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Student veterans returning to a community college: Understanding their transitions

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**Student veterans returning to a community college:
Understanding their transitions**

by

Corey Bradford Rumann

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
Florence Hamrick, Major Professor
Robyn Cooper
Megan Murphy
Lori Patton
Roger Smith

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2010

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my niece, Mikalynn Ree Morrow. Your genuineness, perseverance, and gentle heart will always be my inspiration. This dissertation is also dedicated to my immediate family: my parents Carol and Larry, my sister Heather, my brother Jeff, my niece Abby, and my nephew Jefferson. Thank you all for your love and support!

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ABSTRACT

Higher education and the military have been linked throughout history in the United States. Now, with the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq the higher education community is beginning to realize again the importance of understanding student veterans' transition experiences into college and providing appropriate support programs. However, the experiences of war veterans making the transition from servicemember to college student are not clearly understood. Consequently, community colleges and other institutions of higher education may not possess the information necessary to assist these students effectively.

The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative research study was to explore the nature of the transition experiences of student war veterans who had re-enrolled in a community college following military deployments. Using Schlossberg's Theory of Transition (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) as the theoretical framework and a three-interview series (Seidman, 2006) as the primary method of data collection, four themes characterized participants' transition experiences: (a) negotiating the transition, (b) interactions and connections with others, (c) increased maturity and changes in perspective, and (d) re-situating and negotiating identities. These findings could be used to help community colleges and other institutions of higher education to understand more clearly the experiences of student veterans. They could also help to inform student affairs professionals, administrators, and faculty as they make policy and programming decisions related to student veteran populations.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Higher education and the military have been formally linked since the Morrill Act of 1862 which mandated that land grant institutions of higher education had to offer military training as part of their curriculum (Abrams, 1989; Neiberg, 2000). This relationship was further solidified by establishment of Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs at colleges and universities, wherein college students received military leadership training (leading to commission as an officer) while simultaneously enrolled in college courses (Abrams, 1989; Neiberg, 2000). With the introduction of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (popularly known as the GI Bill) after World War II, many veterans took advantage of the educational benefits it provided, and entered or returned to college (Olson, 1973). Correspondingly, institutions of higher education began to consider institutional preparedness for the entering student veteran population. While it remains clear that military and educational institutions provided formal opportunities for servicemember education, there exists today only a small body of information concerning the challenges, successes, and adjustments of war veterans through the years, with respect to their transitions into college following military service. Such transitions include servicemembers who enrolled in institutions of higher learning for the first time, as well as those whose military obligations during times of conflict interrupted or delayed their collegiate pursuits.

Contemporary U. S. military operations also affect colleges, universities and students, but in slightly different ways. In previous wars, most active duty servicemembers were drawn from full-time military ranks. However, current military

forces in Afghanistan and Iraq are disproportionately staffed with National Guard and Reserve personnel to supplement full-time military personnel. Such Guard and Reserve involvement is unprecedented since the Korean War, and the current levels of reliance on Reserve troops has not occurred since World War II (Doubler & Listman, 2007). As of March 8, 2010 138, 217 National Guard and Military Reserve personnel were currently activated as part of Operations Noble Eagle, Iraqi Freedom, and Enduring Freedom, with 620,983 having served to date (i.e., between September 2001 and March 2010) (U. S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs, 2010). For a number of current Guard and Reserve servicemembers, one of the primary motivations for joining the armed services was the educational benefits that accompanied their enlistments (Farrell, 2005). Enrolled students who were activated and deployed had to interrupt their academic pursuits.

Now, increasing numbers of student veterans are returning to college, and the higher education community is beginning to realize again the importance of understanding the war veterans' transition experiences into college, and providing appropriate support programs. More and more institutions are beginning to address this issue through programs and initiatives (Cook & Kim, 2009; Quillen-Armstrong, 2007; Stringer, 2007; Zdechlik, 2005). More attention is paid to college student war veterans who are returning from duty in Iraq (and Kuwait) and Afghanistan; however, the experiences of each war veteran making the transition from servicemember to college student are not clearly understood. To date, only three research studies have explored this transition experience (Bauman, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008;

Rumann & Hamrick, in press), and none of them focused on community college setting and students.

Problem

The transition experiences of military service personnel in the National Guard or Reserves who are re-enrolling at community colleges following military war zone deployments within the past seven years have not been closely investigated and are not well understood. Consequently, community colleges and other institutions of higher education may not possess the information necessary to assist these students effectively. More research will broaden the knowledge base in this area, and ultimately inform effective institutional practice and policy making.

Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative research study was to explore the nature of the transition experiences of National Guard or Military Reserve student war veterans who had re-enrolled in a community college following deployments to Afghanistan, Kuwait, and/or Iraq within the last seven years.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question:

- What are the transitional experiences of student war veterans re-enrolling at a community college and resuming their college student roles and lives?

Data were collected to answer this question through qualitative research methods, including a three interview series of semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006) with, and observations of, participants who returned to a community college following a military war zone deployment. These data were then analyzed using open and closed coding processes in order to identify thematic findings (Esterberg, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

I approached this study from an interpretive theoretical perspective grounded in the epistemology of social constructionism. Social constructionism affirms that people construct meaning through their interactions with the world, while recognizing the influence culture has on those constructions (Crotty, 1998). Using a constructionist foundation and interpretive theoretical framework, I selected a phenomenological perspective in order to describe the transitions from war veteran to college student, as informed by the participants' unique experiences of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2002).

Schlossberg's theory of adult transition served as the primary framework for this research study. This theoretical model characterizes the transition experience as a process of moving "in," "through," and "out" of a major transition, with reference to four factors that help people cope with transitions: situation, self, support and strategies (the 4 S's) (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Data were collected and analyzed in light of this theoretical framework.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study can be used to inform community college faculty, staff, administrators and the higher education community in general about the transition experiences of veterans returning to a community college. With this knowledge, education professionals can be better prepared to support these students upon their return. Furthermore, the findings of this study can assist college and university administrators with developing policies, programs and procedures focused on this student population. Finally, the results of this study will inform policy makers about policy developments that could support and ease the transitions of returning student war veterans.

Definition of Key Terms

National Guard and Reserves—National Guard and Reserves forces are comprised of servicemembers who serve part-time in the military, and typically attend training one weekend a month and two weeks a year, except when they are activated and/or deployed at times of state or national crises or wartime.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)—Refers to ongoing U. S. military operations, principally in Afghanistan, which began in October 2001 (Doubler & Listman, 2007).

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)—Refers to ongoing U. S. military operations in Iraq, which began in March, 2003 (Kapp, 2005).

Operation Noble Eagle (ONE)—The general name given to military operations since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 (Kapp, 2005).

Student veterans—Student veterans are any college students who have served as active duty servicemembers in a war zone as a result of a military deployment, and who have now re-enrolled in college. More specifically, for the purposes of this study, the focus will be primarily on student veterans who have served either in Operation Enduring Freedom or Iraqi Freedom through National Guard or Reserve service.

Transition—Goodman et al. (2006) defined a transition as “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33) which can be either anticipated, unanticipated, or a non-event. Transitions can have both positive and negative effects on a person’s life (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989).

Veterans Affairs Certifying Official (VACO)—For the purposes of this study, the Veterans Affairs Certifying Official is the student affairs staff member responsible for certifying student veterans enrollments at their institutions so the student veteran is

eligible to receive GI Bill funding for college. These individuals also serve as liaisons between the student veteran and the Department of Veteran Affairs and assist them with the process of receiving funding.

Military acronyms

The following are military acronyms used by participants in the study during data collection and may be referred to in this study:

AAFES—Army and Air Force Exchange Service

BX—Common name for a type of retail store operating on military installations (Base Exchange on Air Force bases)

CSH—Combat Support Hospital (pronounced “cash”)

ETS—Expiration Term of Service

FOB—Forward Operating Base

IED—Improvised Explosive Device

KIA—Killed In Action

MOS—Military Occupational Specialty

PX—Post Exchange

VBID—Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device

Summary

This study explores the experiences of war veterans transitioning from a military war zone deployment back into a community college environment. The findings of the study inform education professionals and other college administrators, faculty members and policy makers about the collegiate transition experiences and needs of this unique, and growing, student population.

Chapter 2 contains a review of literature of historical perspectives of the effects of military actions on colleges and universities, and research on war veterans and their post-war college experiences. It also discusses the lack of empirical work focused on contemporary student veterans' transition experiences. The chapter concludes with a description of Schlossberg's transition theory, followed by a brief discussion of community colleges as an appropriate setting for this study of life transitions.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology, theoretical frameworks, and methods for the study, as well as ethical issues and considerations—including my role as the researcher. The chapter concludes with delimitations and limitations of the study, and a short description of an earlier pilot study.

Chapter 4 presents participant profiles followed by a description of the four thematic findings that emerged from the data analysis.

