job where I wasn't just making money, but I was doing something worthwhile." Destiny transitioned from the active-duty Army to the Reserve, and reflected that her transition was seamless, although technically she had not completely transitioned out of the military. However, she shared that, on the day of our interview, her unit had

> a USDVA rep here that just gave us a whole class about going to the USDVA and making sure your USDVA disability percentage. I was able to talk about education. In the Army, this information is mandatory. You have to go through these transition courses to make sure that you're set up. Whether that's education or entrepreneurship, they really want you to be a very successful veteran once you depart service.

Like Destiny, Erin had not transitioned out of the military but was planning to within the next 2 years. When asked about her transition, she commented,

> I'm a senior person. Imagine one of the junior people who said they have no choice in what they have and no voice about what they are going through. [That is] probably why I am not going to stick around. The military is using so many people. I don't know when we're going to wake up. You know this mass exodus around here? Just dropping. It's just people—people leaving like crazy because we thought we would have the support that we should have. We need to figure out … working 14- to 16-hour days … used to be my life, but I no longer want it to be.

Transition from the military was not the only significant transition these five women faced. Four of the five had transitioned into doctoral programs, while one sought to complete her bachelor's degree. All had vastly different experiences with their higher education institutions.

Transition into Higher Education

> Kelsey's transition into her doctoral program was very positive. As she said,
>
> They have a very robust student veteran and military student success center there. Their program, their clinical master's, is tied closely with the veteran center, so I was able to really channel my passion for the military and service members and veterans into what I was doing clinically. So, I got to take a lot of clients that were veterans, and I got to work in the student success center helping them transition from military to student life and what that looks like for them. I went out on a lot of outreach programs and put together lectures and programs and things like that…. I really got to help others through the same process that was difficult for me.

Kim, however, transitioned back into college after she retired from the military and found "working full time and going to school was difficult, especially since it had been so many years since I had attended college. I'm not going to say this is easy … especially biology." She found that although her university touted being-military friendly, she did not get any support, so eventually she stopped attending.

Similarly, Stephanie entered her doctoral program once she moved back home and paid out of pocket the first year because she did not realize she had education benefits:

> It was like graduation when I realized that there were other military people in my classes. There was no organization. There was no student organization, and people didn't understand. You know, the dynamics of having somebody who had served and had served in combat. In the classroom, they weren't very accommodating with disabilities. It was terrible.

By contrast, Destiny found that her school was supportive because "they have a military and diplomatic affairs section. So, working with them, they made me feel very comfortable about my transitioning, offering me experiences still within the military that transitioned into the civilian sector." Likewise, Erin found her civilian institution worked with her and was "very supportive," especially since she moved to the West Coast and was attending her doctoral program in the Southeast. "I had to petition the deans of the programs of the school to give me exceptions to their usual policies." She also had to fly back and forth to attend school on weekends. She admitted humbly, "You have no issues with civilian institutions when you're a good student, but personally, I was good money for them" since Erin funded her education.

Gender Roles in the Military: Women and Military Masculinity

All five participants expressed that they had experienced the hypermasculine culture of the military. Destiny spoke about one incident that occurred while she was serving in a demanding unit with frequent deployments. She had fainted, and her "team sergeant said, 'Get her some aspirin or something.'" She said the male soldiers were uncomfortable around women, especially "having conversations about female reproduction."

Stephanie was repeatedly told, "'Women don't belong in the Marine Corps.… You should be in a kitchen somewhere.'" Likewise, Kim remembered "having a first sergeant that told my roommate that women had no business being in the military, and there were no repercussions for him saying that." When Kelsey was separated from the military, she wondered, "How fair is this treatment? Would you really treat me the same if I was a male?" Kelsey also recalled that in every leadership position she held, she

> always [felt] like my male counterparts got respect off the bat, and they really had to do things to lose it. Whereas I had to earn it, and I was never really afforded the opportunity to just be given it based on my position or my rank.

Kelsey felt that she had been treated differently and had the impression of always being tested: "'You want to play with the boys now? You're going to prove yourself.'… There were always little comments like, 'Keep your emotions out of if.'" Erin also saw the disparity in opportunities. When she requested additional education and training, she was told, 'We can't afford to let you go.' However, she observed White males who had joined her unit after being allowed to attend other courses. At the time, she thought that, since she could not get support to reach her professional goals as a Black woman, she should separate from the military, but she was convinced to stay and try another nursing specialty, which opened the opportunities she sought.

