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## **Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

*Nannette W. Glenn, Ph.D.*

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Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

A Path to Success:

A Case Study of Military Veterans at a Midwestern University

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Jada N. Reynolds

October 2022

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I would also like to thank my beautiful daughter Aerial Nicole for her unending understanding, support, and patience during my education process. I want to express my extreme gratitude to my dissertation chair Dr. Antonia Lukenchuk, for remaining patient and dedicated throughout this process to help me understand the proper development of this contribution to the field of research. Her suggestions and feedback have made me a better writer, and were invaluable to my success, for which I will forever be grateful. Lastly, I would like to thank my dissertation committee members Dr. Colleen Ramos and Dr. Diane Reed, for providing their professional expertise to this body of work.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of military veterans transitioning from service members to civilian life. The study was conducted using semistructured interviews with eight transitioning veterans who had completed their bachelor's degree from the same Midwestern U. S. university between 2017 and 2022. Retention theory, and transition theory were used as the guiding theories for this study. An intrinsic qualitative case study was used for data analysis, which resulted in the emerging themes (a) Transitioning from Military Service to Civilian Life, (b) Work-Life-Study Balance: Confronting Challenges, and (c) Supporting Military Veterans. This study contributed to current research by exploring the systems of support needed for military veterans to successfully transition from the military to their civilian lives and successfully complete their higher education degrees. This study also provides insight into the obstacles faced by transitioning veterans such as reintegration with health concerns, changes and adjustments to the veteran's geographic location, daily work routine changes, locating supportive resources, and reliance in family and social systems of support. This study contributed to current research by identifying campus and community resources that were used, or that were missing and needed during participants' undergraduate studies. Among recommendations for future support was a mixed-methods study to review qualitative and quantitative data on the increased retention of military, a phenomenological study to focus on the common experiences of transitioning military veterans centered on participants' gender, race, or socioeconomic status.

*Keywords:* Traditional learners, nontraditional learners, social supports, family responsibilities, transition, military friendly

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Higher education academic institutions are comprised of a broad and diverse population of learners. These adult learners include traditional learners and nontraditional learners. Traditional learners can be defined as learners between 18 and 24 years of age, who have continuously been enrolled in an academic course since completing their postsecondary education (Parkes et al., 2015). Nontraditional learners can be defined as learners who have delayed entry into higher education institutions, who are age 25 and older (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Nontraditional learners can include older adults, military veterans, students who are also parents, or learners who have taken time off from their education and are returning after multiple years of not being enrolled in a learning program. Nontraditional learners have a higher attrition rate compared to traditional learners enrolled in a degree-seeking program (Ellis, 2020). Nontraditional learners and more specifically, military veterans often have increased obstacles to overcome while pursuing their higher education goals. Military veteran learners often balance multiple responsibilities with their family, health, and work obligations, while trying to complete their degrees and reach their career goals.

There may be difficulty in transitioning from service to education for military veterans (Livingston et al., 2011). Life transitions whether from one career to the next, or from the military to a civilian can have added barriers with successful degree completion compared with a traditional learner. Some of the barriers to military veterans continuing their education can come from situations that arise with their health, or their familial responsibilities (Patterson & Paulson, 2016). Also, there may be a barrier from the instructional design, and the learner have difficulty learning in that institutional setting. Academic institutions have started to make changes to become more aware of the concerns of military veterans by becoming military-friendly schools.

Military-friendly schools specialize in offering above-average support in the removal of barriers and social reintegration to assist in their successful transition (Norman et al., 2015; Strickley, 2009; Wilson, 2014).

Military veterans are nontraditional learners who have increased difficulty in completing their higher education goals compared with traditional learners without the same barriers to success (Pratt, 2017). Often nontraditional learners have increased practical real-world experience because they often have field experience with different jobs, are raising families, or have been balancing work and familial obligations with academics. There is a demand for individuals in the workforce who have both the academic knowledge, and practical real-world experience, but due to decreased degree completions for nontraditional learners, there is a need to find success strategies so more of these qualified candidates can enter the workforce. Many veterans seek employment to assist them in their transition from military to civilian to reintegrate into their civilian communities. It can prove difficult for veterans to find employment post-military due to the demand for college educated employees at many civilian employment organizations.

Identifying practical learning methods and effective instruction models for nontraditional learners who may be in transition is a necessity for learning institutions to facilitate outputs for this learning demographic. Educators should consider the needs of different populations of learners to create learning models with access to technologies needed for the variety of learners enrolled with the institution, or who may be potential learners. Being a military-friendly academic institution involves creating learning models that are sensitive to veterans' needs, and education requirements (Strickley, 2009; Wilson, 2014). College graduates typically find more consistent employment, earn more money, and often lead healthier lifestyles compared to adults

who do not attend college (Castro & Kintzle, 2017; Lawrence, 2018). It is important to create an academic climate where all learners, and specifically transitioning military veterans, have the greatest potential to complete their higher education degrees.

### **Researcher's Positionality Statement**

I am a graduate in the same Midwestern area in the United States where I recruited participants who were interviewed for this study. During my undergraduate coursework, I was a single parent and a military veteran who had to overcome increased barriers to success. After my return from active-duty military service, my physical injuries were apparent, however, my mental health conditions were unknown to me, or evaluated by medical professionals for 3 years. My transition from military service member to an adult nontraditional learner was difficult because of the change in discipline displayed by nonmilitary civilians, along with the lack of social hierarchy for communication in academic settings, and the lack of discipline that I was previously accustomed to in the military culture. The change in social interactions triggered my undiagnosed mental health conditions. There was no designated place for military veterans on campus to congregate and share resources or support each other in their academic pursuits. I believe there is a better way to support transitioning military veterans and to help find solutions for future learners from this group based on my personal experience.

I am a first generational college student. Neither of my parents have a higher education degree, and I was the first among my siblings to enroll in college. There was a lack of family support for my higher education degree pursuit because my immediate family did not understand the appropriate social support needed for my degree attainment. During my undergraduate studies, I was receiving medical treatment for my physical health conditions, post-military, and the symptoms of my mental health conditions, which were being treated improperly due to

missed medical diagnoses. To complete my bachelor's degree, I sought out and used multiple resources on campus like the library and technologies available, and in the community such as local nonprofit veterans' organizations, for social support. There were also resources identified through networking with academic advisors, and other nontraditional adult learners pursuing their higher education degrees at that time through information sharing. At the university where I completed my undergraduate studies, there was limited support for military veterans to have the same success as other groups, such as student parents, or traditional learners. This created a lack of sense of belonging for me personally. Based on my experiences, I clearly see from personal lived experience the need to ensure that military veterans transitioning from service members to civilian learners can overcome obstacles and complete their higher education degrees.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In higher academic institutions there are traditional learners between the ages of 18 and 23, and nontraditional learners between the ages of 24 and 59, who are all pursuing their higher education degrees. Traditional learners are those who go directly from high school to college and center their lives around their academic goals. Nontraditional learners do not take a direct path from high school to college and may take time off from pursuing their education for family and work obligations (Deschacht & Goeman, 2015). Many contemporary American higher education student body settings have changed with traditional students comprising around 15% of the total undergraduates and the remaining 85% being nontraditional adult learners (Sun, 2019). With the changes over time, course delivery methods should be practical for the variety of learners that are learning in academic programs.

Military veterans comprise part the of body of nontraditional students at many academic institutions. Many military veterans are returning to their civilian lives after military service and

are pursuing their higher education to learn the skills needed for in their careers (Borsari et al., 2017). About 50% of veterans who are in transition from their military careers to their civilian education do not complete their degrees (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Mason, 2016). Some reasons for the attrition of veterans in higher education programs relate to the transition from military to civilian for veterans, the difficulty adjusting to changes in daily routine coupled with the loss of connection with peers, and a lack of support for medical issues the veteran may be facing. Military culture and veteran characteristics can lead to a developed stigma for the veteran's mental and physical health issues, which can affect a smooth transition into higher education settings (Ulrich & Freer, 2020). The goal for many military veterans is to find employment that offers financial stability. Evidence suggests that military veteran members are experiencing less academic success compared with other adult learners (Borsari et al., 2017). This is a significant issue because college graduates typically find more consistent employment, can earn more money, and often choose to lead healthier lifestyles compared to adults who do not attend college. This shows that college retention and graduation can be principal elements of successful adjustment to civilian life and post-military employment (Borsari et al., 2017). Completing higher education degrees becomes a necessary component for transitioning military veterans to compete in the workplace for professional careers.

Military veterans might feel some anxiety in the transition from military to adult learner, and they may have additional barriers to acclimating to campus life such as library anxiety, and other forms of mental health, which can have a detrimental effect on their academic performance (Sample, 2020). Several studies examined how students experience library anxiety, and other mental health concerns at higher rates, and what factors or causes may be most prevalent in the cause of anxiety for a particular group (Sample, 2020). The ability to use facility resources is

important because the lack of social support and resource support affects performance.

Nontraditional learners who perform poorly are more likely to drop out of their academic programs, which can be prevented by helping remove barriers to successful degree completion.

Even though there have been numerous studies about the obstacles that military veterans and other nontraditional learners may face when returning to their academic coursework, specific success strategies to attain degree completion has not been sufficiently explored. Therefore, it is imperative to examine what support systems are useful for this group of learners. It is also necessary to identify what strategies are in place that have already proven to aid with successful degree completions for other military veterans. More studies about effective means to overcome obstacles by balancing work, school, and life, can shed additional light on how to remove barriers to success when working toward degree completion. Many military veteran learners can find it difficult to balance between family, work, and academic obligations. To find a balance between family life and academic or work responsibilities veterans must maintain a schedule to balance family routines and academic coursework (Milkie et al., 2010). Around 40% of students feel their educational responsibilities interfere with their family time (Kirby et al., 2004). It is important for many veterans to maintain a schedule, like when they were in the military, to eat meals with family daily, to maintain a schedule with their family, and to have dedicated time for coursework. This balance allows the veteran to balance competing responsibilities and maintain a schedule to keep a balance between school and family responsibilities.

### **Research Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of military veterans who have completed their undergraduate degrees within the last 5 years from a large university in a Midwestern city in the United States. I wondered how these veterans overcome the barriers of



balancing their educational, personal, and academic responsibilities to transition to their civilian life and complete their higher education degrees. The participants in this study were nontraditional adult learners who are military veterans and have completed a four-year bachelor's degree from the same Midwestern university in the United States.

### **Research Questions**

An overarching research question that guided this study was: How do military veterans transition from service experiences to academic and professional lives? Additional research questions included:

- What obstacles, if any, do they encounter on the path to successful academic and professional career attainments?
- How do these veterans experience life-study-work balance in their lives?
- What are the systems of support that can be conducive to these graduates' success?

Understanding resources, obstacles, and support systems used by successful nontraditional adult learners can help create alternative solutions for this group of the student population. This in turn, can assist administrators in providing the opportunities for future learners to overcome obstacles to success in obtaining their higher education degrees.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Military veteran and other nontraditional learners are attendees at most higher education institutions in the United States, yet these learners often lack academic skills due to having taken time off from their education for career and family obligations (Pratt, 2017). It is estimated that one out of every two veterans in higher education programs do not complete their degrees (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Mason, 2016). The following review of literature focuses on what factors may aid military veterans in their transition from military member to nontraditional adult learner, to complete their higher education degrees. A focus on the obstacles that military veterans may encounter during their academic careers and transition from the military is done to help with tools used to manage work, school, and life balance. Finally, the review of literature addresses the support systems that have been used on campus and in the community to have greater academic success for military and veteran learners are discussed. The following main themes comprise literature review: (a) U.S. Military Veterans within the Context of Higher Education, (b) Success as a Balancing Act, (c) Systems of Support for Military Veteran Students, and (d) Theories Pertaining to the Transitioning Experiences of Military Veterans.

### **U.S. Military Veterans Within the Context of Higher Education**

The retention rate for many community colleges in the United States is between 40 and 50% (Mason, 2016). The population of learners analyzed in Mason's (2016) study on retention were mostly nontraditional learners transitioning from military employment to civilian education systems and using their earned military education benefits. Military veterans comprise part the body of nontraditional students at many academic institutions. One in two military veterans do not successfully complete their higher education degree due to obstacles they encounter in their transition from military to civilian (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Mason, 2016). To assist military

veterans in completing their higher education degrees for them to seek and obtain more gainful employment post-military, it is important to review factors that affect successful degree completion for this population of learners.

### ***Historical Developments***

The United States Government began offering numerous education benefits for transitioning and active military members dating back to the 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment act (Jolly, 2013). These education benefits include a GI bill that is developed for each major conflict from the Korean war to the post 9/11 conflicts, and they provide military veterans the ability to attend college at little to no cost to the transitioning service member (Jolly, 2013). Prior to the enactment of Executive Order (EO) 13822: for the soldiers readjustment act in 2018, the military offered benefits to military members but expected soldiers to readjust to their civilian roles without the assistance of the government (Lawrence, 2018).

There was an estimated one million student veterans enrolled in higher education who used the post-9/11 GI Bill between 2009 and 2013 with estimates of up to \$30 billion for the post-9/11 GI Bill was spent on veteran higher education expenses (Cate, 2014). When service members transition to their civilian lives they often look to utilize their earned educational benefits (Vacchi, 2012). It is important for higher education academic institutions to make intentional efforts to connect transitioning student veteran learners with resources to support them in their academic pursuits while coping with family, health, financial, and academic responsibilities (DiRamio et al., 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Military friendly academic institutions allow for use of service members and military veteran's educational benefits. These institutions also assist with transfer of credit assessments for prior learning. There is also offered orientations for smoother transitions on military to

student services facilitate an easier transition from military to college for student veteran's unique needs and circumstances (Strickley, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Military friendly schools specialize in offering above average supports in removal of barriers and social reintegration to assist in their successful transition (Norman et al., 2015; Strickley, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Institutions need to ensure they are offering support to transitioning veterans if they are military friendly, and to ensure they assist in the student veterans' transition to college (Wilson, 2014). Institutions should review their student veteran population for intentional support to be investigated and specific support services offered to this group of adult learners.

Many veterans seek employment to assist them in their transition from military to civilian to reintegrate into their civilian communities (Lawrence, 2018). It can prove difficult for veterans to find employment post-military due to the demand for college educated employees at many civilian employment organizations (Ghosh et al., 2022). This difficulty comes from military training and experience not transferring to the civilian workforce, and additional training being required for professional careers (Lawrence, 2018). Veterans are challenged when trying to find employment aligned with their skillsets and often end up in entry-level positions that offer low wages, which can lead to financial issues and instability (Castro et al., 2014). The world has transitioned over the last several decades from an industrial society with factory-based work, to a postindustrial society with a knowledge-based service economy focused on technology (Smerdon, 2018). To improve the marketability of veterans in the workforce their degree attainment is a key component for success in the workplace, as well as a successful reintegration into their civilian lives.