Finally, chapter 5 discusses conclusions, limitations, and ethical issues related to the study. The chapter also presents implications and recommendations for future research and implications for practice.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature framework for this study involves four topical areas: (a) veterans coming to college, (b) veteran students' outcomes and the nature of the transition coming to college, (c) transition theory and, briefly, (d) community colleges. First, I present student veteran profiles throughout the years, and summarize the literature related to transition and adjustment experiences of student veterans. These historical perspectives provide overviews of a number of key topics, such as how returning veterans have impacted higher education, how colleges and universities have responded to the needs of past and current veterans, as well as issues related to veterans' college adjustment. I then detail theories that could be used to understand veterans' transitional experiences—especially with such experiences as grief and loss. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of how community colleges, with their collective history of serving adult learners, generally are not only well-positioned institutionally to assist student veterans in transitioning to college, but also specifically provided an appropriate setting for this study.

Veterans Coming to College

Higher education enrollments grew considerably between World War I and World War II. Post-World War II enrollment growth can be attributed primarily to student veterans entering college (Altbach, 2005). The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (i.e., the GI Bill) provided educational funding for veterans enrolling in college after their military service. Subsequently, veterans enrolled in college in unprecedented numbers, and nearly overwhelmed U. S. colleges and universities (Altbach, 2005; Olson, 1973,

1974). The GI Bill also made college education possible for veterans who otherwise might not have had that opportunity (Olson, 1973). This influx of student veterans presented colleges and universities not only with massive increases in student enrollments, but also with a new group of students who possessed needs, desires, and characteristics decidedly different from non-veteran students (Clark, 1998). College administrators and educators of the time were concerned that many veterans would enter college underprepared academically, while other veterans would simply tap their educational benefits without pursuing a college degree, thus lowering academic standards at colleges and universities, and creating unnecessary burden for colleges and universities (Olson, 1973, 1974). These concerns were unfounded since, as the following sections discuss, student veterans came to be admired for their academic focus and successes (Olson, 1973).

World War II veterans' impact on higher education

Following the passage of the original GI Bill, scholars and administrators proposed ways in which colleges and universities could support and accommodate student veterans (Kraines, 1945; McDonagh, 1947; Shaw, 1947; Titus, 1944; Toven, 1945; Washton, 1945; Williamson, 1944). Suggestions included flexible admission policies (Brown, 1945) and provision of college credit for military service (McDonagh, 1947; Toven, 1945; Williamson, 1944). Higher education scholars and administrators accurately predicted that veterans would want to take heavy class loads in order to make up for lost time, which would in turn put pressure on faculty members and the higher education system to offer more classes, or possibly lower academic standards in order to avoid clogging the system (McDonagh, 1947; Titus, 1944). Offering accelerated

programs of study was a concern, because to do so would change the nature of the collegiate experience and put pressure on the higher education system to make quick organizational and policy changes—including implementing more liberal admission policies and allowing credit for military experience (Olson, 1974). Scholars also expected that World War II veterans would bring a higher level of maturity, compared to their non-veteran peers (Shaw, 1947; Titus, 1944; Washton, 1945), which generally turned out to be the case (Toven, 1945). However, veterans' increased maturity could create a gap between veterans and non-veteran students, and change the face of the student population, thus altering students' expectations of the higher education system (Titus, 1944; Williamson, 1944). Unlike many non-veteran students, veterans entered college with more focus and sense of purpose and no-nonsense attitudes; because they had set very specific goals that they wanted to meet (Kinzer, 1946). For example, veterans with families or plans to start a family felt as though college provided their best opportunity to prepare for careers to support their families; they wanted to finish college and get jobs as quickly as possible so they could get on with their lives (Kinzer, 1946).

Korean and Vietnam War veterans' impact on higher education

The extent to which the GI Bill had an effect on higher education and the system itself has been debated (Clark, 1998; Olson, 1973; Stanley, 2003), but the student population at colleges and universities drastically changed with the flood of World War II veterans funded by the GI Bill. United States military veterans of the Korean War also were entitled to GI Bill educational benefits, but their presence on college campuses had a less dramatic effect on higher education, primarily because there were smaller numbers of Korean War veterans (Olson, 1973). “Korean veterans...were a minority on campus

and never exerted an influence that remotely approached that of their World War II counterparts” (Olson, 1973, p. 610). Statistics show this was also the case for Vietnam War veterans. World War II veterans “comprised roughly 50 percent of the student population at universities... contrasted with a less than 10 percent average [of Vietnam War veterans] for the same universities in 1973” (Horan, 1990a, p. 3). Vietnam veterans also tended to maintain lower profiles because of widespread negative attitudes toward the war (Horan, 1990a). It is also possible that Korean and Vietnam veterans had less impact on higher education because colleges and universities already had an infrastructure in place, as a result of the earlier institutional changes that accommodated World War II veterans.