Mental Health

Erin shared that she was "easily triggered by certain events…. I'm constantly trying to stay grounded." She mentioned her

> defense mechanism is avoidance. I avoid anything with feelings. It took me a while to realize I needed to address it, and when I did try to address it, guess

what? You can't get an appointment anywhere because everybody else in the world is struggling. So, I just keep busy.

Kelsey discussed her transition, not knowing for months what her future would look like. Considering the way she had been "pushed out" of the military, she felt, "I'm just broken, and so there's nothing and I can do about it." Kelsey stated her sudden transition impacted both her mental and physical health. Kim had only started dealing with her military sexual trauma "in the last 2 ½ to 3 years" and "sees a therapist twice a month. It was every week for a while." After Stephanie moved home to take care of her brother, "it became obvious that I needed help. I don't know how to do this by myself." However, based on Stephanie's experience with the USDVA, she decided to find her own health care as she found the care for women veterans lacking. Destiny commented that women ignored their own mental and physical health to focus on the mission. When she transitioned to the Army Reserve, Destiny found she had additional time to focus on herself. As one of the youngest participants, Destiny indicated the Army had focused on resiliency, worked to destigmatize seeking mental health services, and prevent sexual harassment and assault.

While all the participants in this study had succeeded professionally, they also struggled with the transition from the military into higher education. The transition was easier when attending colleges and universities on or near military installations where the institution was familiar with veteran students. While not applicable to the entire population of women veteran students, themes related to the negative impacts of subordinating one's own physical and psychological health for the military mission and being invisible as a veteran were salient among the interviewees. However, for all five

participants, despite their challenges, they had both external and internal motivation to succeed.

Chapter VI

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Phillip and Lincoln's (2017) veterans critical theory framework provided the primary lens for viewing the participant interviews in this study. As VCT centers the individuality and intersectionality of veterans' identities, the methodology of getting to know student veterans and learning their stories without attempting to homogenize the group allowed the participants to voice the unique phenomena they experienced. The most prominent message articulated by the participants in this narrative inquiry was that despite being "broken" and facing challenges, the participants had created their own successes. While all the participants experienced marginalization based on gender—best explained through the application of critical feminist theory—four of the five participants were also women of color. VCT, which comprises many theoretical components, allowed critical race theory to be overlaid on participants' individual stories and perspectives, lending greater depth and complexity to the narratives. Also, as neither gender nor race could be considered a discrete factor in the experiences the participants faced in the military, the theory of intersectionality was also applicable. Along with civilian privilege, most participants had difficulty transitioning from the military into civilian life and into higher education. Civilian privilege was most obvious in Stephanie's narrative, in which she expressed a difficult transition to her doctoral program since the university was not part of a military community. In addition, when seeking employment, Stephanie felt compelled to remove her military experience from her resume to be considered for jobs.

VCT provided an open aperture for viewing the participant's narratives through the lens of multiple critical theories.

Veterans Critical Theory: Contraindicative of Deficit Thinking

Overall, society tends not to view veterans on a continuum in society; rather, they are perceived as a binary, as either broken or heroes (Phillips & Lincoln, 2017). However, women student veterans—and veterans more generally—represent a wide spectrum and cannot be constrained within a single category. Specifically for women veterans, research has focused on their challenges: sexual harassment and assault, increased rates of homelessness and suicide, and mental and behavioral health struggles (Baker et al., 2023a; NCVAS, 2015; Resnick et al., 2012; Rivera & Johnson, 2014; VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans, 2016). Yet, though the participants in this study had experienced some of these issues, they emerged as victorious and successful, a finding not typical in other studies. For example, four of the five participants had earned master's degrees, two had completed their doctorates, and one was just months away from completing her doctoral studies; one participant was in the middle of finals week for her pre-med degree and applying to medical schools. One participant was pursuing her bachelor's degree after a successful career in the military, having achieved the highest enlisted rank and being the first Black female in a senior position in her unit. While all had experienced sexual harassment—with one participant revealing that she was a military sexual trauma survivor—all had overcome these obstacles and succeeded in their respective careers and educational pursuits.

Other critical theoretical components of VCT were applicable to some or all of interviewees. The most relevant of these was critical feminist theory.