### *Military Veterans as Nontraditional Students*

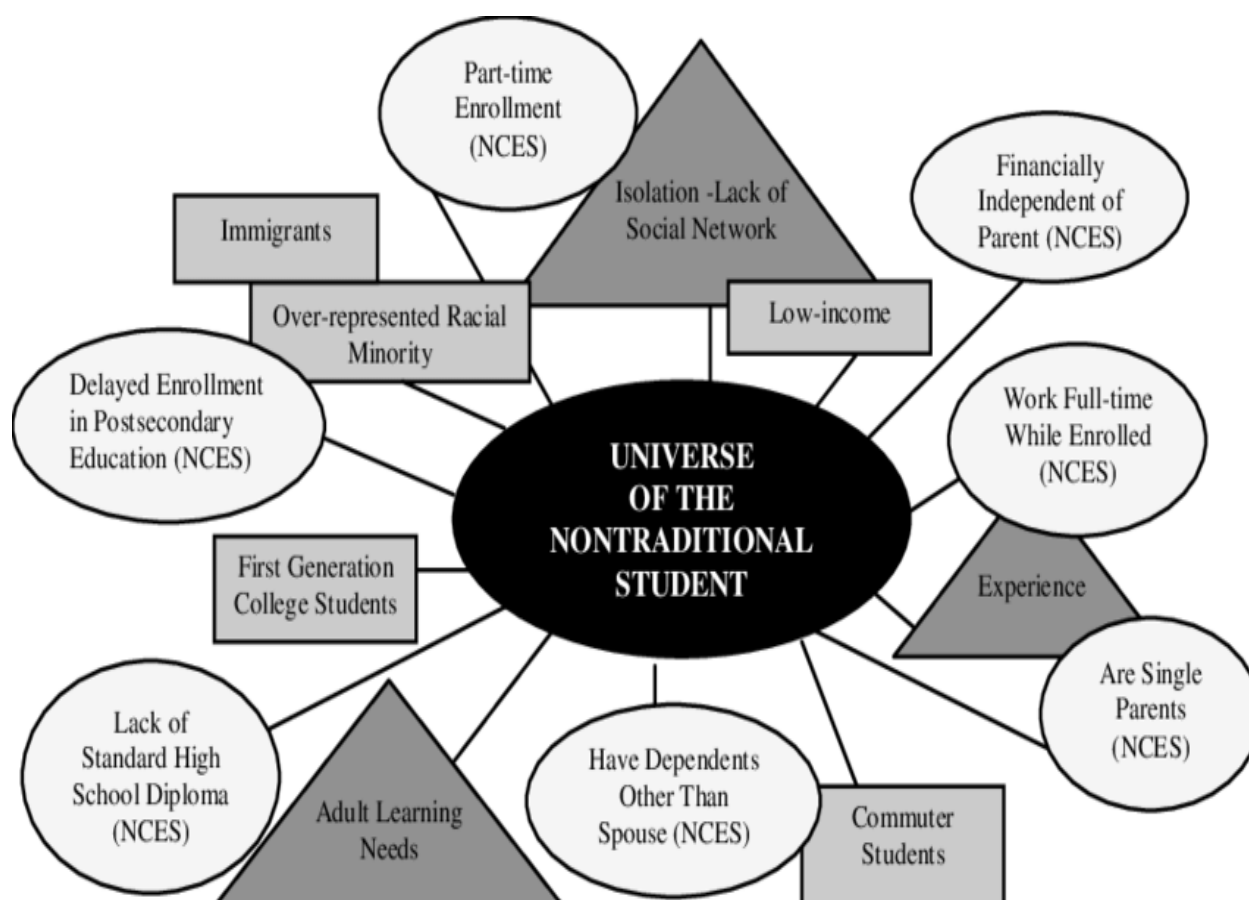
According to Borsari et al. (2017), many military veterans are returning to their civilian lives after military service and are pursuing their higher education to learn the skills needed for in their careers. The goal for many military veterans is to find employment that offers financial stability. Evidence shows transitioning veterans who are adult learners experience less academic success than other students (Borsari et al., 2017). This is a significant issue because college graduates typically find more consistent employment, can earn more money, and often choose to lead healthier lifestyles compared to adults who do not attend college. This evidence shows the retention and graduation rates for military veterans are essential elements in successful adjustment to civilian life for transitioning service members. It becomes important to identify what makes higher education degree completion and career attainment a reality for transitioning military veterans.

The unemployment rate among veterans in 2011 was 12.1%, which was considerably higher compared to the nonveteran unemployment rate of 8.7% in 2011 (United States Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2014). The unemployment rate for veterans transitioning from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars in March 2013 was recorded at 9.9% in 2013 (Daywalt, 2014). This translates to about 200,000 veterans being unemployed in a 2.6 million population. Nearly 8 in 10 veterans are unemployed upon leaving the military (Lawrence, 2018). The unemployment rate for transitioning veterans may be attributed to difficulty with having transferable skills from military to civilian sectors. Additionally, some veterans have suffered traumatic injuries, which can add to the struggles to reintegrate into civilian jobs (Daywalt, 2014). Reintegration can be difficult due to veterans not taking time to reacclimate to their civilian roles, and the shock between military culture and their civilian

education (Sayer et al., 2021). It is important for academic institutions to improve the transition experience for military veterans, and to increase the number of military veterans who complete their higher education degrees (Heineman, 2016). Veterans are often grouped within the nontraditional designation in academic settings (Hamrick & Rumann, 2009; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011), to improve their success rate institutions should address the unique needs of this student population (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Universe of the Nontraditional Student*



*Note.* Buglione (2012). *Nontraditional Approaches with Nontraditional Students: Experiences of Learning, Service, and Identity Development*. Copyright 2012 by Susan Buglione. Reprinted with permission (Appendix G).

### *Military Veterans: Academic Success and Obstacles*

As mentioned earlier military veterans experience multiple obstacles transitioning from the military to their civilian education, and experience high attrition rates in response to these obstacles. A review of the learning methods, learning styles, and any barriers that are caused by these are important for developing success strategies for transitioning veterans. One way to assist veterans in transition from military to civilian learner in attaining academic success is develop appropriate content for learner's communication needs (Barieva et al., 2018). Many educational instructors develop a standardized education model for delivery in educational settings, which can prove difficult to understand among a group of learners. The standardization of teaching comes from educators looking at a systematic way to develop learning content for a variety of learners learning in the same environment (Verpoorten et al., 2007). In addition to developing success strategies for military veterans and other nontraditional learners it may be beneficial to understand how to improve communication and understanding between instructors and learners as well.

Military veterans often face obstacles with their transition from soldiers to adult learners. Obstacles that military veterans as adult learners may experience as discomfort from their transition from being service members to students, as well as other discomforts such as library anxiety or other forms of anxiety and mental health concerns, these health issues can have a detrimental effect on learners' academic performance (Sample, 2020). The ability to use facility resources is important because the lack of social support and resource support affects performance. Nontraditional learners who perform poorly are more likely to drop out of their academic programs, which can be prevented by helping remove this barrier to successful degree completion.

Factors that may affect military veterans in successful degree completion are social relationships with peers and faculty, medical or mental health issues for the veteran, balancing multiple responsibilities with school, and family (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018). Improvement in the understanding of military culture on academic campuses from faculty, administrators, and other adult learners might help to improve student veterans' successful degree completion.

Nontraditional learners described the lack of support from educators during the process of achieving one's higher education (Oxhandler et al., 2018). The journey to complete a higher education degree can be challenging for learners due to time constraints and deadlines for assignments. The balance between family responsibilities, and work or education responsibilities can prove difficult for many adult learners. For learners to have the perception that they are not supported by their educators can make the arduous process of degree attainment even more difficult.

### ***Overcoming Obstacles***

The transition from the predominately male-military culture with structure and discipline, to one with a lack of accountability in the civilian sector, which lacks a clear chain of command can be overwhelming for veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Osborne, 2014). The change in culture can lead to culture shock for some veterans transitioning from military to civilian learner and lead to attrition in academic settings. Another factor that can lead to attrition for veterans is the teaching methods available for them to pursue their degrees. The teaching methods are rarely individualized, and often standardized which can add obstacles to military veterans understanding of the course content (Verpoorten et al., 2007).

The methods of instruction such as online forums with limited synchronous social interaction (Arjomandi et al., 2018), or in person lecture hall instruction with less disciplined



learners can add barriers to success for veterans. Although online learning does offer flexibility in scheduling to support competing demands between academics, family, and employment, this format does not always offer the appropriate social support for adult learners who have been out of school for multiple years, such as military veterans. The variety of adult learners on college campuses has caused educators to change their teaching methods to accommodate different learning styles, and different course delivery methods.

Kokko et al. (2015) investigated the development of hybrid learning also known as blended learning and virtual learning as emerging solutions to time demands for learners. The virtual learning aspect allows learners to focus on the topic they choose to study, without having to follow a specific outlined set of instruction from an educator. The hybrid learning allows for the study of concepts and instruction virtually, and then a hands-on practical application for face-to-face portion of instruction. O'Hara et al. (2018) provided a comprehensive look at the interpersonal educational (IPE) model and the prior literature on the learning model. IPE shows improved outcomes for the stakeholders in medical treatment facilities. The use of the IPE educational model helps form the study structure for using hands-on training as part of the curriculum for higher education students. It may assist educators in the retention of military veterans to offer more hands-on practical education for a better understanding and transition into their higher education role for some courses. Practical application in on-line settings may also prove helpful to ensure the intended learning has taken place for transitioning veterans.

Another obstacle that some military veterans face post-military is moral injury, which can lead to long term health complications. Rand Corp. (2008) conducted a study that found nearly 20% of the military veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, suffer from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other mental health diagnoses such as major depression and anxiety. In

addition to the potential for mental health concerns post-military, many veterans also suffer with severe physical injuries such as traumatic brain injury, missing body parts, hearing loss, and blindness. Physical disabilities are more easily diagnosed than mental disabilities because physical conditions can be assessed through a physical exam at one point, compared to mental conditions requiring mental evaluations over multiple visits (Rzempowska et al., 2016). Many military veteran learners have clearly defined physical conditions, which are easy to recognize are limitations, but they may be in the process of identifying other underlying mental health conditions that affect their daily lives and academic performance (DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Rand Corp., 2008). Being mindful of both visible and less obvious health concerns for veterans it is important to identify success strategies that have been used that allow successful degree attainment for transitioning military veterans (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). The identification of success strategies that have been used by other veterans can be used and improved upon for future transition learners and allow academic institutions to be proactive for veteran's needs.

### **Success as a Balancing Act**

Many academic institutions require a well-rounded education that provided individual and societal growth within their curriculum for learners to obtain a higher education degree (Smerdon, 2018). One of the barriers for learners is a lack of understanding the important skills that will be necessary in the workforce in the next 10 years (Tharumaraj et al., 2018). Learners may be required to study material that will not be applied to their future career. The addition of this coursework in a degree program increases the costs of one's education, and the content has no practical purpose in the desired career (Sklar, 2018). Learners have a necessity to consider the effect of the cost of education in comparison with the potential for a career postgraduation that

will cover their cost of living and the repayment for their educational requirements to obtain a degree.

Elnitsky et al. (2018) explained the path-goal theory as a tool used with veterans who had comorbid health issues and were pursuing their education. Path-goal theory is central to the relationship between leadership style and the followers' characteristics (Northouse, 2016). The leader's style compared to the follower's characteristics are important to allow the leader to have the most effective motivation tools for the followers (Elnitsky et al., 2018). The path-goal theory of leadership focuses on the relationship between the followers and what method the leaders used to motivate these followers (Elnitsky et al., 2018). Using path-goal can aid transitioning veterans because they often learn differently and have additional barriers to learning than more traditional learners (Pratt, 2017). All learners whether traditional or nontraditional have directive styles of leadership in university settings and are given a curriculum to follow by instructors.

Military veterans often are experiencing competing responsibilities coursework, family responsibilities, health concerns, and work obligations (Pratt, 2017). Identifying strategies used by veterans who have had similar competing responsibilities can assist future veterans in degree attainment (Schreiner et al., 2012). Further, it is important for society at large to understand the transition needs of veterans to help them reacclimate into society and lead healthy productive lives.

Giancola et al. (2009) stated that nontraditional learners have different priorities than traditional learners. Nontraditional learners are often balancing their medical needs, familial responsibilities, work-life balance, and academic responsibilities. It is imperative for academic institutions to understand the multiple roles that are in place for military and veteran learners to assist this population with balancing multiple responsibilities (Hammer et al., 1998).

Additionally, it may be necessary for nontraditional learners to seek employment that offers scheduling flexibility to ensure these learners can plan their work schedule around their other roles and responsibilities.

### ***Life-Work-Study Balance***

Conflict from competing roles in a veteran's life may impact the responsibilities for other roles (Rogers & May, 2003). Work responsibilities may affect familial responsibilities or academic responsibilities. Stress from work, family, or academic responsibilities can cause conflict interchangeable with any of these roles (Rogers & May, 2003). Many military and veteran learners may find it difficult to balance the time requirements between family, work, and academic demands.

An effective means to find balance between family life and academic or work responsibilities is to maintain a schedule with family routines and coursework practices (Milkie et al., 2010). Kirby et al. (2004) reported that around 40% of students feel their educational responsibilities interfere with their family time. It is important to eat meals with family around the same time daily, and to keep a schedule with family, as well as to have a dedicated time for study and coursework that is maintained on a schedule to keep a balance between school and family responsibilities.

Traditional undergraduate college students are typically able to center their lives around their academic studies, whereas military veterans and other nontraditional undergraduate students often are required to manage their studies around their lives (Priode, 2019). Military veterans may need increased flexibility to have balance between education and personal responsibility and should be developing learning models that can allow work-life balance for these transitioning service members.

As a result of work-life balance concerns, many academic institutions have created online and distance learning programs. Grenier (2015) conducted a study where students identify the limited interaction between educators and learners on learning content development. In Grenier's (2015) study, learners preferred educators allow students some amount of independence in their learning, while the educators offer guidance and modeling interventions. However, in response many educational institutions believe they have already developed the best learning model and do not modify their content or delivery methods. There is not a large amount of modification for the educational material to accommodate learner needs in many instances.

### ***Systems of Support for Military Veteran Students***

As stated earlier, one in two military veterans do not complete their higher education degree programs. Military and veteran learners face challenges that are not experienced by traditional college student (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; Lokken et al., 2009). The reaction from institutions to the veteran and military population of learners has a direct impact on the successful completion rates for nontraditional learners. To support this population of learners, academic institutions have begun to offer on campus and community support systems as resources for military and veteran adult learners.