Judging by the paucity of published reports, Korean War veterans raised few concerns for college campuses. Educational benefits were available to veterans of the Korean War through the Korean GI Bill (also known as, “the Veterans’ Readjustment Act”), but these benefits were less generous than the first GI Bill (Olson, 1974), and carried more restrictions (Stanley, 2003). This change was due in part to the belief that the original GI Bill “had been too generous,” more than adequately covering the costs of going to college (Olson, 1974). Also, at the time of the Korean War, college enrollment could be used as grounds to request a military service deferment (Stanley, 2003). Although requests did not guarantee deferments, the change likely impacted higher education enrollment by drawing men who could afford tuition into college and away from military service (Bound & Turner, 2002). On the other hand, for those who could not afford tuition, military service offered post-service educational benefits for college (Bound & Turner, 2002). College deferments were also available during the Vietnam

War, and were used as strategies to delay conscription (Card & Lemieux, 2001). Card and Lemieux estimated that “draft avoidance raised college attendance by 4 – 6 percentage points in the late 1960’s” (p. 101).

Like their Korean War veteran counterparts, smaller numbers of Vietnam War veterans enrolled in colleges and universities, compared to World War II veterans (Horan, 1990a; Horan, 1990b). Vietnam War veterans were entitled to educational financial assistance through the Vietnam GI Bill (the Veterans’ Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966) (Olson, 1974). However, the Vietnam GI Bill provisions contained additional regulations and restrictions compared to previous versions of the GI Bill, and educational benefits were even more limited than benefits provided by the Korean GI Bill (Olson, 1974). These additional regulations and restrictions (plus the negative campus environment for veterans) made it more cumbersome to acquire educational funding, and led to frustration and discouragement for veterans seeking to enter college (Horan, 1990b). According to government reports, proportionately more Vietnam veterans used the GI Bill than Korean or World War II veterans, but Horan (1990b) argued that such estimations were unreliable, because not only were numbers counted in different ways, but also they did not take into account the numerous adjustment problems of Vietnam veterans that made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to enter or succeed in college.

Links between higher education and the military

While educational benefits have been provided to veterans by various iterations of GI Bills, it is important to note that higher education and the military have a long relationship in the U.S., and they continue to enjoy a strong relationship today. Higher education and the military have been linked as far back as the Morrill Land-Grant

Colleges Act of 1862, which stipulated that land grant institutions offer military training—specifically, instruction in military tactic(s) (Abrams, 1989). In 1916, the National Defense Act established the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), a program offered initially at land grant institutions and various military institutions. During the same time other institutions (outside of the land grant system) established Student Army Training Corps (SATC), which was funded by the federal government to provide on-campus military training for students (Neiberg, 2000; Thelin, 2004). The ROTC was later strengthened by the National Defense Act of 1920, and greater access to the program was made possible by establishment of “ROTC units in any college or high school” (Abrams, p. 19). Currently, the ROTC program is designed to offer leadership and military training for college students in preparation for military service, and it provides cadets with educational financial benefits (GoArmy.com, n.d.a). The Simultaneous Membership Program (SMP) is a program within ROTC where student servicemembers are not only contracted to become officers in the U.S. military, but are also required simultaneously to be members of the National Guard or Reserves (Go Army.com, n.d.b). SMP members prepare to become military officers both through ROTC and direct military service, and they earn financial benefits to attend college (Go Army.com, n.d.b).

Movement to an all-volunteer force

From the American Civil War through the Vietnam War, conscription was used to secure adequate numbers of military personnel (Watson, 2007). However, the draft was discontinued in 1972, and all branches of the U. S. military have now transitioned to an all-volunteer force (AVF) model (Griffith, 1997). AVF has had a tremendous influence

on how the military operates and the way it recruits (Griffith, 1997). Declining numbers of individuals joining the military after the Cold War and the military's transition to an AVF prompted significant changes in military recruitment operations (Asch, Kilburn, & Klerman, 1999). Increased competition between the military and institutions of higher education to recruit college-bound young people added to the challenges faced by military recruiters (Asch et al., 1999; Asch & Loughran, 2004).