Critical Feminist Theory

Critical feminist theory is particularly useful in investigating hypermasculine organizations such as the military. Even with significant strides around inclusion—namely the opening of all military career fields to women—the participant interviews made clear that there is still a pervasive military culture that marginalizes women. Stephanie and Kim were both told outright that women do not belong in the military. Kelsey and Erin mentioned having to fight for the same opportunities that were doled out to men. Kelsey also believed that, had she been male, the Army would have assisted in her rehabilitation instead of medically separating her. Destiny was the only participant who did not face an overtly hypermasculine culture, but she knew it was always in the background.

As Goodman (2019) wrote, "In the face of dominant structures, institutional forces, oppressive ideologies, and historical atrocities, much feminism must seek out possibilities of change." (p. 5). The five women interviewees embodied possibility, overcoming the male-dominated structure of military institutions, with all serving as catalysts for change by virtue of their success and perseverance. All five women had served post-9/11 and had been deployed overseas, with both Stephanie and Erin serving multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mortars and explosive devices do not discriminate based on gender or race, and these women survived life-threatening dangers and overcame the military's pervasive hypermasculine culture, finding meaning and excelling in their service.

Critical Race Theory

Four of the five study participants were Black women and faced discrimination and marginalization based on their race. According to Delgado and Stefanic (2017), critical race theory examines the relationship between race and power and is applicable to all marginalized races and ethnicities. Built on the tenets of radical feminism, CRT evolved after equality stalled following the civil rights movement. While the military has touted its efforts to shape social reforms and eliminate racism in integrating the armed services (Moskos & Butler, 1996), the four Black women interviewees indicated that racial equality is still a "stretch goal" for the military. All four highlighted a pervasive, subversive culture of White males getting opportunities that women, especially women of color, do not; however, instead of accepting this as reality, they all strove to work harder to prove themselves. Due to the intersectionality of gender and race, it was difficult to parse out whether the discrimination and marginalization the four women of color faced was the result of being a woman or Black. However, their mindset of overcoming whatever obstacles were placed in their way allowed these women student veterans to succeed not only in the military, but also in their educational pursuits. While race appeared to be a factor in the opportunities presented to the four Black women, it was difficult for them to describe the obstacles and discrimination they faced as being based on their gender, their race, or both.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality of race and gender. For the four participants who identified as Black women, the two identities of being woman and Black were not mutually exclusive, nor could they be disentangled. Erin

noted that While males were given opportunities she sought, despite the men having less experience. Kim described her unit overtly thwarting her goals of achieving higher military rank and position. Stephanie was turned down nine times for promotion to a senior rank because of a White male who served on the promotion board. These three women felt discriminated against; whether this discrimination was based on their gender, their race, or the intersection of the two, they all felt marginalized in the military.

Implications for Administrators: Veteran Focus

Though the study results are certainly applicable to efforts by the Department of Defense to discourage discrimination, this section offers recommendations to higher education administrators for ensuring that their campuses not only are veteran-friendly, but, more specifically, meet the needs of women student veterans. Several participants did not struggle with their transition into higher education because, in their words, their campuses were either on or near military installations; conversely, those institutions where participants struggled to assimilate did not have military programs or someone dedicated to assisting military students. For Stephanie, who attended school in a large metropolitan city at a university without many military students, it was only when another student veteran connected her to someone in the registrar's office that she became aware of her education benefits and how to use them. Military-focused programs, such as the one Kelsey attended, or visible veteran spaces on campus, similar to what Kelsey and Stephanie experienced during their master's programs, are ideal. Student veterans need to know who their point of contact is to help them navigate the maze of higher education institutions.

Community Resources

Campus veteran centers or military-focused programs may not be viable for some higher education institutions. However, leveraging resources in the community or at the state level (as Kim used during her educational transition) could allow for the sharing of resources in public–private partnerships. Kim described her veteran success coach, who helped her define her goals and then presented several programs and institutions that met her educational and career goals. The success coach was "agnostic," not representing a specific university, and kept Kim's needs and goals at the forefront. Such a veteran-first model may not seem lucrative for higher education institutions seeking increased enrollments, but, as Kim witnessed through her experience with her success coach, a student veteran may start in a 2-year college and then matriculate into a 4-year institution. A collaborative environment in which multiple institutions work together often results in a win-win for the student veteran and for enrollment for the two institutions—instead of a potential dropout if the student veteran was not ready for a 4-year institution.