Social support is a critical component for the success of transitioning military veterans (Schlossberg, 1984). Social support can come from campus supports, community supports, veterans service organizations, and the Veteran's Administration. Studies have shown one of the biggest gaps in military family and veteran support services is the lack of collaboration, coordination, and collective purpose (Armstrong et al., 2015). To improve the social support for transitioning veterans a greater focus on development of on-campus and community supports should be emphasized. It can aid academic institutions to explore what support systems are

available for transitioning military veterans to ensure they can offer referrals for supportive care and services.

### *On Campus Support Systems*

It is vital to the success for military and veteran learners to have a place on campus to share information and experiences with other learners from this group (Moon & Schma, 2011). In response to this vital need, many academic institutions in the United States have created Veteran Centers on campus to give this group a place to mingle with other learners who have shared, or similar experiences. These veteran centers allow for campus staff to interact with this population of learners to understand their individual needs, and to help facilitate the sharing of other resources between members of the group. Designated spaces for military and veteran learners gives them a place to go to for a sense of belonging, and shared camaraderie during their transition from service member to adult learner. Rouscher (2018) emphasized how important it is for faculty to understand and respond to the unique needs of military and veteran adult learners and help and support for these learners, and more so at a military-friendly school.

Many military veterans find it challenging to locate support services to help them with their transition from military to civilian (Castro & Kintzle, 2017; Castro et al., 2014). It is imperative for academic institutions to identify veteran and military learners needs and to provide programs which meet the needs of these learners at their institution (Ventrone, 2014). Areas of support on campus may include tutoring for coursework, academic advising, workshops for study skills, employment assistance and career planning, financial aid assistance, mental health counseling, and disability support services (Ventrone, 2014). Partnerships between academic institutions and community support systems with a common goal of assisting transitioning veterans is critical to reintegrating veterans, and creating successful, healthy

citizens (Berglass & Harrell, 2012). Military and veteran learners have experienced life events unlike other traditional college students, and it is imperative to provide support and services that address the unique needs of this student population (Ulrich & Freer, 2020). The identification and exploration of which campus supports have been used by transitioning military veterans who have completed their bachelor's degree can assist veterans and administrators to improve degree attainment percentages.

### *Community Support Systems*

Multiple support systems are needed to positively contribute to the success of transitioning military and veteran adult learners. Community support comes from veteran service organizations for many veterans. Veterans are less likely to hide their military affiliation and feel a greater sense of belonging when involved with a veteran service organization due to the supportive services and camaraderie between these support structures and the military and veteran learners (Summerlot et al., 2009). With veteran support organizations in place many veterans have less difficulty reintegrating into their civilian education role from their military service because they are supported with their unique concerns for work, family, health, and academic competing roles.

The identification and exploration of community support organizations that are available and used by military veterans can help these veterans have a smoother reintegration into their civilian roles. Furthermore, identification of on-campus, and community support systems can assist future veterans in transition from soldier to civilian learner and provide resources to help with this transition. A military friendly academic institution is more than just a school that accepts the veteran's education benefits, but one that provides accommodations for veterans to honor their labor of service to our country (Strickley, 2009; Wilson, 2014). The accommodations

may include a club or center dedicated solely to veterans, priority choice with course selection, and policies being developed specific for this group of learners.

### **Theories Pertaining to the Transitioning Experiences of Military Veterans**

There are several theories that can inform this study, and Tinto's theory on Student Retention (1993) and Tinto's theory on Conceptualizing Conditions for Student's Success (2012) are among them. During the last three decades, Tinto's initial theory has evolved into the theory of attrition of adult learners in higher education. Tinto's theories are particularly relevant adult learners transitioning from their military careers to educational and civilian career pursuits. For many military veteran adult learners, the work of attending college is not as important as obtaining a degree (Tinto, 2012). Tinto's early work focused on the factors that caused learners to leave their academic programs. It is essential for adult learners to complete the degree. To improve the graduation rates for adult learners it is important to identify the reasons why learners leave prior to completing their degrees. It is equally important to understand factors that cause adult learners to stay and complete their higher education degrees, to help identify success strategies, and appropriate support systems. Similarly, it is important for the administration at military friendly schools to offer more proactive assistance for students to aid them in overcoming obstacles to completing their degrees, while also helping the learners take ownership of their responsibilities to balance their competing obligations in work, family, and academics. Tinto (2012) presented four conditions that allow for successful degree completion. These conditions are expectations, socioeconomic status, academic preparedness, and family background. Expectations are shaped by the student's own views as well as by the institutional anticipated outcomes. Socioeconomic status refers to student's prior education, skills, abilities, and financial security. Academic preparedness is related to high expectations of student success



by both the student and the institution, compared to the low expectation of student success that predicts academic failure (Tinto, 2012). Family background is the condition that can ensure support for the student or lack thereof.

### ***Expectations***

Looking at military veterans' experiences through the lens of Tinto's condition of expectations it is important to underscore the value of communication with instructors and faculty (Tinto, 2012). Communication is the key to veterans' performance and successful classroom experience. Faculty and instructors can offer support for transitioning military veterans through tutoring, academic advising, career counseling, and resource centers (Ventrone, 2014). Having a place to network and receive social and academic support can lead to greater success of veteran students in their coursework, and in completing their higher education degrees.

Additionally, veteran students' expectations can be centered on social interactions between peers in the classroom, and with faculty and instruction interactions (Tinto, 2010). Having a chain of command for communication is a component in the military and that chain of command is missing in academic settings, which can affect the discipline in social interactions in academic settings (Tinto, 2012). The expectations between faculty and instructors and veterans are reflected in the grading standards, communication that is centered on feedback for assignments and examinations, and development of effective learning materials and learning models for this level of education (Gabriel, 2017). Effective communication allows for the most favorable outcome, and appropriate shifts in effort from the veteran learners, faculty, and instructors interchangeably (Gabriel, 2017). Student veterans can expect to exert greater effort to improve poor academic performance with improved communication between the learner and

instructors (Gabriel, 2017). Efforts to improve understanding between nonmilitary learners, faculty, and academic administrators can correct mismatches in expectations and lack of communication between groups.

### ***Support***

Appropriate academic, social, and financial supports are key components to the socioeconomic needs of veteran learners (Tinto, 2010). Academic support can be related to the learning community that is available for transitioning veteran learners, as well as supplemental instruction and tutoring that is available for this learning group. Having the additional academic support can help reduce stressors, offer supports, and lead to greater effectiveness of subsequent academic success. Effective programming support efforts have shown that peer support groups, and early interventions for poor performance is contributed to improved retention for veteran learners (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Having a proactive approach to academic success can give transitioning veterans improved retention rates, and increased completion rates (Tinto, 2012).

Social and cultural supports are also a necessary component for transitioning military veterans. Veteran service organizations are great places for offering transitional and social support to military service members (Tinto, 2012). Many military veterans do not self-identify as needing help, which makes academic advising a needed component to successful degree completion, so working with veteran service organizations with trained peer support specialists can help identify needs for the veteran (Livingston et al., 2011). Academic advising is also a tool that helps faculty, and the veteran students stay on track with performance issues and align the learner with appropriate resources available for success prior to the attrition of these nontraditional learners. Improved social support can allow transitioning veterans an improved sense of belonging in academic settings. This sense of belonging can show transitioning veterans

that they matter, and this sense of mattering can prevent attrition in in their degree programs (Tinto, 2012). With effective communication for the expectations and support needed adjustments can be made in social, technological, and academic supports to assist this group of learners.

Additionally, the financial needs of nontraditional adult learners may impact their attrition in academic programs. Financial aid that is not required to be repaid by the veteran has an impact on the retention of these learners (Tinto, 2010). There is the potential for all learners to have difficulty balancing the cost for education and family needs simultaneously, and it is important to not assume the veteran's education benefits completely cover the living and education expenses during their academic careers.

Another conceptual framework that informs this study is Schlossberg's transition theory (1984) that focuses on the reaction to transitional changes in adults. Schlossberg's transition theory consists of four principles: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategies. The first principle of situation refers to the kind of transition that is occurring, and the reasoning behind the transition. The principle of self-explores the motivations and expectations that are present during the transition process, which may be affected by experiences. The principle of support focuses on resources that are helpful in the transition process, including people, places, or things. Finally, the principle of strategies relates to methods used to overcome obstacles to create balance and exert control over the transition process. This can include locating and using effective coping strategies as well.

Schlossberg's transition theory (1984) is particularly relevant to this study in that it provides the framework to analyze the aspects of transitional experiences by military veteran students. For instance, such transitional experiences can be anticipated, unanticipated, or non-

event centered transitions (Schlossberg et al., 2012). Anticipated event transitions would be predictable occurrences. Conversely, unanticipated event transitions would be unexpected occurrences that affect transitions. Understanding the type of transition, anticipated or unanticipated, that military veteran learners can be going through can help develop appropriate coping strategies. Equally important could be to identify how military veterans deal with obstacles faced during the transition process (Lazarowicz, 2015; Livingston et al., 2011). Unanticipated transitions and obstacles that military veteran learners can experience along the way can disrupt normal routines and cause unexpected barriers to success (Schlossberg et al., 2012). Clearly, unanticipated transitions can be more difficult for military veteran students than anticipated transitions, where the events are more predictable and expected.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

All adult learners have some sort of barriers to successful degree completion that may arise during their academic careers (Ellis, 2020). For military veterans there may be increased obstacles to higher education degree attainment than traditional learners (Livingston et al., 2011). To ensure that all groups have equal opportunity to have successful degree attainment, and proper career networking opportunities for postgraduation, institutions should look at the needs of military veterans transitioning to college (Norman et al., 2015; Strickley, 2009; Wilson, 2014).

The identification of the unique obstacles that military veterans face when transitioning from the military to the veteran's role as a civilian learner can help the veteran as well as the academic institutions to find supportive systems to aid in degree completion. By identifying the obstacles veterans face during their transition from soldier to civilian, academic administrators and the community at large can find or create campus resources and community resources to provide a less difficult transition. The identification of resources can offer well-rounded

supportive care and improve the number of military veterans who are able to complete their higher education degrees. It is important to improve the retention of transitioning military veterans in their higher education academic programs. The retention rates of military veterans can cause problems for college administrators, and government funding for admissions, due to learners starting but not completing their higher education degrees (Osam et al., 2017). The bigger issue with the retention of veterans in higher education degree programs is the fact that having no college degree can limit veteran competitive abilities in the workplace. This is a major concern because veterans maintaining gainful employment can improve their reintegration into their civilian lives and improve their quality-of-life post-military.

Identification and understanding of what social support systems that already exist and are available can also be compiled and potentially offered during orientation trainings to ensure greater success. Many institutions have data on how many learners at their institution are military and veteran learners, but do not have specific data on how many of those learners complete their degree requirements. Moreover, there is a lack of data on the specific support systems that are most imperative for military veteran learners to overcome obstacles to complete their degrees and make appropriate community connections for work after graduation. Further research can assist current and future veteran learners at academic institutions by offering appropriate supportive systems and improved educational practices.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter addresses theoretical assumptions underpinning this study's research design, ethical considerations, evaluation criteria, and researcher's self. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of military veterans who have completed their undergraduate degrees between 2017 and 2022, from a large university in a Midwestern city in the United States. I wondered how these veterans overcame the barriers of balancing their educational, personal, and academic responsibilities to transition to their civilian life and complete their higher education degrees. An overarching research question that guided this study was: How do military veterans transition from service experiences to academic and professional lives?

Additional research questions included:

- What obstacles, if any, do they encounter on the path to successful academic and professional career attainments?
- How do these veterans experience life-study-work balance in their lives?
- What are the systems of support that can be conducive to these graduates' success?

#### **Theoretical Lens**

Tinto's and Schlossberg's theories (1984, 2012, 1984) on the retention of adult learners, and attrition rates of adult learners provided the conceptual lens through which the experiences of this study's participants were studied. Tinto's theories (1993, 2012) helped shape research purpose and questions for this study. Schlossberg's transition theory (1984) guided the data analysis in terms of identifying obstacles faced by military veterans transitioning from one role and career, into a different role as an adult learner in a nonmilitary academic setting. The aforementioned theories proved to be beneficial for data gathering and analysis strategies to successfully transition from military to civilian life and complete a higher education degree.

### **Research Design: Case Study**

This study was conceived as a case study, which is the best fitting design to investigate the experiences of military veterans transitioning from their military service to civilian lives and particularly their pursuit of higher education. Case studies focus on an individual unit, person, group, organization, or event (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). A case study allows for examination of unique factors that shape outcomes. A case study is preferential for the review of events and adds sources of evidence as direct observation of the events studied as well as interviews of the persons involved in the events (Yin, 2014). A case study is used to capture the significance of a single case through examination activity within a particular circumstance (Stake, 1995). There are three types of case studies to include intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. An intrinsic case study is appropriate when a researcher wants to better understand a particular case. An instrumental case study is appropriate to gain clarity on the restructuring of a generalization. A collective case study is appropriate when a researcher seeks to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition.

Given the purposes of this study, I pursued an intrinsic case study to better understand the experiences of several military veterans transitioning to civilian their lives post-military, and their pursuit of higher education. By using an intrinsic case study, I focused on the individual cases of transitioning veteran participants (Yin, 2014). An intrinsic case study allows for the review of events and sources of evidence through direct observation of the events studied as well as interviews of the persons involved in the events (Yin, 2014). By conducting an intrinsic case study my research gave understandings about a particular situation experienced by members of a similar group.

Case studies are effective at answering the what of circumstances, while also discovering the why and how (Yin, 2014). Case studies can be explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive in nature. Explanatory case studies investigate the causal links between factors being reviewed. Exploratory case studies evaluate factors without seeking a clear set of outcomes. Descriptive case studies are used to describe a phenomenon within the context it occurred (Yin, 2014). This qualitative case study followed Yin's exploratory and descriptive categories.

### ***Participants and Site***

The participants in this qualitative case study were graduates from a four-year degree program who are military veterans. These military veterans have completed a four-year degree from the same public university in a midwestern city in the United States. I recruited eight participants. The site for the interviews was on a virtual zoom meeting, which was recorded for accurate transcription. These meetings were virtual due to the current pandemic with the Coronavirus, to maintain safety for the participants and myself.

An email was sent inviting participants to sign up for the case study from the military and veteran resource office on campus, to potential participants who completed their bachelor's degree between 2017 and 2022. Announcements in Facebook groups for military veterans, and university alumni was also sent to gain interested veteran participants after the original email did not generate interested participants using a solicitation letter (See Appendix D). A purposive sample was used to recruit participants. A purposive sample is based on locating participants whose characteristics are defined for a purpose that is relevant to the study (Andrade, 2021). Purposive sampling is based on specifying the characteristics of the participants of interest, then locating individuals with those characteristics (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). In this study the



recruitment was specific to military veterans, who have completed a 4-year degree, from the same university and shared their lived experiences.