The 1985 Montgomery GI Bill's (MGIB) recruitment incentives included providing full-time military personnel with educational benefits, in part to assist them with their transitions back to civilian life (Asch, Fair, & Kilburn, 2000). The MGIB was also the first to offer post-secondary educational benefits to National Guard members and Reservists; however, benefit levels varied depending on length of service (full-time vs. part-time military status) and whether or not a servicemember was deployed and had served in a military war zone (U. S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2009a). Now with the Post 9/11 GI Bill, which was put into effect on August 1st, 2009, educational benefits for student veterans have been expanded and are more generous overall (U. S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2009b). These benefits more adequately cover the full costs of college education, including higher stipends for books and costs in addition to tuition for some student veterans depending on their particular situations and circumstances (U. S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2009b). However, the post 9/11 GI Bill has not been without its critics (Eckstein, 2009), and there were a number of challenges certifying eligible student veterans and getting them their funds in a timely manner during the first semester it was enacted (Nelson, 2009; Stripling, 2009, 2010). For the purposes of this study, the most recent GI Bill being enacted is noteworthy,

because its potential impact on student veterans' enrollment at colleges and universities (Moltz, 2009; Radford, 2009).

Educational benefits for Guard and Reserve troops

Historically, as a result of these GI Bill changes, service in the National Guard or Reserves and programs like ROTC (and the SMP option to combine the two), have made college attendance while serving in the military not only possible, but financially prudent (Asch & Loughran, 2004). This is even more the case with the new GI Bill, which offers potentially greater financial resources for military veterans who have served in a war zone to attend college (U. S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2009b). In addition, during peacetime, the activations of National Guard and Reserve troops are minimized, and interruptions of college less likely. However, Guard and Reserve troops are subject to activation and deployment at times of state and national emergencies, civil unrest and natural disasters during peacetime. For example, National Guard troops were some of the first units that undertook Hurricane Katrina recovery and relief efforts (Doubler & Listman, 2007) and provided additional security at U.S. airports following the September 11, 2001 attacks (Kapp, 2005). Activation for domestic emergencies such as these can vary in duration, but cannot exceed 24 consecutive months (Army Reserve National Guard, 2005). On the other hand, when National Guard troops are needed to supplement full-time active duty forces (and a Presidential Reserve Call Up is enacted) for an operational mission, the length of active duty cannot exceed 270 consecutive days.

Educational benefits are a tempting incentive for future and current college students to join the National Guard or Reserves. As noted earlier, Guard and Reserve members qualify for MGIB educational benefits that can be used while the

servicemember is enrolled in college for up to 36 months (United States Department of Veteran Affairs, 2009a). To qualify for these benefits, the student-servicemember must enlist for six years in the National Guard or Reserves. Depending on the state where they serve, National Guard members have an added incentive, because some state governments also pay tuition costs for its National Guard members. Servicemembers who are mobilized for a period of 90+ days qualify for additional benefits through the Reserve Education Assistance Program (REAP) (National Guard Virtual Armory, n.d.). Also, the Army National Guard GI Bill Kicker Program offers additional educational benefit incentives for servicemembers who are in critical skills or units (National Guard Virtual Armory, n.d.). For example, student servicemembers in the Simultaneous Membership Program qualify for the “kicker” incentive that raises the GI Bill’s monthly payments from \$282 per month to \$350 per month, in addition to their ROTC stipend (\$350 per month for juniors over 12 months and \$400 per month for seniors over 9–10 months) (West Virginia Army National Guard, 2002). Additionally, SMP cadets cannot be deployed if their Guard or Reserve unit is activated and deployed (West Virginia Army National Guard, 2002). Finally, special loan repayment terms and conditions are available to National Guard and Reserve servicemembers who borrow money for their college education (U. S. Department of Education and Student Financial Aid, 2003).

Now, with the implementation of the new GI Bill student, veterans can receive tuition assistance up to the highest tuition charged at the state’s public institutions along with a stipend for housing and textbook expenses (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009b). Housing stipends are determined based on the cost of living and geographic location of the student veterans. In addition, programs such as the Yellow Ribbon

program allow more flexibility for student veterans in deciding where they choose to go to college (Eckstein, 2009; Redden, 2009). Through the Yellow Ribbon program the VA will match dollar for dollar whatever private and for-profit institutions are willing to contribute toward tuition assistance for student veterans (U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009b).