Veteran-Friendly Policies and Practice

Another key takeaway from this study centers on veteran-friendly policies. While all institutions that receive G.I. Bill funding must have military-friendly policies, such as allowing for incomplete courses when a military member is mobilized or has military duty, Erin's experience went much further than simply policy. When Erin had to move cross-country and was in the middle of her doctoral program, her university allowed her to attend virtually, which was a novel concept at the time. The institution also allowed her to take exams outside the normal schedule based on her shift work in the hospital for which she was working; she was allowed to take exams early or take a different version

of the exam. At times she would need to travel back to the university for labs, but her professors and the program chair and dean accommodated her unique requirements so she could finish the program and graduate. This flexibility was also beneficial to Erin since it meant she did not have to start over at a new university, to which few credits would have transferred. Erin commented that being a good student and communicating with her professors helped secure the accommodation required due to military service. Thus, while flexible institutional practices would assist student veterans, the student veteran must also play an active role in their education.

Designated Woman Point of Contact

Another key takeaway centered on the importance of having a woman point of contact at higher education institutions who work specifically with women student veterans. Stephanie had felt comfortable working with the woman in the registrar's office who checked on her every semester. Likewise, Kim, who had experienced military sexual trauma, stated she only felt comfortable because her success coach was also female, though not a veteran. Some women veterans, because of their military experiences with discrimination, harassment, or trauma, may not feel comfortable working with a man. If a higher education institution is truly committed to serving women veterans, then they should consider hiring women points of contact. Similarly, not all women are comfortable joining a larger student veteran group or using a veteran's lounge since these are typically used by male veterans. While creating a distinct space for veterans may not be feasible for some institutions, the participant interviews highlighted the value of separate veteran groups or mentorships.

Mentorship

All five participants mentioned the importance of mentors, especially those with whom they shared some commonality. Erin's mentors, though not women, were Black. Kim's mentor and success coach was also a Black female. Kelsey did not find mentorship with other women but did have male mentors who shared her military skillset. Stephanie's mentor recommended her for promotion (after nine previous attempts) when she was finally selected for warrant officer. Creating mentorship or peer support programs in which students and mentors can mutually determine the best match would benefit woman student veterans and their higher education institution.

Mental and Behavioral Health Resources

Another critical area of focus for higher education institutions in serving women student veterans is ensuring access to mental and behavioral health resources. Erin mentioned that she felt "hindered by her mental health issues," specifically her coping mechanism of avoidance and staying busy. Kim revealed that she had sought counseling to deal with her military sexual assault only within the last few years when she recognized it was impacting her relationships. It also took Kelsey some time to realize she was not broken, even after medically separating from the military, and she articulated how important physical and mental health are to a successful transition. While there are many suggestions for institutions to better serve women student veterans, perhaps it is best to have the five participants explain, in their own words, why they succeeded.

Success

The participants interviewed for this study are unique and not representative of the women student veteran population as four of the five had achieved or were pursuing a

doctoral degree. However, their educational success has implications for other women veterans and institutions of higher education.

Destiny stated that her success was attributable to

> my faith and my religion, but I would say second is having mentorship and sponsorship. I was nervous attending school because there's no major installation here. So, I'm used to having a military community where you walk in, and you're instantly taken care of. I would say, I do have a lot of outside networks. I belong to a sorority; I still have military mentors that I connect with. The mentorship at the university came more from my military experience because there were veterans within the university. So, because I had that, I was able to easily connect with those individuals, and it has made my experience in school better.

Kelsey stated that her success was a result of self-advocacy and taking it day by day. She also credited her military experience with teaching her how to speak for herself, address groups, "and so many life skills that [she's] seen paid off tenfold," like being focused and able to plan and coordinate meetings. These skills acquired in the military had paid huge dividends as she neared the end of her doctoral program.

Kim attributed her success to having a veteran success coach who helped her navigate the transition from the military into an educational program. She stated that this type of service and support was not part of her transition program from the military but made a considerable difference in helping her transition successfully. The success coach provided her with resources Kim did not know existed, guided her, and checked in on her so Kim knew she was not alone in her journey.

Stephanie chose to use her challenges transitioning to higher education to dedicate herself to helping other veterans' transition successfully. For years, and now at a second institution, she ensured that other student veterans had the resources and community support they needed. She also instituted the conferral of military graduation cords and student veteran scholarships to ensure appropriate recognition.