### *Sources of Data and Methods of Data Collection*

I collected several sources of data for this study: interviews, field notes, and documents and artifacts.

**Interviews.** Qualitative interviews can provide insight about participant's experiences, thoughts, and beliefs (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). I employed semistructured interviews to gain authentic data about their experiences as military veterans, as well as reflections on their transitional experiences. Semistructured interviews use open-ended questions while leaving space for more questions to emerge during the interview (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Prior to the interview, I presented a consent form (Appendix A) to participants via email to inform them about the process and their rights. An interview guide (Appendix B) was created to keep the interview process in an organized manner. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted via a recorded zoom. I asked all questions in the same order of each participant, and Then I transcribed interviews and returned them to research participants via email within 24 hours of the interview for participants to confirm accuracy in the transcription. The participants' confirmation of the accuracy of interviews was to incorporate member checking of the data I obtained. Member checks are a tool to enhance the validity of the research findings as well as establishing trustworthiness and credibility of the research (Thomas, 2017). Transcripts were labeled with ID01-ID08 for the number of interviews 1-8. All participants returned transcripts communication within 24 hours and no transcripts were returned for review and/or corrections. Once the transcribed interviews were returned by the participants, pseudonyms were given to each participant to protect participants' identities.

**Field Notes.** Throughout the study, I kept a journal of observational and self-reflective notes gathered while conducting interviews and closely observing the participants. Field notes are the observations that are written by the researcher during interviews (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). These notes are useful for the researcher to have an analytic reference for what is observed visually in the social interaction with each participant. Therefore, I did not need to rely on my memory of what occurred during each interview to improve the understanding of the data collection for coding. Notes were recorded for emotional reactions to interview questions, identification of questions which may have been confusing, and the value coding for the categorized identification found from interview questions.

**Documents and Artifacts.** Documents in research are the written forms and visual communications used to collect data for research, and artifacts are any tangible items used in the research process (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). With regard to this study, I collected artifacts photographs of the campus and community resources that were of significant value to study participants. I used these artifacts to show visual representation of the resources that were used by participants for a variety of purposes.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis uses multiple approaches and methods to analyze the data collected, and coding is the term associated with qualitative data analysis (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The first step of coding comes from transcribing interviews. Codes allow the researcher to summarize, synthesize, link, and interpret data. I used coding to assign a word or short phrase to categorize the summation of data and identify themes (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Coding can be seen as the process to transition data from the collection of open content to the analysis and conceptualization of the that content, by assigning key words as codes for

common emerging themes. Two methods of finding meaning in qualitative research are direct interpretation of an individual's experience, as well as through aggregation of common instances among participants (Stake, 1995). There are four different coding methods: In Vivo, Process, Emotion, and Value Coding (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). In Vivo coding focuses on the participant's responses that are not generated by the interviewer's questions. Codes extracted in the in vivo stage typically offer organic responses that provide natural quality. Process coding in an interview would focus on the assigning action and will typically be gerunds that end with "ing." In Vivo coding was the first level of coding in this case study to identify the participant's use of language and terminology. In Vivo coding was seen with the acronyms that were used by multiple participants for different support systems, military jargon, and common military phrases, such as, "*Be all you can be in the Army.*"

Emotion coding focuses on the distinctive thoughts, psychological and biological state of research participants (Goleman, 1995). Emotion coding highlights specific emotions revealed during interviews and seeks to identify specific triggers for those emotions. I used emotion coding from my reflective journal as the second level of coding with this research. I recorded in my reflective journal how different questions from the interview guide (Appendix B), elicited emotional responses when events were recalled.

Value coding reviews the values, attitudes, or beliefs that participants assign to a particular subject. Value coding is appropriate for almost all qualitative studies, and specifically those that seek to explore cultural values, identity concerns, and actions in a case study. I used value coding during interviews, and in coding of field notes, artifacts, and my research journal as the third level and final level of coding with the coding of this research. The value coding was assigned to the cultural identity as a service member veteran, a nontraditional learner, and steps

taken by participants to gain support in their transition from military to adult learner, and then again from adult learner to professional employment, which were the categorized questions on the interview guide.

Coding allows for qualitative research to transition from categories to emerging themes (Saldaña, 2015). The transition from categories to emerging themes is to take the data from open coding to conceptualized coding (Saldaña, 2015). I used several cycles of coding that allowed me to identify themes and group these themes to create a synthesis of the collective data. The first cycle of coding looked at the research questions and captured key themes that emerged from the interviews (See Table 2). The second round of coding looked at the emotions express by participants of this study. The third and final round of coding reflected on Tinto's theory on student retention (1993) of adult learners, and attrition rates of adult learners, and Schlossberg's transition theory (1984) of adult learners (See Appendix E.).

### **Validation Criteria and Ethical Considerations**

Research that has value is made stronger by its measure of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The trustworthiness of research involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility comes from the truth and facts of the findings. Dependability comes from the ability to repeat the research within the same context. Transferability allows the research to be done successfully when applied to other contexts. Confirmability comes from the findings of the study and is shaped by the responders, while not being influenced by bias, personal motivation, or personal interests of the researcher. Throughout the study, I have made effort to be honest and transparent in the collection and analysis of data, while adhering to the criteria for credibility and confirmability

After each interview, the participants were sent a transcript of their interview to verify the transcribed interview accurately recorded participant's intended responses. This form of verification with participants is known as member checking. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) explained that member checking is one of the methods to check credibility to further add integrity to the research data collected. I followed up with participants to ensure I accurately captured their intended answers for this qualitative case study.

Triangulation is used to increase the credibility or trustworthiness of a research findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Triangulation is used to seek the convergence and corroboration of results to inferences, interpretations, and conclusions from varying methods studying the same phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). I used triangulation to increase the credibility or trustworthiness of the research findings. For this study, triangulation of data sources included interviews and field notes safeguarding me against potential researcher's bias.

Validation criteria also included thick and rich descriptions of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rich and thick are adjectives used to describe the breadth of data. Rich data are based on the quality of data and thick is based on the quantity. I used both rich and thick descriptions of the data that include layers of detailed documented experiences, and thick with numerous amounts of useful information used to code and explain findings.

Qualitative research is designed to offer reflection and reflexivity of data and to find the meaning for outcomes (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Reflexivity allows researchers to reflect on actions, reaction, and interactions to lead to different circumstances and outcomes. This reflection allows for analysis of individual experiences, and what a variety of people do in reaction to similar circumstances. I practiced reflexivity by continually keeping a journal of observations and self-reflective notes. Prior to data collection, I completed training to

comprehend social and behavioral research and obtained the institutional review board (IRB) for permission to conduct research with human subjects (see Appendices C and D).

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis**

Conducting the interviews, and logging observations provided the foundation for the findings and results of this study. Participants openly shared their experiences, and any emotions or feelings that resulted from those experiences when answering research questions which provided an insightful understanding of participants' experiences. I used interview questions to explore the participants' backgrounds, identification as a nontraditional learner, transition experience, obstacles with work-life-study balance, and systems of support used during their transition. This study has begun by seeking ways to support veterans transitioning from their military careers to civilian lives and fulfilling their educational goals.

This chapter introduces the eight participants who all were military veterans during their undergraduate studies. These participants were all above 24 years of age, making them nontraditional learners and fit into a category of learners who have increased difficulty in completing their higher education degrees based on competing responsibilities in their lives (Ellis, 2020; Pratt, 2017). Data analysis consisted of several iterations of coding interview transcripts and supportive data sources, which, in turn, has generated meaningful themes that, in essence, represent the findings of this study.

### **Introducing the Participants**

The participants of this study included five female and three male veterans. All participants were parents while pursuing their higher education degrees, and seven out of the eight veterans were enrolled in mental health services during their undergraduate studies. All participants had formerly been members of the active-duty military. Two participants began college while still in the military and completed their degrees post-military. Table 1 provides basic demographic information about the participants.

**Table 1***Demographic Information of Participants*

# of participants	Participants' pseudonym	Participants' age range	Participants' family structure	Degree obtained
1	Nancy	Late 20s- early 30s	Single parent	BS in Education
2	Sara	30s	Married with children	BS in Social Work
3	Teddy	50s	Single Parent	BS in Business and Finance
4	Derek	30s	Married with children	BS in Engineering
5	Jazzy	Late 20s- early 30s	Single parent	BS in Social Work
6	May	Late 30s – early 40s	Single parent	BS in Business and Finance
7	Tami	30s	Single parent	BS in Business and Finance
8	Danny	30s	Married with children	BS in Social Work

**Nancy**

Nancy is a military veteran and a single parent. She described her background as disadvantaged, with limited college enrollments and she was not expected to attend college after high school. She explained that having children early in life, and not having proper family planning was considered normal. Nancy went to the military to change her environment and her outlook on life in hopes of changing her anticipated future. Post-military she enrolled into



college to pursue her dream job as a teacher. She self-identified as a nontraditional learner and discussed the obstacles she faced being a nontraditional learner. This is how Nancy described her experience before joining the military and the obstacles of being a nontraditional learner:

Well, I grew up on the east coast, and at first, I tried to go to college, and I could not afford it. And then I kept talking to different recruiters. And I'm like, you know, what, instead of me staying home, and probably either getting pregnant, shot, or just not progressing in my life, I think I need to get out of here. So, I joined when I was 19. And then I joined the military. Well, I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher, I just did not have the means to go to college. [...] I was not your traditional student, somebody like me, a mom somebody who's a little older. I guess it was hard finding people to really connect with because all the other students were in their early 20s, when I went to school I was in my late 20s, early 30s, and none of them had kids, had experienced the military life, had been married and then divorced, like, none of them had those experiences. So, it was really hard to connect with people. I would always go to the vet center because that's where my people were.

Nancy experienced a difficult transition from the military due to some unanticipated events during her transition. Moreover, during her transition, she got divorced, which resulted in changes in family dynamics and overall family support system. Such changes in her daily routines, support system, and family structure inevitably led to barriers to her successful degree completion. The unanticipated events of leaving the military without planning for housing and employment, coupled with getting a divorce during her transition caused increased difficulty with her degree completion.

**Sara**

Sara is a military veteran who had a husband and two children while attending her undergraduate program. She joined the military after one semester of college, when she realized she was not ready to continue her education after high school. Her family has had many college graduates, and college was an expectation in her family. Post-military college seemed like the next step towards accomplishing her goals in life. Sara self-identified as a nontraditional learner because of her increased responsibility while she was a student due to having a husband and children. By the time she entered college, Sara was over 24 years of age. Sara seems to be the story of a typical nontraditional learner in a traditional classroom environment. This is how she described some of her experience:

That's (college) always been a value in my family, my parents have always pushed that. I actually dropped out of my first semester freshman year at a community college. So, I wasn't really ready to go to school, I wasn't really getting anywhere I was a bartender. So, I just figured, maybe the military would provide a sense of direction, I guess. When I got out of the military, I kind of decided I wanted to go into college.

Sara explained her self-identification as a nontraditional learner as:

Me, student, parent, really, student parent. And kind of going along with that is usually just folks that maybe don't quite fit the age range that we know what you think of a traditional college students who instead of being that 18, to like 22, typically think of, you know, 23 plus years of age. I have kids, I'm married have dogs, you know, we had a house. Just all those extra responsibilities as a nontraditional student.

Sara decided to join the military and therefore postpone her college education, just like one of her friends. Sara's spouse and parents supported her decision to leave the military. However,

even with the support system at home, Sara experienced difficulty navigating in the higher education setting due to time spent away from school and having more responsibilities than her traditional student peers.

### **Teddy**

Teddy is a military veteran who began his college coursework while still enlisted in the active-duty military more than 20 years ago. His family and work obligations made school less of a priority while still in the military. Teddy found it necessary to put his educational goals on the backburner while in the military, and for multiple years post-military due to having work and family obligations that had competing responsibilities for him. Once his children were all adults, he pursued his higher education. Teddy explained his formative years did not have the best structure, and he needed a change in his environment to have a more successful future, and this was his primary reason for joining the military. He was fortunate to not have unanticipated events during his military to college transition, and his transition was relatively smooth. He explained that he had a set of priorities that included securing his employment, housing, taking care of his family, and then finishing his college education post-military. His transition was a planned retirement. Teddy described his experience as follows:

Well, it seems the only thing to do once you start serving in the military, you have goals that just get off the street. It was an easy way to get off the out of the neighborhood. And pay for college. Changed my environment. But then after a while, you start to realize that education is a part of growing up. So, I pursued my higher learning while I was serving, and finished after serving. It wasn't hard for me to transition because of the fact that when I left off active duty, my first goal was to make sure that I had an education and a civilian home. So, I can find a civilian job in relation to what I was doing in the military.

Even with a lack of obstacles during his transition, Teddy recognized that it was not easy to return to school after many years away from it. He considered himself a nontraditional learner because of his age upon his degree completion being in his 50s. This is how he described his nontraditional views and experiences:

Well, outside of the norm, online learning other means of being on a campus versus being on a campus. I had to relearn subjects that I had not done for quite some time, like math, and I needed help to do the work, which I got from those who helped tutor me.

Teddy took a long winding road to successful degree completion. He was supporting a wife and four underage children when he began college, which is why he had to take time off and then return to his studies several times. Ultimately, Teddy completed his degree requirements after his retirement from the military. By then, his oldest three children also obtained their own college degrees.

### **Derek**

Derek decided to join the military because he wanted to distance himself from some negative situations and influences in life and straighten himself out, yet the military had always been something he wanted to do in life. After leaving the military, Derek pursued higher education in order to remain competitive in the workforce and set a good example for his children. At that time, he was married and had two children under age five. Family and work responsibilities certainly make Derek a nontraditional learner. This is how he describes some of his transitioning experiences:

So, I always wanted to go to the military. When I was younger, I was unable to due to financial restrictions and my family needs. Then I got a little older, and I was able to get this path lined up, I got myself into some situations where I needed to essentially, vacate

from some bad situations in my life, I used the military as an opportunity for me to straighten those things out. I needed something concrete. I needed a foundation beneath me, felt the military would give me the discipline and tools needed for that. I joined as an opportunity to move forward in my life and straighten myself out. So, the military afforded me the opportunity at essentially no financial bearing on myself after serving, to be able to further my education and make more opportunities open for me. With getting my degree, it afforded me essentially opportunities that they would otherwise overlook me because I did not have a higher education. I was the first one in my family to get my degree, that was a big deal to me, and setting the example for my children.

Derek struggled quite a bit when adjusting to college experiences as a nontraditional learner:

Somebody that's more like a hands on or has a little bit more of a dynamic way of learning different from that of somebody who is a textbook or classroom learner. I need to be able to do something, have my hands on it, do the clicks, do the keystrokes, do the motions. Not always just have everything just in black and white texts for me to go ahead and study, but more or less, have more conversations have more of an open forum to discuss it and really implement the practices that are expected.