Although student members of Guard or Reserve units have immediate access to financial support for their college attendance (Farrell, 2005; Stringer, 2007), their college education is disrupted when they are activated to serve in a war zone and must then re-enroll in college following their deployment. Accommodating and easing these disruptions presents potential challenges for higher education institutions (Cook & Kim, 2009; Stringer, 2007). As student veterans transition back into the college environment, they require support and assistance for colleges to manage the transitions, administratively and otherwise (DiRamio et al. 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, in press).

Today, institutions of higher education are not legally mandated to provide comprehensive support to departing servicemembers or to returning veterans. Typically, services and policies are developed by individual institutions and in some cases the state (J. Mikelson, personal communication, June 4, 2008)¹. Presently, legally-mandated provisions for deployed servicemembers deal primarily with financial aid eligibility issues and loan repayment relief (U. S. Department of Education and Student Financial

¹ John Mikelson served for 25 years in the United States Army. Currently he is a Veterans' Advisor at the University of Iowa and the Midwest Regional Director for Student Veterans of America (SVA). He has also been President of the Johnson County Military Affairs Association since 2005.

Aid, 2003). For example, the HEROES Act gives student loan repayment relief to Reserve members who are called to active military duty (National Association of Student Affairs Financial Aid Administrators, 2007).

One bill proposed in the U. S. Senate mandated designated student support services for veterans (Mikelson, personal communication, June 4, 2008). Senate Bill 2677, “Supporting Education for Returning Veterans Act of 2008”, was offered as an amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965, and would have authorized federal grants to institutions of higher education to establish support services for veterans at their institutions. One example of required program activities was establishing a Center of Excellence for Veteran Student Success. Optional program activities included classes limited to student veterans to help them fulfill general education requirements, and support for student veteran organizations and support groups (Open Congress, 2008a). A similar bill in the House of Representatives (HR 5143), “Securing Success for Veterans on Campus Act of 2008”, also addressed meeting student veterans’ needs at institutions of higher education (Open Congress, 2008b). To date neither of these bills (or similar bills) have been enacted or voted into law.

Historically, student veterans’ college experiences have varied, depending on a number of factors, such as the numbers of veterans returning to colleges and universities, the political climate on college campuses, programs available to student servicemembers (such as ROTC) and changes made to financial benefits offered to student veterans via the different GI Bills. For the purpose of this study, understanding trends in veterans’ pursuit of higher education, as well as government support of and responses to student veterans, helps contextualize the campus and social environments returning student

veterans face, and how patterns of educational incentives and support compare. The next section discusses aspects of the student veteran transition process, noting similarities and differences from World War II to present.

Student Veteran Outcomes: Nature of the Transition

Scholarly work focused on the returning veteran as a college student is limited (LaBarre, 1985), and information on the transition experiences of veterans returning to college is scarce. Using Academic Search Elite, Academic OneFile, and Google Scholar and the search terms “college”, “college student”, “veteran” and “transition” resulted in only a few articles or reports focused on the transition experiences of student veterans returning to college. The majority of studies pertained to the post-World War II era, and much of that work dealt with the scholastic achievements of veterans, rather than life transitions per se. However, some studies focused more narrowly on the adjustment and personal experiences of veterans enrolling in college.

World War II veterans

A handful of studies on academic achievement of World War II veterans revealed positive outcomes. World War II veterans consistently showed superior academic performance over their non-veteran counterparts (Clark, 1947; Garnezy & Crose, 1948; Gowan, 1947; Hansen & Paterson, 1949; Love & Hutchison, 1946; Thompson & Pressey, 1948). Additionally, some World War II veterans whose college education had been interrupted because of the war actually outpaced their pre-war academic achievement once they re-enrolled (Hansen & Paterson, 1949; Love & Hutchinson, 1946; Thompson & Pressey, 1948).

Some research focused on academic adjustment issues of World War II veterans enrolled in college (Hadley, 1945; Kinzer, 1946). Hadley found that the veteran students in an academic study skills and personal adjustment course reported feeling out of place, nervous, lacking in self-confidence and concerned about college success. However, these students also reported that the study skills course in which they were enrolled helped them to overcome many of those difficulties. Kinzer (1946) also studied a group of veterans in an academic and personal adjustment skills course and found they had similar concerns, but not to the same extent; the veterans in Kinzer's study resembled more the general student population than did the veterans in Hadley's study. Physical and mental health issues were typical concerns for World War II veterans (Hadley, 1945; Kinzer, 1946), and other studies noted the college counseling needs of the student veteran population and recommendations to address these needs (Toven, 1945; Williamson, 1944). For example, Williamson (1944) identified a number of broad-based adjustment problems that veterans might experience, including choices between work and college, the need for adequate financial assistance to attend college, desires for college credit for military experience to make up for lost time, feeling segregated from the traditional student population and low morale as a result of the transition to civilian life—where their military status no longer served as a marker of accomplishment. In response, Williamson outlined five steps for colleges to take, including policy changes, more effective physical and mental health facilities, student veteran orientation programs and more effective organization of counseling services. Most of these studies revealed patterns of short-term adjustments and long-term successes.