Erin stated, People keep telling me I'm successful, but I don't believe I am. There is so much more I want to do." She also talked about facing the stigma that as a woman of color she would never complete anything and reflected that without her advocating for herself and others believing in her along the way, she would not be where she is now, a senior officer in the Army approaching retirement.

Implications for Women Veteran Students

Women veteran students have a role to play in ensuring their educational success. The first is to identify themselves as veterans. While women may want to simply assimilate into the college or university, the only way for administrators to provide services is if they can identify this population. Women veterans also need to seek mentors and be willing to be a mentor. Erin stated, "without mentors and coaches of color to speak on her behalf, [her career and education] never would have happened." Erin had also become a mentor to other women of color. While help-seeking behaviors are not normally exhibited by women student veterans (DiRamio et al., 2015), there are resources within every institution of higher education designed to help students succeed. Women student veterans need to seek these resources out, whether it be reasonable accommodations based on a disability, time management and study skills, or the counseling center.

Implications for Practice

This study's findings have several implications for better serving women student veterans. Based on the narrative from all five participants, when higher education institutions are not located on or near a military installation, there may need to be a concerted effort to welcome veteran students, especially women veteran students. A first and essential step is having a dedicated page on an institution's website with links to military and veteran resources. Ideally, the webpage would have images of women veterans and veterans of color. The second step is to identify the women veterans (Hodges et al., 2022) by adding a block on the admission form that asks the applicant if they have served in the military, versus if they are a veteran. Many women do not identify as veterans since they may have not served in combat (Best et al., 2021). Additionally, having a point of contact to help veterans know about their benefits and how to use them at the school is critical—a point made in Stephanie's interview.

Since the population of veteran students is still predominantly male, male veterans can often rely on their peers for support, whereas women student veterans may not even know who one another are and may be such a small population, creating feelings of isolation (Hodges et al., 2022). Fostering a welcoming environment and a peer support network could help with both enrollment and retention. Additionally, since many veterans use their G.I. bill benefits to fund their education, recognizing that the USDVA is often slow with reimbursements and funding (USDVA, 2020), extending drop/add dates for veteran students while they work through the labyrinth of educational benefits would help alleviate stress. Additionally, as Erin discussed, educational benefits often run out prior to degree completion, and, consequently, military members may have to change

schools, resulting in a loss of academic credit and the need to re-take coursework (Hodges et al., 2022). Instituting veteran scholarships or grants to help students fund the remainder of their degree programs, as well as accepting credits from other accredited institutions, would also help relieve stress and encourage retention. Other suggestions include incorporating programs that bolster resilience, grit, and posttraumatic growth. While institutions may not have the resources to address all the challenged faced by women student veterans, there are certainly steps they can take to attract, retain, and graduate women student veterans and launch them successfully into the next chapter of their life.

Future Research

Understandably, the nature of a narrative inquiry, especially related to a small sample, does not lend itself to generalization of the entire population of women student veterans. A quantitative study comparing discrete differences or similarities among women student veterans would be illustrative. It would also be worth delving more into the intersectionality of race and gender and expanding future research to include sexual identity both from a qualitative and quantitative perspective as the population of women student veterans continues to grow. While not the focus of this study, three of the five participants were single mothers in the military while pursuing higher education; thus, research examining the additional challenges of single parenthood is recommended.

Conclusion

Although all five women student veterans experienced different challenges as they transitioned into higher education and the civilian sector, their persistence made them all successful. While several of the participants were able to determine when they

would transition out of the military, for veterans like Kelsey, the transition is sometimes out of their control. Regardless, there must be support structures and mentors in place to ensure a successful transition. Perhaps the best example is exemplified through Stephanie's continued work assisting student veterans at her university. She explained that when she did not know "which way to go or who to talk to and what to do when I needed something, someone picked me up." Stephanie was committed to ensuring that when life hit, her student veterans would have the resources in place to succeed. "We want our students to continue to graduation and into careers in the community."

While gender and racial discrimination exists within the military, women's attitudes are not entirely negative. All the participants in this study reflected positively on their military career, their educational transition, and the future. Destiny may have summarized it best: "Just be happy and optimistic and continue to live within my purpose, which is helping people. You can't go wrong with that. So that's what I can control."