Additionally, Derek had to deal with various challenges in his civilian life, trying to provide for his family. He changed his occupations several times so that he could find the job that fits with his military core values, and at the same time provides for his family needs. Worth-noting is that Derek had to take care of his mental health, which was likely to be a life-long process. These unanticipated events and obstacles during his military to civilian education transition caused increased difficulty with his degree completion.

**Jazzy**

Jazzy is a military veteran and a single parent. She joined the military to escape her neighborhood and make a living. Upon leaving the military she decided to pursue her higher education to set an example for her children as to how to accomplish one's goals. In fact, college was always a goal for her. Jazzy thinks of herself as a nontraditional learner because she attended college when in her 30s and she had children to take care of while in college. Jazzy described her experience as follows:

I decided to serve in the military, I was about 19 when I am listed, and it's one of those things was having like a challenging time financially with college, grew up in a rough neighborhood. It was one of those things where I was just trying to look for a better alternative for my life, and to try to get away from certain environmental factors as well family factors, I did not have a lot of family support, a lot of family members that were struggling with substance use and things like that. For me, it was kind of an escape. [...] For me, (college) was definitely something that I always wanted to do. After I had my two sons, it became more important to show them that no matter what struggles you faced in life, or no matter how long it may take you, you can accomplish your goals. My number one was to prove to myself even though all this time has passed you can do it, and to show my sons that if you have a dream for your goals go after it.

Jazzy shared her experience as a nontraditional learner as: "Since I am in my 30s, starting college, and also a student parent, makes me nontraditional. I have a lot of responsibilities that the traditional college student would not."

Jazzy encountered some challenges when transitioning from her military to civilian life. She was divorced and had several health concerns. During her transition she also found that her

two preteen aged children had health concerns that required special attention. Clearly, such challenges made her degree completion difficult.

### **May**

May is a military veteran and single parent. She described her reason for joining the military as a way to find direction in life after high school. Post-military she decided to pursue a higher education to be more competitive in the job market. May self-identified as a nontraditional learner due to having a different learning style from traditional lecture hall format and being a single parent while attending college. May describes her experience as follows:

I decided to serve in the military because upon leaving high school because I really did not have an agenda for my life. I did not really want to go to college. And I felt like honestly, like I needed the discipline and the change in my life. And a recruiter spoke with me, and I was hooked right after that conversation. I decided to pursue my higher education because I felt as if it was kind of a requirement to move up and in organizations and in the company, and so I did not want me not having it to limit me from promotions and moving up in the company, so I just decided to pursue it.

Nontraditional would-be online students, or students who take a few classes here and there and is not the traditional in schoolteacher learning environment. I consider myself a nontraditional student because I learned from the books that I read, I don't learn from a lecture or someone who's literally talking to me, or just reading books and submitting essays or submitting papers regarding the literature that we read.

May had unanticipated events during her military to civilian transition. She experienced divorce, which left her the single parent with three children of elementary school aged to rear. The need to provide for her children, and her desire to complete her higher education degree affected her

mental and physical health. It also affected the quality time she was able to have with her children during their milestone years from toddlers to preteens. The challenges May experienced made her degree completion difficult.

### **Tami**

Tami is a military veteran and mother who joined the military due to the call to service from the media after the attacks in New York on September 11, 2001. Her family expected her to attend college after high school and were not expecting her decision to enlist. Post-military she enrolled in college as that was the next thing to accomplish and it was an expectation from her family. Tami self-identified as a nontraditional learner because she attended college while being a single parent in her late twenties. Tami stated:

I decided to serve in the military because I was in high school when 911 occurred. And I think there was just so much publicity. With the military, it was everywhere, suddenly, they were just advertising, you know, having careers in the military. And every time you turn on the TV, there was recruiters all over the place in the malls, you know, places where I would hang out with my friends. And it just kind of spoke to me, and it was something that my family wasn't expecting, but I just felt like it was the right move, for me. It wasn't anything that I wanted to do my whole childhood, you know, I feel like I was just surrounded by it, and then kind of bought into it. I've always wanted to get a bachelor's degree. I feel like that was my standard that I wanted to set for myself. I wanted to have a good career with a decent salary. There aren't a lot of bachelor's degrees in my family, but that was definitely something that I wanted to pursue myself. [...]

Nontraditional student, to me sounds like maybe an individual who did not follow the road that everyone else follows like college right after high school, and then graduating



by the time you're 22. Getting a degree, I feel like a nontraditional student would be anyone who probably went into the military first, or maybe even took a break after high school and decided to come back to college later on.

Like other participants, Tami experienced quite a bit of challenges in her transition from the military to civilian life. She left the military due to becoming pregnant while on military deployment overseas. Upon leaving the military, she was divorced and relocated to pursue her degree. She changed her major three times which led to additional years of coursework to complete her degree. The unanticipated obstacles of unplanned parenthood and enrolling into college without a clear career path decided caused increased difficulty with her degree completion.

### **Danny**

Danny is a military veteran who felt compelled to join the military as a patriotic response to the attacks on September 11, 2001. He then went on multiple tours of duty in foreign countries serving in the military. Post-military he believed a college education was necessary to be competitive in the workforce marketplace. Danny self-identified as a nontraditional learner due to attending college after a divorce and being in his late twenties. This is how Danny describes his transitioning experiences:

The September 11, attacks on New York (motivated me to join). After my second deployment, I decided to leave the active-duty military. Most of the government jobs or jobs that seem to pay well enough to raise a family seem to want a college degree. And so that was part of my part of my choice to go to college initially.

Danny shared his experience as a nontraditional learner as:

Well, for me, it's frustration. So nontraditional students generally means students that are sort of an afterthought for big state schools, in my opinion. The first time I heard nontraditional student I submitted all my paperwork and stuff to my college, and I was visiting my grandmother in who had cancer. They college called me and said, we saw you're scheduled for new students testing next week, before you begin classes and we saw you have military service, you're actually a nontraditional student, not a new student. Well, what does that mean? They're like, well, you know, we have different scheduled times for nontraditional students. I said, Okay, well, then I guess, just put me in one of those. And they're like, well, we don't have any more of those left. But we're doing some a week after the semester starts. And I was like, oh well, can I pick my classes now then? And they said, no, you cannot pick your classes until you've done the testing. And I was like, well, what's the difference between new student testing and I guess me nontraditional slash old student testing? And they said, was the same tests, just different groups? I said, well then just put me back in the new student testing and you can switch me back after I do it. They were like, no, we cannot do that. That really affected my experience early on.

Danny encountered several challenges during his transition from the military to civilian life. He left the military during a government shutdown, which left him without the proper documentation to begin seeking care from the Veterans Administration hospital. Post-military Danny divorced and had issues with housing and paying for his living expenses. These unanticipated events and obstacles caused increased difficulty with his degree completion.

Overall, the participants of this study share common experiences as military veterans returning to civilian life and pursuing higher education and professional careers, and at the same time, each participant has paved their unique path to success.

### **A Path to Success: Thematic Analysis**

When searching answers to the research questions, I reviewed interview transcripts several times making sure not to miss essential information about the participants. Data analysis went through several cycles of coding, which ultimately resulted in identification of meaningful themes (Table 2). When coding transcripts, I searched for the details of the participants' experiences during their transition from the military to civilian life, particularly, their college experiences as nontraditional learners. Additionally, I identified specific experiences of the participants through the lens of two theories that inform this study: Tinto's (1993, 2012) theory of student retention and conceptualizing conditions for student's success, as well Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory (see Appendix F).

Ultimately, as a result of data analysis, I identified the following three interrelated themes: "Transitioning from Military Service to Civilian Life;" "Work-Life-Study Balance: Confronting Challenges;" and "Supporting Military Veterans." Please see Table 2 for the graphical data of the emergent themes and subthemes from the data analysis.

**Table 2***Emergent Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
Transitioning from Military	Expected Events,
Service to Civilian Life	Unexpected Events
Work-Life-Study Balance: Confronting Challenges	Overcoming Obstacles with Prioritized Scheduling
Supporting Military	Campus Resources
Veterans	Community Resources
	Family and Social Systems of Support

**Transitioning from Military to Civilian Life**

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of participants as they transitioned from military service to civilian life, and from college to career. While all participants share many common experiences on their path to success in obtaining academic degrees and the challenges they encountered, each of their stories represents a unique tale of a military veteran. A review of some of the transitional obstacles is detailed in the following. What stands out in the participants' transitioning experiences is how they describe such experiences as expected or unexpected, or both, events in their lives.

***Expected and Unexpected Events During Transition***

One of the common experiences that the participants of this study share is their drive to succeed in life after military service. In fact, some of participants come from families encouraging their education and they have high expectations of them to succeed academically.

Their path to success is often ridden with challenges (e.g., health concerns, the breakdown of an immediate family, or the lack of job opportunities). Even though some of the participants' parents did not expect them to get a college degree after the military service, the participants themselves sought higher education to become more competitive on a job market and to set an example for their children.

Low socioeconomic status or unfavorable life circumstances prompted the participants to choose military service with the hope to achieve a better life, and military benefits for education played a crucial role in their choice to pursue college education. Some participants received a parent scholarship as one of the benefits. Others sought additional grants to pay for their education and living expenses while in school. Nancy explained her obstacle with an unexpected transition as:

I wasn't prepared because I was trying to reenlist. Well, things weren't submitted in time.

I honestly wasn't even; I did not really know how to manage my life. At the time, I had two kids in a small duplex and there was just like months that I just could not pay my rent and I was on like, going to food banks to get food and I really hit a dead-end okay.

Nancy's transition from military to college presented some significant hardships. As previously mentioned, Nancy was divorced upon leaving the military, which made her a single parent. After becoming a single parent, she encountered financial concerns that affected her ability to provide as a single mother to two daycare aged children.

Tami stated:

When I left the military, it was kind of bittersweet. That would be more memorable for me. I was pregnant. When I was in Iraq, I found out I was pregnant in Iraq. So, and I was in a warzone, and I had this baby inside of me. And I was like, I have to choose one or

the other. And my unit is deploying every other year. And so, I decided to leave, that was kind of hard for me. It was hard to make that decision. And I felt like a disappointment too. So, I think I have negative feelings with my departure from the military. The reasons for difficulty in the military to civilian transition included health, employment, and housing concerns.

Sara expected transitional support from the veteran service office on campus to aid in her transition from the military to a military friendly school. Sara explained:

I expected to get more support, from my understanding is leadership at that time at that [vet] office was kind of toxic. So, they were not a very supportive office at all. It was very unexpected not to really get the support or the help, or you know, have that very unwelcoming environment in that office. Especially since on campus at the time, and now is supposed to be a very military friendly campus.

Danny described his challenges as follows:

Getting divorced and getting out of the military during the government shutdown they weren't even really doing preparation stuff for people leaving, they would not print my medical records or anything. I did not anticipate the inflexibility of state schools. It never occurred to me that schools might champion themselves as military-friendly, simply because they have so many military people going there, not because they're actually military-friendly. I could not get them to comp, any of my undergraduate stuff, the very basic stuff that, you know, I had on my transcript, and that was just so frustrating to me. I said, I'll just I'll have to just figure out how to fix this for other people. I burned a bunch of my personal time driving back and forth to the state capital and getting legislators to pass a bill forcing the state school system to give military students transfer credits. That

ended up cutting about, you know, three semesters off my undergrad. My school originally advertised themselves as accepting Joint Service transcript credits. Then when I got there, they gave me like four or five Ed credits. I have all these all these military service credits very applicable to my degree program credits, and I'm not certain why I'm not getting them. But that's something that my college is very behind in, other Midwestern states have streamlined that stuff.

Despite unanticipated events that caused challenges during their transitions from the military to civilian life and education, all participants completed their degrees.

The participants confronted challenges in terms of finding professional employment after graduation. The participants referred to veteran career fairs as networking opportunities with employers in their field. Social networking is one of the social supports that can assist in ensuring a successful transition from college to employment. Tami explained her frustration with the lack of networking as: "It's like, you have to be in the know you've got to know somebody." May echoed: "It would be nice if organizations could have like a network night or if they can provide resources or emails." Jazzy believes that institutions may want to consider changing the structure in the senior year at academic institutions to allow for connection to employers be incorporated in the curriculum as follows: "I think like in the last year of school, maybe that senior year, allowing, like, maybe creating more opportunities where students are being connected with you know, businesses or people in the community."

Regardless of various life challenges, all participants found gainful employment after graduation. What is truly remarkable about the participants' experiences is that they were able to overcome homelessness, loss of daily routines in the military, and survive navigating campus life and graduate. The participants demonstrated stamina in persevering through all

obstacles they faced, while still managing their family responsibilities, and overcoming any obstacles that arose during their undergraduate studies. Clearly some participants experienced more obstacles than other participants. Some participants became single parents upon leaving the military, which resulted in significant changes in their family support systems. Others experienced health concerns, which made their ability to prioritize college, because coursework came secondary to their own self-preservation needs.

### **Work-Life-Study Balance: Confronting Challenges**

As previously mentioned, the participants of this study were parents during their undergraduate studies, and in most cases, being responsible for rearing children delayed their degree completion. Clearly, parental responsibilities do not always allow for an equitable balance between work, life, and study. So, how did the participants of this study maintain a balance in their lives? What were the obstacles that they experienced along the way? The identified obstacles which affected participant's life balance during their undergraduate degree pursuits were their schedules, competing obligations between work-family-school, and ensuring that their mental and physical health were addressed in real time to ensure they did not have any breakdowns when trying to accomplish goals. Additionally, such obstacles included divorce, unexpected health diagnoses for self and children, issues with childcare to attend classes, and trouble connecting to peers who were traditional learners and who had less life experience.

For instance, maintaining work-life-study balance represented a tremendous challenge due to health issues of the participants, their spouses, or children. This is how Nancy described her challenge of finding appropriate childcare:

I had to rely on finding someone that wasn't really reliable. There were nights that I had to take my kids to school with me. And they had to sit in class. I had an incident where



one of the professors actually made me sit outside because she did not want my kids in the classroom. I would not want anybody to be embarrassed like that. Because why are you punishing me? She actually was the only professor that had a problem.

One of the challenges of balancing work, school, and family in their lives had to do with establishing priorities. The participants of this study admitted that they often had to choose as to whether they should prioritize work and study over family, or family over work and study. For instance, May explained that she initially prioritized her work and education above her family obligations and had to shift her focus at some point to maintain better balance as follows:

To make sure that work life balance, I can always get another job, but my kids, you know, my family will now always come first. Sometimes you don't even realize that what you're doing until you stop and see the effects, and how it's affecting those around you. And then you realize, and you know, I haven't been putting my family first.