Vietnam War veterans

Vietnam War veterans returned to a much different set of circumstances than did veterans of previous wars, including college campuses, where opposition to the war was high and negative feelings toward veterans were evident (Horan, 1990b). For many Vietnam War veterans feeling unwelcome at home and on college campuses led to a feeling of unease during the collegiate experience (Horan, 1990a, 1990b).

The psychological adjustment difficulties of returning Vietnam veterans have been well documented (Hendin & Hass, 1991; Horan, 1990a, 1990b), but little has been written about the experiences of Vietnam veterans coming to college. Because of widespread opposition to the Vietnam War and campus protests during that time, returning to college was often a tumultuous and lonely experience for Vietnam veterans; many of them reported trying to blend in with the general student population as much as possible (Horan, 1990a). In light of the magnitude of the psychological and social adjustments facing Vietnam veterans, returning to college posed even more of a challenge (Horan, 1990b). Through his work with a group of Vietnam War veterans, Horan (1990a) found that:

The returning Vietnam veteran faced negative images and was a student misfit; the college experience of many was one of quiet desperation as they attempted to escape the image many people had of them; military duty had a negative effect upon post-military achievement; and this population faced special post-war readjustment problems. (p. 1)

Confounding these individual problems was relatively low support for this group of students at college campuses from staff and administrators (Ackerman & DiRamio,

2009). The college completion rates of Vietnam War veterans initially were lower in comparison to non-veteran students (MacLean, 2005; Teachman, 2005). However, Vietnam veteran students academically outperformed non-veteran students, and veterans who had pre-war college experience—just like their WW II counterparts—did even better academically than they had prior to their active duty service (Joanning, 1975).

Contemporary student veterans' transitions

To date, only three studies have addressed the transition processes of contemporary student veterans who served in Kuwait, Iraq or Afghanistan, and enrolled or re-enrolled in college following their deployment (Bauman, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press). DiRamio et al. (2008) interviewed 25 student veterans enrolled in one of three higher education institutions who either began or returned to college after active duty in Iraq or Afghanistan. Rumann and Hamrick (in press) conducted in-depth interviews with six student veterans about their transition experiences returning to college following their deployment. Both studies identified a number of challenges that student veterans faced going to college following their military service, such as concerns about inadequate funding for college or loan repayments, relationship difficulties with friends, family, and college peers upon their return, adjustment difficulties (such as having to re-learn study skills), ambivalence about being recognized for their service and shifting from the military environment to the less structured college environment. Findings from Rumann and Hamrick's work also suggested that the student veterans engaged in processes of self re-identification and assessment, prompted by the perception that, in important ways, they were not the same people they had been prior to deployment. Participants in both studies also reported

positive outcomes, such as increased maturity and focus on their academic pursuits, attributed wholly or in part to their military experience (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press). The DiRamio et al. study included student veterans who were in college prior to deployment, as well as those enrolling in college for the first time after military service. Rumann and Hamrick focused on National Guard and Reserve members who were in college before being deployed and had subsequently re-enrolled. Both studies used theoretical frameworks associated with Schlossberg's adult transition theory (Goodman et al., 2006) to explore and characterize these students' transitions. Rumann and Hamrick also used aspects of Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualization of the multiple identities model (Jones & McEwen, 2000) to help explain some of the identity re-identification issues student veterans in their study faced during their transition, which proved to be an effective way to help conceptualize that process.

Contemporary transitions from being a servicemember in a war zone to a college student can be difficult for many returning student veterans (Stringer, 2007; Zdechlik, 2005). A number of returning veterans encounter stress-related mental health issues as a result of their deployment and subsequent transition back to civilian life (Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006), with depression and post traumatic stress disorder particularly being concerns (Hosek, Kavanagh, & Miller, 2006). Servicemembers returning from deployment experienced a "range of problems when they returned from Iraq, including difficulty sleeping, strong reactions to loud noises, anger, excessive drinking, flashbacks to casualty situations and anxiety" (Hosek et al., 2006, p. 93). Routine screening for symptoms of PTSD is now required by the military for all servicemembers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, but more follow-up outreach

programs are recommended, because of tendencies to avoid seeking help based in part on the stigmas attached to counseling (Hosek et al., 2006).