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Protocol Exemption Report

Institutional Review Board Protocol Exemption Report

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants
Protocol Exemption Report
Provisional

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 04340-2022 **INVESTIGATOR:** Col. Patricia Ross

SUPERVISING FACULTY: Dr. Jamie Workman

PROJECT TITLE: *Narrative Inquiry of Women Veterans Transition into Public Institutions of Higher Education in Georgia.*

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 study changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before instituting any changes.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *This report has been released for the purpose of securing a Letter of Cooperation (LOC) from the Technical College System of Georgia.* ***This research study is not authorized to begin.***
- *Upon receipt of a LOC an official Protocol Exemption Report will be released with an IRB authorized start date.*

APPENDIX B

Participant Recruitment Email

Participant Recruitment Email

Ross, Patricia

To: TCSG Identified potential participant
Subject: Participation in a research study on women veteran students
Attachments: Attachment 1_irb-adult-consent.doc

Dear Prospective Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Valdosta State University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to examine women veterans and their transition from the military and into the Technical College System of Georgia. I personally invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, are a Post 9/11 veteran, and attend a Technical College System of Georgia school, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete some basic demographic data so I can closely match the participants to the demographics of Georgia. If selected to participate, I will conduct a total of three face-to-face interviews. It should take approximately 30 minutes for each face-to face interview. You will receive a $10 Amazon gift certificate each time you are interviewed. Your name will only be known to myself, and any other identifying information will be known as part of your participation, but will remain confidential. I am also a Post 9/11 veteran and am interested in hearing about your experiences.

If you are willing to participate, please read the attached consent form and contact me via phone or email so I can forward the demographic questionnaire and can then schedule a time and place for the interview. Please complete and sign consent form and bring with you to the interview session.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Patricia Ross at pmross@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.

Sincerely,

Patricia Ross
Doctoral Student
School of Education
Valdosta State University
pmross@valdosta.edu

APPENDIX C

Participant Payment Procedures

Participant Payment Procedures

In accordance with the Valdosta State University Office of Financial Services Research Participant Payment Procedures, the researcher will provide an incentive payment in the form of a $10 Amazon gift card for every interview conducted. The gift card will acknowledge the time and expense incurred by the participants and should encourage participation.

Because the gift cards will not constitute more than $600 in payments from all Valdosta State University sources as participants are students within the Technical College System of Georgia, there is no required identifying information or need for a financial disclosure. Additionally, no Valdosta State University faculty or staff or non-resident aliens will be recruited as neither would meet the criteria of being a current women student veteran in a Technical College System of Georgia school.

Additionally, because at most participants will receive $30 in Amazon gift cards, well below the financial cap of $600, their information does not need to be made public under the Georgia Transparency in Government Act.

This research project is not sponsored nor are University funds requested as payments will come personally from the researcher. Payments are included in the proposed budget and are subject to IRB approval. The researcher will document any payment to participants in accordance with the IRB protocol and will log the disbursement of gift cards in the following payment log.

Information collected will include: date of payment; participant's pseudonym, amount paid, and the researcher's initials.

APPENDIX D

Detailed Payment Log

Detailed Payment Log

Valdosta State University
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT PAYMENT LOG

Responsible Researcher: _____ **Department:** _____ **IRB Protocol Number:** _____

Title of Research Project: _____

INSTRUCTIONS TO RESEARCHER: For each payment made, complete Columns A-C. If the participant is not expected to receive $600 or more from all VSU sources in the current calendar year and protection of his/her identity is not required by the IRB, complete Columns D and E only. If the participant is not expected to receive $600 or more from all VSU sources during the current calendar year but the IRB requires protection of his/her identity, complete Column F only. If the participant is expected to receive $600 or more from all VSU sources in the current in the calendar year, complete Columns D, E, G, and H. The identity of these individuals cannot be protected, and they may receive a Form 1099 at the end of the year. Read the certification statement below, sign and date the log, and submit it with the weekly petty cash fund reconciliation or the cash advance reconciliation.