Due to prioritizing some responsibilities over the others in their lives, the participants of this study experienced increased difficulties to maintain good grades while working and raising children. May explained her difficulty with maintaining work-life-school balance as:

I want to say that it was it at times it was stressful, because I was in an environment where I had children and responsibilities, I was actually working two jobs and going to school at some point. So therefore, I did not always achieve the best grades in my bachelor's either.

Other obstacles that are faced during their military to college transition come from veterans' own health concerns, while simultaneously having changes in family structure and support systems. Jazzy explained that she had unexpected health concerns, coupled with a change in her family dynamic as major obstacles to success:

When I first started, I was going through a divorce with my ex-husband, who was in the military. Dealing with my own mental health during that time having, PTSD, depression, and anxiety, in addition to other physiological medical stuff as well.

The challenge of having to provide for one's family while simultaneously pursuing degree attainment was an obstacle faced by all participants in this study. For instance, Derek explained:

I would say if I could find one, it would be a financial hardship of being able to afford living, providing for a family and finding time to be able to go to school and making all that work the juggle.

The need to take care of financial obligations can take a precedence in a transitioning veteran's life, especially when they have a family depending on them for support. Health concerns may be a part of a veteran's transition from military to college. Having the need to take care of one's own mental and physical health needs can cause a barrier to their ability to learn and complete assigned work timely. The stress of managing one's own health concerns coupled with health concerns for children proved to be an obstacle for participants of this study. A major step to help overcome obstacles for participants in this study included scheduling management.

### ***Overcoming Obstacles With Prioritized Scheduling***

Overcoming obstacles for this study participants required creating and maintaining a strict schedule that prioritized the competing areas in their lives. To overcome the competing schedules participants created an order of priority for their schedules that included work-family-school. The participants of this study detailed the expense of prioritizing work over school and family, or school over work and family, or family over work and school. Prioritizing schedules in their lives entailed choosing one area over the other, which affected the outcomes on the other areas. The participants also shared the steps that they used to better maintain a better work-life-

study balance, which included using family support, campus support, and community support, along with structured time management. For instance, Teddy explained his ability to balance competing responsibilities as: “I followed a schedule, and got help from family, friends, and the tutoring center.” Nancy explained: “It was school (I prioritized), I did not really pay attention too much to my kids. And I felt like I tried, but then I just get overwhelmed.”

This is how Sara described her prioritization:

I definitely prioritized my education, I put a lot of pressure and a lot of stress on my marriage. I was definitely at school a lot. Having two young kids at home I had the kids in daycare for the entire amount of the day, I think that they like opened at 7 a.m. and did not close to like 6 p.m., and some days the kids were there at like all day.

When participants entered college, they may have chosen easy classes to allow them re-acclimated to the schedule to college and finding balance between multiple obligations. One participant explained that her priorities shifted during her undergraduate studies in order to manage competing responsibilities. Jazzy explained her shift in priorities over time as follows:

In the beginning, work and family was a priority just because of needing to provide as a single parent. I think towards maybe halfway towards the tail end of it that priority shifted to school, and children only because if I finish this we get in a better situation, and so I had to shift that priority to where I need to make this happen.

May also identified that she shifted from prioritizing work and school to prioritizing family and work to maintain better balance as follows:

I prioritized, I want to say, work. I would not say school, but I definitely prioritized work, mostly. I learned that definitely was probably not the right thing to do. It was because of the pressure. It depleted me, and when it came to family, those years went by so fast, I

wasn't seeing my kids all the time. The babysitter was with my babies more than they were with mom. I feel as if that was a life lesson learned. To make sure that work life balance, I can always get another job, but my kids, you know, my family will now always come first. Sometimes you don't even realize that's what you're doing until you stop and see the effects, and how it's affecting those around you. Then you realize, and you know, I haven't been putting my family first. I want to say that when I started to get in my groove, I definitely put my family first. I realized that when I put my family first everything came together, work second, school third, it actually worked out, you know, it actually worked out even if that meant, you know, putting the kids to bed on time, and then doing my studies and staying up. That meant doing stuff during scheduled times. That meant making sure that I had time for work in the mornings, I had time for my kids in the evenings I had time for school on scheduled dates.

Other participants would make sure to balance their time between work and family prior to school, which lead to late nights up studying after everyone at home was asleep or using a community resource such as the library. Overall, prioritization of schedules was paramount for participants' attempt to maintain appropriate balance between their busy lives and studies. The participants admitted that family took priority above work and education. This is how Derek explained his method to balance competing responsibilities:

Time management, making sure that those around you are fulfilled and supported with what they need. While you're also having to juggle your mental health and making sure that you can continue to perform in all the areas necessary the best you can. I called upon my wife to help support; time management helped me get organized to get everything kind of in line. After my wife and my kids were in bed, I would stay up late by would not

sleep and get my schoolwork done every night. So, my priority was family and work and then school because school was something that I could go back to if I needed to later on.

But everything else cannot wait, bill collectors don't wait, family doesn't stop.

The need to prioritize one's family and work often delays plans for graduation. Therefore, for some participants it took longer than for others to complete the degree requirements. This is what Tami said about her time management:

I changed my degree quite a few times. I first started going, I actually took one course when I was 18. And that was before I went into the military, I took one course my dad wanted me to try it out. Just to make sure I wanted to go into the military just to kind of see what my options were. Then when I was 25, I got a divorce. So, it took me I want to say about 10 years. I started when I was 25, I'm 35 now. I went parttime and it wasn't always consecutive semesters. I ended up needing to do homework, I'd be up until one o'clock in the morning, or I would have to leave the house and go to the library.

Sometimes I'd have to take a trip to the library. I had children. So that was a big obstacle, I could not dedicate all of my time to study time. I also found that I had to frequently take breaks to take care of my children, you know, and take care of the household. So that was a real struggle for me trying to balance the home with the school.

It took Teddy several years to complete his degree precisely because of other responsibilities:

Over a period of 20 something years, you know, I had breaks in between going to school, and working, military. So, my education did not follow the normal process of graduating high school, going to college for years so forth.

The need to shift priorities can make adult learners, such as the participants of this study, focus more on school as their degree program progresses. However, having family and parental

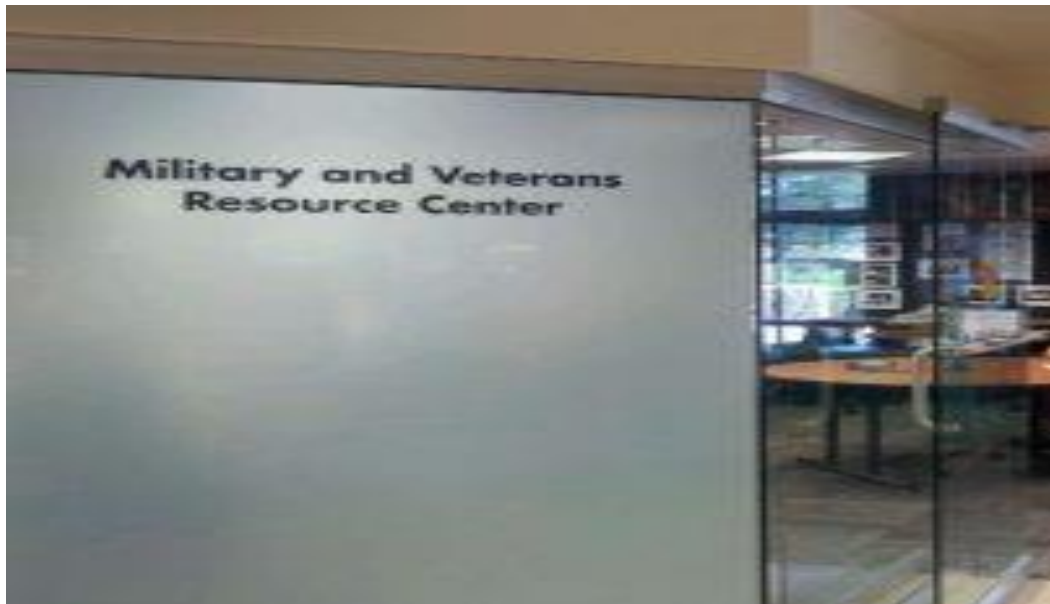
responsibilities creates another shift in priorities, whereas education has to take a back seat. How can military veterans be supported in order for them to attain college degrees and desirable employment?

### **Supporting Military Veterans**

In order for this study participants to overcome obstacles and maintain balance in their lives, they had to have a strong support system on campus and beyond. The participants of this study made use of several resources that assisted them in obtaining college degree. Such resources included: the campus veteran center, the scholarship office for parents, communication with counselors and faculty, or tutoring. However, those participants who had family obligations took online courses and therefore could not benefit from tutoring, counseling, or services of veteran's center typically offered during regular work hours.

### ***Campus Resources***

The participants of this study singled out the campus tutoring center as a valuable resource to them to complete tremendously difficult coursework. Accordingly, the veteran's center was of much value in terms of networking with other veterans. It is important to note that the veteran's center in the participants' institution did not consist of all veteran's staff, which led to a toxic environment between staff and veterans at that time, due to lack of commonality and understanding. The most valuable resource for the participants of this study was the scholarship office that provided students who were parents with additional financial assistance and supportive services for veterans who had under adult aged children while attending college. The following images portray the Military and Veteran Resource center and the Children's Learning Center that were used by the participants of this study campus resources (see Figures 2 and 3).

**Figure 2***Military and Veterans Resource Center on Campus Used by Participants*

*Note.* This is a photograph of the military and veteran's resource center on the university campus where the study's participants attended their undergraduate studies.

**Figure 3***Campus Daycare Center*

*Note.* Actual campus daycare center for student parents attending this university to enroll their children age birth to 12.

### *Lack of Campus Resources*

When exploring the campus resources that would have made degree obtainment easier, the participants of this study singled out counseling and tutoring available beyond regular work hours. Some participants suggested that the dean of students take a serious look at creating a department that focuses on student parents, such as the student parent center, which was not available to them during their studies at that institution. For instance, Jazzy said:

I think if there was more resources for parents navigating, just more resources for student parents. Have something more specialized, that focused on parents for with children with a disability, I felt like I was navigating like a lot of things all at once and did not necessarily know what resources were available.

May also felt a resource center for parents would be beneficial:

I think that's just a place where, you know, you can learn all your benefits when it comes to grants, and how to balance work and life as students, and what military resources and benefits are available. I mean, I think schools should be reaching towards that to make it easier for people to come. And I felt like it was like a puzzle, it was very difficult to find.

Some participants attended only evening courses to complete their bachelor's degrees. They said that there were no campus resources that were available to them due to the campus faculty and centers closing at 4:30 p.m. Derek explained:

I think if there was something where if there was a counselor who actually would stop by during the evening courses because you're not on campus, you don't live around campus you're not, you know, on campus like other students would be. But if there was a counselor or somebody that or tutor or something that would stop by and check in and actually pull you aside for a few minutes, you know, during your semesters and just say,



“what can we do for you?,” that's something like that would be a little bit more utilized.

And I think it would be more beneficial for, for the folks who are just already having time management and things going on.

Notably, online programs allowed flexibility for the participants of this study to pursue their higher education degrees. The participants agreed that institutions could offer weekend courses and access to tutoring and faculty for working adults as well.

### ***Community Resources***

The participants of this study made use of several community resources that were the most useful during their degree pursuit, such as for instance, food pantry services, childcare that was near the campus, and nonprofit churches and organizations. These organizations provided activities for the families, clothing items, as well as supplies and food for the household. The community support services also provided networking opportunities for veterans struggling with their transition to meet others in the community to have peer support. Participants also identified a need for use of the Veteran's Administration (VA) hospital, and additional education and support benefits from the VA. The following image portrays the VA hospital that was used by participants of this study as a community resource (see Figure 4).

## Figure 4

### *Veterans Administration Hospital Used by Participants*



*Note.* Actual hospital attended by participants of this study, located in the Midwest Region in the United States.

As an example, this is what Nancy said about her use of community resources:

I had support from the community but for veterans specifically. When I was having difficulties with like, paying my rent and stuff, I could not even get a job. I was just using my GI bill at the time. And then I ended up using Vocational Rehabilitation (from the VA).

Teddy stated: “I used the vocational rehabilitation with the VA. My VOC rehab counselors and the Veterans Administration and my chapter 31 benefits were the most useful during college.”

Jazzy explained:

There were some resources like the parenting network, which was really great. Like, they have a lot of like, family oriented, like workshops and things like that. Different events where you can bring children and they usually provide like, babysitting, and you know, dinners, the Women's Center, where they had like, diapers and things like that.

The use of resources in the community, in addition to the resources on campus, aided the participants to overcome obstacles and complete their degrees. The community resources provided social support, networking opportunities, assistance with health concerns, as well as

additional financial assistance. Participants also identified some resources in the community that would have made their degree completion easier.

### **Lack of Community Resources**

As mentioned earlier, the participants of this study made use of several community resources. Some resources that were not available were identified by participants of this study as networking, support for single parents, and resources for minority women and minority races. More specifically social supports from other peer students managing the same or similar responsibilities. Tami suggested:

Some sort of support groups, especially for some veterans who experience a lot like a lot of traumatic events, maybe experienced PTSD, I think support group meetings, regular meetings, I think that would have been a great idea. And then that way, you're there with other people that you have some something in common with.

Many veterans, such as the participants of this study, lose their support systems and have a drastic change in their daily routine after retiring from the military service. The participants of this study emphasized the importance of community resources. For instance, Nancy said:

Some support groups for parents. I guess finding people to really connect with it was really hard to connect with people. I established a family (in the military), and I was able to be with a family that I never really had. So, people that I met, I never thought I was ever going to meet and like, everybody was just so different. I just grew to love and care for complete strangers.

Another missing component of community support was a career networking opportunity that could identify a contact person responsible for providing information about specific occupations. For instance, May said:

It would be nice if organizations could have like a network night or if they can provide resources or emails or just stay in touch when it comes to anything in the city that's going on pertaining to network and even when it comes to politics or giving your voice to something or because it you can network in any type of environment but just putting out there that this is going on. If you want to attend.

### ***Family and Social Systems of Support***

A great deal of the social systems of support for transitioning veterans including participants of this study, come from their families: parents, spouses, and relatives, as well as various social networks. The participants of this study underscored the importance of support that comes from their families. They also shared the lack of support from social networks on campus and in the community.

The participants of this study benefitted from social support networks that proved to be significant in their transitioning lives. Particularly, they valued campus offices designed to help with reintegrating into school after taking an extended period off from school. The childcare center was of immense value as well due to most participant have children under age 12. The ability to network with other student-parents, and veterans was of paramount importance to the degree attainment by participants.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The participants of this study candidly shared the experiences of their transitioning from military to civilian lives detailing challenges and stories of success. Theirs is a testimony to what an individual military veteran can confront and overcome as an obstacle to achieve one's pursuit of higher education and professional career after retiring from the military. Rich and powerful narratives of eight participants of this study convey their unique path to success, which addresses

the overarching research question of this study. To elaborate on the response to this research question, thematic analysis provided the details of the participants' experiences, both common to all of them and unique to specific participants.