COMPLETE FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS			COMPLETE WHEN PROTECTION OF THE PARTICIPANT'S IDENTITY IS NOT REQUIRED		COMPLETE WHEN IDENTITY PROTECTION IS REQUIRED	COMPLETE ONLY WHEN THE PARTICIPANT IS LIKELY TO RECEIVE $600 OR MORE FROM ALL VSU SOURCES DURING THE CURRENT CALENDAR YEAR	
Column A	Column B	Column C	Column D	Column E	Column F	Column G	Column H
Date of Payment	Amount or Value of Payment	Researcher Initials	Participant Name	Participant Signature	Study ID # or Pseudonym	Social Security Number	Mailing Address
	$						
	$						
	$						
	$						
	$						
	$						
	$						
	$						
	$						
	$						

Responsible Researcher's Certification: ***I do solemnly affirm, under criminal penalty of a felony for false statements subject to punishment by fine and/or imprisonment, that the information provided above is accurate and that the payments described have been made to research participants in accordance with the IRB approved research protocol and university financial procedures.***

Responsible Researcher's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____ *12.02.2011*

APPENDIX E

Consent Form

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY
Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in a research project entitled "Phenomenological Study of Women Veteran Students' Transition into the Institutions of Higher Education." This research project is being conducted by Patricia Ross (USAF Veteran) in the Educational Leadership Department at Valdosta State University. The purpose of this research is to understand female veteran students, what challenges they may face when attending college and what strategies or support make them successful in pursuing higher education. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

As described in more detail below, we will ask you to be interviewed three times in person. All interviews will be semi-structured with open-ended questions. The first interview is to gain background on your experience as a woman veteran student while serving in the military. The second interview will delve into your experience in the military and your transition to college. The third interview will allow you to reflect upon your experiences. *S*omeone in your position might be interested in participating because your experiences may help other women veteran students more successfully transition from the military to college and could be informative for college leadership as they look to better support women student veterans. Because there are some risks, such as identifying challenges and possible trauma experienced during military service, you may not wish to participate. However, women student veterans as a whole are very successful and overcoming challenges and excelling academically is what this research is designed to explore. It is important for you to know that you can stop your participation at any time. More information about all aspects of this study is provided below.

This form includes detailed information to help you decide whether to participate in this research. Please read it carefully and ask any questions that you have before you agree to participate. Please be sure to retain a copy of this form for your records.

Procedures: Your participation will involve three face-to-face or video interviews of approximately 30 -60 minutes each. These are semi-structured interviews, so while there are specific questions, many questions will be asked based on your responses. If you agree to participate, the researcher will also collect basic demographic information about your military service. In-person interviews will comply with the Center of Disease Control guidelines, to include but not limited to no physical contact, frequent handwashing. the use of hand sanitizer, cleaning of any hard surface, social distancing, and the wearing of masks.

Possible Risks or Discomfort: This is a minimal risk research study. That means that the risks of participating are no more likely or serious than those you encounter in everyday activities. However, based on life and military experiences, there could be a discussion concerning sensitive issues. Although there are no known risks associated with these research procedures, it is not always possible to identify all potential risks of participating in a research study. However, the University has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize potential but unknown risks."

If you experience psychological distress as a result of your participation in this study, please contact Patricia Ross at (757) 645-7687. Neither the researcher nor Valdosta State University has made special provision for services required to treat any injury or psychological distress that results from participation in this research study.

By agreeing to participate in this research project, you are not waiving any rights that you may have against Valdosta State University for injury resulting from negligence of the University or its researchers.

Potential Benefits: Although you may not benefit directly from this research, your participation will help the researcher gain additional understanding of how female veteran students overcome challenges and succeed in college. This knowledge may be beneficial to college leadership in assisting other women student veterans with challenges as well as other student groups.

Costs and Compensation: There are no costs for participating in the research other than transportation to the interview, which will be held on your college campus or a public place of your choosing. For each participant selected, you will receive a $10 Amazon gift card for each of the three interviews completed. In accordance with Institutional Review Board procedures, payment must be logged, and your signature obtained upon receipt of the gift card. Since compensation for participation will not meet the monetary threshold set by the Institutional Review Board, no identifying information will be released by the researcher for financial management and audit purposes.

Assurance of Confidentiality: Valdosta State University and the researcher will keep your information confidential to the extent allowed by law. Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a university committee charged with reviewing research to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants, may be given access to your confidential information.

Participant information will be kept confidential and will only be knows to the researcher. The Researcher will keep all information in a private, locked office to eliminate unauthorized access, and information will be kept for three years after dissertation approval at which time it will be shredded.

The data will be obtained from multiple participants, will not be associated with participants by name or specific institution (college), and will use pseudonyms. As this study will occur at colleges across Georgia, care will be taken so participants cannot be identified.

Voluntary Participation: Your decision to participate in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you agree now to participate and change your mind later, you are free to leave the study. Your decision not to participate at all or to stop participating at any time in the future will not have any effect on any rights you have or any services you are otherwise entitled to from Valdosta State University. If you choose to withdraw during the study, your information and data will be deleted and not included in research results.

Information Contacts: Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Patricia Ross at pmross@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.

Agreement to Participate: The research project and my role in it have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, I am indicating that I am 18 years of age or older. I have received a copy of this consent form.

I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study: _____ Yes _____ No

Mailing Address: _____

E-mail Address: _____

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____
Signature of Participant Date

_____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

This research project has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Research Participants through the date noted below:

APPENDIX F

Sample Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Interview 1

Where are you originally from?

When did you join? (Right after HS, College)

Did anyone else in your family have military experience?

Why did you join the military?

Do you remember anything from that time?

In retrospect, what did you think about that decision and why?

What was your skill set (MOS/AFSC)?

How long was basic, tech school? (Initial qualification)

What were your experiences in basic and initial qualification training?

Where were you stationed?

How long did it take you to feel proficient in your military job?

How many other military women did you encounter in your day-to-day job?

What are your strongest memories about the military?

Were you ever harassed because of your gender?

For those not identifying as “white”: Were you ever harassed because of your ethnicity?

If you deployed, what conflict did you support and where were you assigned?

Do you remember anything from your deployment?

How many other women were deployed with you?

What were your billeting arrangements?

Were there any common experiences you and other women experienced during your deployment that you discussed?

Were there any other military members you would consider as mentors? If so, how would you describe your interaction?

Do you still keep in touch with military members you served with?

Are you close (i.e., not just Facebook friends) with these military members? Why or why not?

Who is in your immediate family?

If divorced, are you willing to tell me why?

How did your military career help prepare you for civilian life? If not, what recommendations do you have?

What unique challenges do you believe there are for women in the military?

Interview 2

Let's talk about your transition from the military.

What precipitated your transition from the military?

How did you control your transition timing?

How did you prepare to transition?

If not prepared, what recommendations do you have?

What surprised you most about what you thought your transition would be like and how it actually was?

How did you feel during this time?

Had you ever experienced a transition like this before? (i.e., a break in service)

What memories stand out?

What caused you stress during this time?

What helped you during this time?

Did your role change within your family?

Were there other stressors at the time?

Did you have a support structure during this time?

Who was there for you when you needed them?

Who possibly was not there that you needed?

Do you believe those around you understood what you were going through?

How have you grown since leaving the military?

How did you deal with the transition?

What was the most difficult part?

Were you able to find employment immediately or when you were seeking it?

What differences might there be for female veterans versus male veterans?

How did your identity from the military change when you entered the civilian sector?

Now, let's talk about your transition into college…

Why did you go to college?

Why did you choose a technical college in Georgia?

What resources or information did you need when you entered college?

How did the information help you?

Was there anything you needed assistance with?

Were there other stressors at the time?

What or who helped prepare you to go to college?

What surprised you most about your college experience?

How did you feel during this time?

Did you identify as a female veteran at the college? If so or if not, why?

Did you have a support structure during this time?

Who was there for you when you needed them?

Do you believe those around you understood what you were going through?

Who possibly was not there that you needed?

Do you know other women veteran students at your college?

Do you participate in any veteran events or social groups? If so, which ones?

Did you work with your college's military coordinator and if so, what resources or assistance did they provide? If not, why?

Did your college have a veteran space, and if so, what services did you take advantage of?

What was the most difficult part of going to college?

What was the easiest part of going to college?

How have you grown while attending college?

Interview 3

Reflecting on your experience in the military, transitioning out of the military, and then transitioning into college, what factor contributed to your success and what factors detracted from you being fully successful?

Now that we've discussed the various transitions, what sense do you have about your experiences?

What makes sense about your various transitions and what are you still working through?

Taking into account where you are now, what do you believe made you successful during the military, transitioning from the military and into college?

As you have had time to ponder your experiences, what meaning do you make out of your journey?

Where do you see yourself going in the future based on your experiences?

How do you believe your experiences could assist other women veterans?

**Additional questions on reflection and the meaning ascribed from the experiences will be developed after the responses to the first two interviews