With regard to the obstacles to success, the participants of this study indicated housing issues and homelessness, family balance issues, family structure changes, health issues, and financial concerns related to ending military employment. Although all participants of this study had some obstacles to overcome during their transitions, some participants experienced more significant struggles than others. Having the need to find housing, secure employment, and navigate divorces that resulted in single parenthood are significant changes in one's life to navigate, compared to simply needing to learn to navigate campus life.

Further, overcoming obstacles necessitated attention to prioritizing responsibilities within a life-work-study balanced approach to life. All participants testified to challenges of maintaining the balance and, at the same time, shared their ways of dealing with challenges by prioritizing responsibilities. The competing responsibilities of work and family made prioritizing college a challenge for participants. Managing competing responsibilities led to participants not performing well academically or having trouble achieving and maintaining satisfactory grades continuously. Balance was at times difficult for all participants, especially for those participants whose parental responsibilities became the most important priority in their lives. Some participants were faced with overcoming significant struggles, while re-acclimating to their civilian life roles simultaneously.

In terms of the systems of support, the participants of this study expressed the need to take extended periods of time off from attending courses to manage family and financial concerns. Even though all of the participants benefitted from available support systems, they did

not do it in equal measure. Thus, for instance, those participants who were parents prioritized their children. The participants who prioritized school over family or work expressed missing critical developmental changes in their children's lives because of focusing on the goal of completing their college degrees.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of the Findings and Conclusions**

This study explored the lived experiences of eight military veterans who completed their bachelor's degree between 2017 and 2022. All participants of the study were older than 24 years of age, qualifying them as nontraditional adult learners. Nontraditional adult learners typically have greater difficulty in accomplishing degree attainment due to having multiple responsibilities they must manage simultaneously while attending college (Borsari et al., 2017). In addition to being learners who were older than their peer traditional learners, all participants had the added responsibilities of taking care of children while they pursued their undergraduate degrees, which caused increased obstacles to their successful degree completion (Giancola et al., 2009). Studies have shown that due to the increased obstacles that transitioning military veterans encounter from military to college transition, one in two veterans do not complete their higher education degree (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Mason, 2016). The high attrition rate for military veterans in higher education programs has been attributed to gaps in support services along with a lack of collaboration, and coordination (Armstrong et al., 2015). The results of this study confirmed that improvements in assisting veterans in transition can result in increased retention in adult higher education programs, and in helping to place veterans in professional careers. Having a higher education degree allows transitioning veterans to be more competitive in the employment marketplace and lead to successful readjustment into their civilian lives (Borsari et al., 2017). The retention of transitioning military veterans in academic programs helps them obtain professional employment and lead more fulfilling lives after their military service.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

The participants of this study provided varied reasons for joining the military that included escaping their unfavorable home environments, needing money for college, or having a

sense of being called to patriotic duty in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. Participants of the study testified that their military training and experience did not transfer automatically to the civilian workforce, necessitating additional training in a higher education program to be find professional careers. This finding reinforces Lawrence's (2018) position that military veterans transition from military to college as a necessity to secure professional employment.

The obstacles encountered by the participants of this study, as they transitioned from military to civilian life included some unanticipated events such as divorce, unplanned parenthood, losing support systems, homelessness, financial concerns, and issues with physical and mental health. The military culture often has a stigma that is developed around health concerns, that is, if a transitioning veteran has health concerns it can lead to unanticipated events with their transition (Ulrich & Freer, 2020). The participants of this study chose their military careers primarily because of their patriotic duty, not just the benefits it can offer. They spoke about their unanticipated events as the obstacles, they were willing to overcome. Prioritizing pursuit of higher education was not always easy to balance with other responsibilities. Some participants of the study expressed that school was not the highest priority because work and stability was required, and family came first, but they could always go back to school at a later point in life. If by chance participants of this study did prioritize school over family and work, it led to issues with stability and family relationships and missing key milestones in their preteen children's lives as they got older.

The participants of this study often expressed frustration when it came to balancing their work, family, and study responsibilities. Another source of their frustration is attributed to the difficulty in making social connects to their peer learners in academic settings, because of vast



differences in life experience between them and these traditional learners. Additionally, frustration was illustrated by the lack of support received from the military-friendly institution, which is often formally advertised but not necessarily provided (Norman et al., 2015; Strickley, 2009; Wilson, 2014). In fact, the participants of this study did not receive the assistance with the transfer of credits that could have shortened their degree credit requirements, they also did not receive referrals to support services to help with their transitions. The missing support during unexpected events in their transitions led to participants of this study needing to take more time to complete their degrees and find professional employment.

### **Dealing With Challenges and Prioritizing Responsibilities**

One of the main findings of this study is that all participants have experienced a range of unexpected events in their lives and numerous obstacles as they transitioned from their military service to pursuits in education and civilian careers. This finding supports what Schlossberg et al. (2012) described as anticipated, unanticipated, or non-event centered transitions. Schlossberg (1984) explained that adults in transition focus on the situation, self or lived experience, support in the transition process, and strategies to overcome obstacles. Anticipated event transitions would be predictable occurrences which are less stressful and have expected outcomes. Conversely, unanticipated event transitions are unexpected events and occurrences that can negatively affect transition outcomes. The unanticipated events during a veterans' transition can add obstacles and barriers to success (Schlossberg et al., 2012). The participants of this study explained some unanticipated events experienced during their transition from military to college were the disruption of normal routines and changes in support systems, which added unexpected barriers to degree completion (Schlossberg et al., 2012). Unanticipated transitions and unexpected events can be difficult for military veteran learners compared to anticipated

transitions, where there are more predictable and expected outcomes. Therefore, understanding the type of transition, a veteran is experiencing can help develop coping strategies to assist the transition (Schlossberg, 1984), which is what this study proposes as implication for practice. Further, this study emphasizes specific importance on identification of strategies to help transitioning veteran deal with obstacles faced during their transition process (Lazarowicz, 2015; Livingston et al., 2011).

One obstacle for participants of this study was the lack of support from the academic institution with navigating campus life at this military-friendly school they were attending. Military friendly schools specialize in offering support to veterans and active service members by helping to remove barriers and assisting with social reintegration to aid in their successful transition (Norman et al., 2015; Strickley, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Just like for this study participants, the transition from military to adult learner may provoke anxiety in nontraditional learners, which can affect academic performance (Sample, 2020). The lack of support with navigating campus life or connecting to social supports experienced by participants of this study, caused emotional stress and anxiety for some study participants.

Another obstacle that this study participants referred to was the lack of access to campus faculty beyond normal business hours of business between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Some participants of this study attended online or evening courses due to work and family obligations. Study participants who attended classes on campus before 4:30 p.m. had access to campus resources such as childcare, tutoring, and peer social support in the campus veteran center. The participants of this study who attended classes after 4:30 p.m. or online found the campus resources were unavailable to them due to the campus offices closing prior to them being able to get to campus after their work schedules. For the participants of the study who attended evening

and online courses, it was impossible to benefit from campus resources. Instead, they had to rely more on the use of community resources and family support to assist in their degree completions. Some participants of this study experienced obstacles with managing their health and finances during their transition from military to college. Military veterans often transition from military to college with the use of their military education benefits (Vacchi, 2012). Participants of the study explained that they did use their military education benefits and still needed additional funding to pay for their education and living expenses while in college. Some participants of this study received additional financial assistance from scholarships, loans, grants, and from programs at their local VA centers.

Participants identified the VA center as a central community resource that assisted them with transitional support, health care, and financial assistance, which aided in their successful reintegration. Other community resources that were central to the participants of this study's success were local nonprofit organizations, community pantry sites, and parent network support agencies. This affirms Tinto's (2010) position that providing academic, social, and financial supports for transitioning military veterans includes are key components to the socioeconomic needs of veteran learners.

The transition from college to professional career was also explored in this study. Participants of the study explained that they had been out of practice for job searching after spending years in the military followed by enrollment into college. The time away from working in the civilian job sector made the college to career transition for participants of this study difficult to navigate. Participants of this study explained that there was a lack of connections in the community to organizations with jobs in their career field or direct hiring authorities, which added barriers to obtaining employment after degree completion.

The results of the study found that access to medical care, childcare, and church pantry services/nonprofit organizational support were the most beneficial for the participants of this study. Participants of this study were able to locate these needed resources on their school campus and in the community. It was particularly interesting to find out that a parent scholarship that had its own central office on campus was the most beneficial for half of the participants of this study. The parent scholarship provided access to additional funding for college, and guidance and support for transitioning veterans to childcare selections, and campus and community resources of significant value to this group of student-parent learners. It was unfortunate that not all adult learners who are parents would have access to this sort of support if they were not able to attend daytime courses on campus.

### **Nontraditional or Traditional?**

The participants of this study who are nontraditional learners had increased difficulty to obtaining their higher education degrees compared with traditional learners (Ellis, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The increase in difficulty was due to the increased responsibilities of the participants of this study being students who are parents, and the length of time being out of school during military service causing difficulty acclimating in traditional their learning environments (Pratt, 2017). The need to balance competing obligations can lead to increased stress for transitioning military veterans and their families, as well as cause degree attainment to take longer to complete (Patterson & Paulson, 2016). All participants identified themselves as nontraditional learners due to their age, having children, having been out of school for extended periods of time, having different learning styles, and needing different learning methods such as online learning (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Being a nontraditional learner can cause added barriers to degree completion because of increased

responsibility while attending college (Ellis, 2020). Most traditional learners can dedicate most of their focus on their educational goals, whereas nontraditional learners must fit their education into a competing schedule with work and family (Priode, 2019). The participants in this study could not dedicate most of their time to their educational goals, due to their other work-life obligations, which affirms Priode's (2019) positions that nontraditional learners have increased difficulty completing college degrees because of competing and often conflicting responsibilities.

Some participants of the study believed their individual needs as a nontraditional learner were not of significant importance to their academic institution. The reason they felt their nontraditional needs were not important was the lack of learner-centered courses for nontraditional adults available. Participants of the study also expressed the attitudes of educators and level of understanding for their unique circumstances affected the ability to have social support from staff at school. For instance, Derek shared his thoughts on being a nontraditional learner as follows:

I would say not everybody's the same type of learner. Not everybody has the same experiences and not everybody has the same mental or physical aptitude to be able to overcome and go through things. So having veteran's resources provides understanding of what they might need as far as the extra human touch bedside manner, that type of thing is something that definitely needs to be examined.

Military veterans are experiencing less success in completing their higher education degrees compared to traditional learners (Borsari et al., 2017). Participants of this study were successful in completing their higher education degrees and explained that factors that leading to the attrition for veterans in higher education programs may be the teaching methods and teaching

styles of educators. Teaching methods are rarely individualized with the students' individual learning style in mind (Verpoorten et al., 2007). Teaching methods have evolved over time due to the demands of work-life-family for both educators and learners. Online learning has become popular and can offer synchronous or asynchronous classroom environments. Synchronous learning involves learners all being present in class at the same time to have social interaction as part of the experience. Asynchronous learning can add barriers to learning due to the limited social interactions from synchronous learning online or in person course content delivery (Arjomandi et al., 2018). Participants of this study attended classes online and in-person. Overall, this participant expressed feeling less social support from institution faculty with attending online and evening courses.

### **What Is Support for Military Veterans and How Much of It Is Available?**

The participants of this study believed that attending a military-friendly university would provide additional support in her transition. Transitioning from military service to college for military veterans may be difficult for veterans (Livingston et al., 2011). Intentional efforts to connection veterans learns to support services and resources to aid in obstacles with family, health, and school, should be a consideration for academic institution, especially if they are considered military friendly (DiRamio et al., 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Participants of this study expressed a lack of transitional support from their academic institution and limited to no connections to social support on campus or in the community to assist in their reintegration.

Social support for transitioning military veterans is a critical component for the successful reintegration and degree completion in this group of nontraditional learners (Schlossberg, 1984). Academic institutions should make it a priority to improve the transition experience for military veterans to increase the number of military veterans who complete their

degrees (Heineman, 2016). The participants of this study testified that this higher education institution treated them as less of a priority for scheduling of courses and did not provide adequate assistance to support in their military to college transition. Studies have shown there is the lack of support in the collaboration, coordination, and collective purpose to assist transitioning military veterans has led to increased attrition for this group of learners in higher education academic settings (Armstrong et al., 2015). Appropriate support for transitioning military veterans includes academic, social, and financial supports, which are key components to the socioeconomic needs of veteran learners (Tinto, 2010). Similarly, the participants of this study expressed concern with not being informed about supportive services, financial aid and assistance, or support groups for veterans and families. In addition to not being referred for support services and financial support, participants of this study expressed not having access to campus resources, encountering educators that were not sensitive to their needs, and experiencing very unwelcoming environments from staff who were not supportive, which affected their ability to reintegrate and complete their degrees. Development of resources with the collective purpose of identifying and coordinating supportive services for transition military veterans and their families would be beneficial for the retention and degree completion for this group. Being proactive can give transitioning veterans improved retention rates and increased completion rates in higher education academic degree programs (Tinto, 2012).

The transition experience from military to adult learner was difficult for most participants in this study. There was increased difficulty for study participants who had unanticipated events which occurred during their transition. These unanticipated events increased the timeframe to complete their degrees because of managing changing priorities, which put degree attainment at a lower priority to family and work obligations. For the participants in this study, it took between

36 months and 10 years to complete their degrees. The length of time to complete their degree programs was affected by housing issues including homelessness, and family-work demands. This study also explored the transition of study participants from college to professional career, and the obstacles and support needed during this next step of reintegration into their civilian lives.

### **Systems of Support: How Do They Work?**

One of the main findings of this study was that all participants found employment postgraduation. They all claimed their degree attainment as a key component for success in the workplace and reintegration into their civilian lives. Further, they testified to employment opportunities that aligned with their skillsets prior to degree completion would result in entry-level positions that offer low wages, which would affect financial stability (Castro et al., 2014). Military training and experience are often not transferrable to the civilian workforce job requirements, leading to additional training or degree completion being required for professional careers (Lawrence, 2018). Participants of this study expressed a desire to complete their degrees in order to be an example to their children, as well as have an education to get stable income and employment to support their families.

The participants of this study referred to a variety of ways to support them including, providing networking opportunities to make professional career attainment easier after graduation. Participants of this study also felt job fairs in their career paths to network and make connections should be implemented to improve the college to career transition. The need to network and have direct connections to hiring authorities in organizations can ensure faster employment for transitioning college students. Networking with connections to direct hiring



authorities can be especially beneficial for military veterans who may have been out practice for seeking employment since they spent years in the military and then enrolled into college.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study can be significant in terms of its implications for practice in multiple ways. For instance, academic institutions currently use a directive style of learning in academic settings where instructors provide a curriculum for learners to follow. The curriculum often is not considerate of the barriers that nontraditional learners are faced with or the individual learning styles of learners, which can add barriers to success in completing coursework (Verpoorten et al., 2007). A more learner-centered style of learning could be developed, with the individual learner's needs in mind. It could be effective for academic institutions to use path-goal theory as a tool with veterans who have health issues while pursuing their education. Path-goal theory focuses on building the relationship between educators' leadership style and veteran learners' characteristics (Northouse, 2016). Path-goal theory can be effective in implementing a variety of services necessary to transitioning veterans in terms of improving their retention rates and removing barriers to degree completion by providing course content based on veterans' individual learning style, and specific degree required courses. Additionally, academic institutions focus on providing a well-rounded education for many degree programs (Smerdon, 2018). This focus adds non degree specific coursework in educational programs, which increases the costs of attendance, adds stress to learners, and increases time to complete degrees. A way to improve retention of transitioning veterans is developing content for learner's communication needs (Barieva et al., 2018). Reviewing learning methods, learning styles, and barriers caused by these can allow development of success strategies for transitioning veterans.

Academic institutions that advertise as being military friendly schools should offer support for transitioning veterans (Norman et al., 2015). Military friendly schools should be creating learning models and providing those models throughout the day or through alternative methods such as online to be sensitive to veterans' transitioning needs and the institutions' educational requirements (Strickley, 2009; Wilson, 2014). A learning model that could be mindful of veterans' needs could provide flexibility in due dates for coursework to understand health issues, medical appointments, and the demands of parenthood.

The unique needs of transitioning veterans may cause a need to develop educational programs centered specifically focused on those needs. Development of hybrid learning also called blended learning or virtual learning are emerging to resolve the demands of competing responsibilities for transitioning veterans (Kokko et al., 2015). Hybrid learning often incorporates different styles of learning such as giving the lecture and reading instruction virtually, followed by practical application of learning in face-to-face settings. Participants of this study expressed the need for a learning model that gives practical hands-on application of learned course content, and availability of support beyond traditional business hours of 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

It may be beneficial for academic institutions to have a second shift or weekend staff available on campus or through electronic video conferencing for nontraditional learners attending classes in the evenings and online to aid in the successful degree completion of transition veterans. Asynchronous online courses provide a decreased ability for social learning (Arjomandi et al., 2018). Offering the ability to have a face-to-face conversation with a counselor, or school staff in the evening and on weekends, can assist transitioning veterans with their education and reintegration needs.

It can be beneficial for academic institutions to consider bridging the gap between learners and direct hiring authorities in the community to ensure the college to employment transition is achieved. The process to meet organizational leaders can help streamline the process to transition from college to professional career. The addition of career fairs, internships, and social networking in one's desired career path, could be facilitated by academic faculty. It should be considered by academic institutions that an adult education comes from the learning in the classroom and the practical application in the real world. To offer a more comprehensive education, institutions may want to consider eliminating un-needed coursework, and adding field work on the subject to give experience with the education.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study can be further developed in the following ways. It can be extended as a mixed-methods study to review qualitative and quantitative data on the increased retention of military veterans who have been provided transitional support. A phenomenological study could be developed to focus on the common experiences of transitioning military veterans to discuss experiences based on participants' gender, race, or socioeconomic status. A comparative case study that focuses on multiple academic institutions could add data and more veteran experiences to identify different strategies used on their paths to academic success and professional degree attainment. Also, a further critical narrative study could provide inquiry on the specific and unique experiences of these veterans and the issues they encountered during their transitions. Each suggested study could compare the experiences of combat veterans versus noncombat veterans. It would also be beneficial to further study the outcomes at other public institutions compared with private institutions for comparative analysis.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has some limitations that should be pointed out. First, there was no distinction made between veteran graduates who were transitioning from combat and those who were transitioning from training deployments, such as, leadership training school. These differences may have affected the way that the participants of this study explained various obstacles that they faced during their undergraduate studies. Additionally, the demographic makeup of a state university, which was the site for this study, does not represent other types of institutions, such as, for instance, private universities. There is a potential that graduation rates could be affected differently for students with private instruction, smaller class sizes, and more centralized education practices. Limitations related to demographic composition of the sample are methodological limitations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As a military veteran who attended college as a nontraditional learner, I saw my own experiences mirrored in the experiences of the participants of this study. As I listened to recounts of the difficulties with transitioning from military to college and then from college to professional career experiences, I had to hold in my own emotions as participants experiences were so similar to my own. I could also relate to the backgrounds of the study participants coming from a specific background myself and overcoming similar obstacles, which could have held them from achieving their dreams for a better life: homelessness, divorce, socioeconomic disadvantages, and lack of transitional support was admirable. Having the resilience to complete their higher education degrees despite having housing concerns, inadequate childcare, and financial instability were impactful to their self-esteem, mental health, and sense of pride as they were setting an example for their children.

This study speaks to my own academic successes in a more empowered way and has helped me to see my own ability to overcome obstacles in an enlightened manner. The participant's academic success provides motivation for me and other transitioning military veterans or student parents in general to persevere and complete educational goals. This research gave insight into the financial and support needs that are still missing for transitioning military veterans. It was also of significant importance to understand the ability for participants to succeed despite not having representation with similar gender, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds in the educators facilitating the courses.

Finally, this study underscores the importance of the systems of support that are so much needed for military veterans pursuing higher education and that are often missing in institutions and communities. This study is an appeal to broad audiences to understand the struggles of military veterans, their ability to overcome all possible obstacles, and their drive to achieve new heights in their civilian lives despite their gender, race, ethnic, or sociocultural backgrounds.

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Jada Reynolds, I am a doctoral student at Abilene Christian University. As part of my degree program, I am conducting a dissertation research project, A Case Study of Transitional Experiences for Military Veterans who have complete their bachelor's degree from a large Midwestern University.

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of military veterans who have completed their undergraduate degrees within the last 5 years. This study seeks to examine how these veterans overcame barriers with balancing their educational, personal, and academic responsibilities to transition to their civilian life and complete their higher education degrees, and to identify systems of support that have helped to overcome those obstacles.

The overarching research question that guides this study is: How do military veterans successfully transition from service experiences to academic and professional lives? Additional research questions include:

- What obstacles, if any, do they encounter on the path to successful academic and professional career attainments?
- How do these veterans experience life-study-work balance in their lives?
- What are the systems of support that can be conducive to these graduates' success?

You are invited to participate in a semi-structured qualitative interview. At the time of the interview, a set of questions pertaining to your experiences as a veteran who completed your bachelor's degree will be asked. The approximate length of the interview will be 90 minutes to gather data to narrate the interview.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you can withdraw from it at any time with no consequence to you. Follow-up interviews may be requested depending on the research needs and purposes. The interview will be audio-recorded. The interview will be transcribed verbatim, and the transcript of the interview will be submitted to you for verification of accuracy.

To ensure full confidentiality, the interview transcripts and all files and data of your participation in this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet for 5 years following the completion of the research and then destroyed. All computer files for the study will be kept on a protected server.

The interview itself will be given an identification code and pseudonym will be assigned to you to keep your name and personal information fully confidential. Excerpts from the interview transcript can be included in the dissertation report or future publications. Under no circumstances will your name or any identifier appear in these writings.

*Signature of research participant*

-----

Signature of participant

Date

*Signature of researcher*

-----

Signature of researcher

Date

## **Appendix B: Interview Guide**

### **Background Data**

1. Please tell me how and why you decided to serve in the military?
2. How and why did you decide to pursue higher education?

### **Identity As A Non-Traditional Learner**

3. When you hear the term “non-traditional” student, what comes to mind first?
4. Do you consider yourself a non-traditional student? If so, then what does this mean to you?

### **Transitioning Experience From Military to Adult Learner**

5. How many years/semesters did it take you to complete your bachelor’s degree?
6. Thinking back on your transitioning from the military to higher education, which of these experiences are more memorable? Why?
7. Did you experience any unanticipated events in your life during your military to student transition? If so, what were they?

### **Obstacles With Work-Life-Study Balance**

8. What obstacles, if any, did you encounter during your bachelor’s academic studies?
9. When thinking about life balance, what comes to mind first?
10. Would you say your life was fairly balanced when you pursued higher education? If not, what was prioritized first? What expense did this take on other areas of your life?
11. What steps did you use to maintain a better work-life-study balance?

### **Support Systems**

12. Were you aware of campus resources for students like you? If so, what were they? If not, why not?
13. What campus resources were most beneficial during your bachelor’s program?

14. What campus resources do you believe would have made your bachelor's degree easier to obtain?
15. Did you have access to community resources? If so, what were they? If not, why not?
16. What community resources were most beneficial during your bachelor's program?
17. What community resources do you believe would have made your bachelor's program easier to obtain?

### **College to Employment Transition**

18. Have you found employment post-graduation?
19. What period of time post-graduation did it take to obtain a professional career?
20. What networking opportunities do you feel need to be established for employment to be more easily obtained after graduation?
21. Is there anything I did not ask but you would like to share with me?

## Appendix C: IRB Approval

**ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**  
*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



Dear Jada,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled

(IRB# 22-008 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

## Appendix D: Signature Waiver

ACU IRB # 22-008

Date of Approval 2/11/2022

### WAIVER OF DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

**Waiver of Documentation of Consent:** request a waiver of documentation of consent when you will be meeting all the requirements of consent, but will not be obtaining a signature (written or electronic).

- a. Provide justification for waiving documentation of consent:

The only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document, and the **principal risk** would be potential harm resulting from breach of confidentiality. (Subjects **MUST** be asked whether they wish to document consent in this case and be permitted to do so if they wish.);

**OR**

The research presents **no more than minimal risk** of harm to subjects, and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.

**OR**

If the subjects or legally authorized representatives are members of a distinct cultural group or community in which signing forms is not the norm, that the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and provided there is an appropriate alternative mechanism for documenting that informed consent was obtained

- b. Will participants be provided with a written statement regarding the research, such as a short summary or a copy of the consent form?  Yes  No
- c. How will the researchers document that consent was provided?  
**The interview will be recorded with consent discussed at the opening of the interview.**
- d. If electronic **consent** (clicking a link) is being sought, explain why an actual electronic **signature** cannot be collected.  
All interviews are expected to be done via Zoom to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

### **Appendix E: Sample Solicitation Notice**

Hello,

I am doing a research study entitled “A Path to Success: A Case Study of Military Veterans at a Midwestern University.” The purpose of the study is to examine the lived experiences of military veterans who have completed their undergraduate degrees within the last 5 years. To qualify to participate, you must be a military veteran who completed your bachelor’s degree from a midwestern university between 2017 and 2022.

Participation would require about 90 minutes of your time, to participate in an interview between you and me, the Primary Investigator will coordinate a Zoom meeting to discuss your lived experiences. Interviews will be recorded, and securely stored.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at xxxxxx@acu.edu and you will be presented a Consent Form email with more info.

Sincerely,

*Jada Reynolds*

Primary Investigator

## Appendix F: Table Coding Through Theoretical Lens

RETENTION THEORY								
expected	Did not know what to expect	Did not know what to expect	Did not know what to expect, took indirect avenues	Did not know what to expect	Did not know what to expect	Did not know what to expect	Did not know what to expect	Did not know what to expect
SES	Could not afford college	College would have been paid by parents	Could not afford college	Could not afford college	Could not afford college	Could not afford college	Could not afford college	Could not afford college
academic readiness	Not prepared due to difficult military transition	Not prepared due to difficult military transition	Not prepared and had been out of school for long period of time	Not prepared due to difficult military transition	Not prepared due to difficult military transition	Not prepared due to family needs	Not prepared due to difficult military transition/family needs	Not prepared and had been out of school for long period of time
family background	Limited college enrollment	College was expected	Limited college enrollment	Limited college enrollment	Limited college enrollment	Limited college enrollment	Limited college enrollment	Limited college enrollment
support	Peer students, other veterans, campus resources, community resources	Family, Peer students, campus resources, community resources	Family, counselors, campus resources, community resources	Family	Family, counselors, campus resources, community resources	Family, Peer students, community resources	Family, Peer students, community resources	Family, campus resources, community resources
TRANSITION THEORY								
situation	Discharged from military and enrolled in college	Discharged from military and enrolled in college	Started while in military stopped, reenrolled post-military	Discharged from military and enrolled in college	Discharged from military and enrolled in college	Discharged from military and enrolled in college	Discharged from military and enrolled in college	Discharged from military and enrolled in college
self	I am a NT learner	I am a NT learner	I am a NT learner	I am a NT learner	I am a NT learner	I am a NT learner	I am a NT learner	I am a NT learner
support	None, and led to transitional hardships for health and housing	Family Support from parents and husband	Family support from spouse and adult children	Family support	Limited, and led to transitional hardships for health and housing	Family support	Family support	Family support
strategies	Used campus and community resources	Used family support with	Family, campus, community	Time Mgmt, Prioritized schedule	Used campus and community resources	Family, prioritize schedule	Family, prioritize schedule	Family, prioritize schedule,



		campus and community resources	resources used				campus resources used	
emotion	Tears from stressful experiences during transition	Expressed stressful work/life/family balance emotional	Limited stress due to schedule	Limited stress with schedule	Expressed stressful work/life/family balance	Expressed stressful work/life/family balance	Expressed stressful work/life/family balance	Expressed stressful life /family balance
value	Military values, family values	Military values, family values	Military values, family values	Military values, family values	Military values, family values	Military values, family values	Military values, family values	Military values, family values
<b>OBSTACLES</b>								
Life-work-study balance	Difficult due to being a single mother and having health issues	Difficult due to being a mom/wife / having health issues	Limited had adult children, and supportive family	Difficult due to being a mom/ having health issues/ kids also with health issues	Difficult due to being a single mother and having health issues	Difficult due to being a single mother and having health issues	Difficult due to being a mother of multiple young children	Difficult due to own mental health concerns, classroom settings
Systems of support	Childcare facilities, vet office on campus, The scholarship office, community service orgs	Family/ spouse, the scholarship office, mental health services, community service orgs	Family/ spouse, campus resources, community resources	Family/ spouse	Family, campus resources, community resources	Family/ spouse	Family/ Spouse, Community resources	Family/ Spouse, Campus resources
Success In transition	Yes	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Not yet	yes

## Appendix G: Permission to Reprint

ResearchGate

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Suzanne sent you a message



**Suzanne Buglione**  
Bristol Community College

Jada, I'm so glad my work has been helpful to you. Yes, you have my permission to use the graphic with proper citation. Can you send me a copy of your dissertation when it is done? Best of luck!