The college environment is also very different from the military war zone environment, further complicating the transition process (Rumann & Hamrick, in press; Stringer, 2007). Servicemembers in a war zone lead a more structured and routine life than most college students, and the loss of connections with military friends and peers can make student veterans feel out of place on college campuses upon their return (Rumann & Hamrick, in press). Student veterans may also encounter significant financial difficulties if their accrued educational benefits (e.g., the GI Bill) do not cover college costs (Farrell, 2005; Stringer, 2007). Other veterans, especially those with physical injuries suffered as a result of their wartime service, may experience additional transition challenges (Stringer, 2007). Traumatic brain injury (TBI) (Okie, 2005) and limbs or sight lost to improvised explosive devices (IED) (Gawande, 2004) are some of the more common physical injuries suffered by troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Student veterans who have disabilities as a result of their wartime service bring into question colleges' and universities' preparedness for working with them (DiRamio et al., 2008). Also, at this time, little is known about how wartime injuries (both physical and psychological) may hinder or prevent student veterans from re-enrolling in college.

Contemporary support programs

Colleges and universities are beginning to plan and develop programs and services to support returning war veterans (Stringer, 2007). For example, Citrus College, a two-year college in California, has designed a class to assist returning Iraq war veterans with their transitions back to civilian life (Quillen-Armstrong, 2007). Other campuses

have instituted or plan to institute veterans' groups on their campuses, some in partnership with community organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) (McDaniel, 2004). A more comprehensive example of a campus-based veteran support program is the Veterans Transition Center at the University of Minnesota. Established in September 2005, the center provides resources to help student veterans adjust to the college environment and civilian life with the support of other veterans (University of Minnesota, n.d.). Federal programs are available for qualifying veterans, like Veterans Upward Bound (established in 1965 as part of the Upward Bound Program), which provides support and transitional services to veterans who meet eligibility criteria (i.e., low-income and/or first generation college students with a minimum of 180 days of active federal service, and with a discharge other than dishonorable) (National Veterans Upward Bound Program, n.d.). Additionally, a national student veteran organization was recently organized; Student Veterans of America (SVA) was created to bring student veterans together through dialogue and support (Student Veterans of America, 2008). SVA held its first national conference in Washington, D.C., in June 2008. Finally, the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) was created in 1972 to help provide military personnel with college opportunities that accommodate the transient nature of many military careers. The SOC is sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and has over 1,800 member colleges and universities (Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges, n.d.). The SOC provides a number of resources for military personnel, including information regarding GI Bill benefits and recommendations for

Guard and Reserve troops who are activated and deployed while pursuing their education.

Sources focusing on the transition experiences of student veterans are limited, and deal primarily with academic adjustments and anecdotal reports of transitioning student veterans' needs. Little is known about other aspects of student veterans' transitions coming to college, such as relationships with faculty and peers, or levels of integration into the college environment. More systematic inquiries like this current study are needed to help inform the higher education community about the transition processes for student veterans. Also, these inquiries should have a strong theoretical base in order to provide a more comprehensive and detailed description of the holistic, person-centered transition process, rather than focus on only one aspect of it (e.g., academic achievement). For the purpose of this study, transition theory offers the most appropriate framework for understanding student veterans' transition experiences.

Transition Theory

In one way or another, most college and university students are in states of transition (Laanan, 2006). War veterans entering or returning to college are also transitioning—at the very least, between military and college environments—and it is crucial to understand these general transition processes while also recognizing the individual nature of transition experiences, so that colleges and universities can proactively support these students (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press).

Schlossberg's theory of transition

Using developmental theory to more clearly understand college students is important, especially for higher education professionals who work directly with students

(Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Knowledge of Schlossberg's theory of transition is a useful tool for understanding individual transitions, because it "provides insights into factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment that are likely to determine the degree of impact a given transition will have at a particular point in time" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 107). This theory proved to be particularly relevant for this study because of its focus on the nature of the transition of re-enrolling in college as a particular point in time for targeted individuals, as well as the impact of the college environment and individual factors on that transition. Transition theories are most often grouped with adult development theories, but are also relevant to other populations, such as traditional-aged college students, and can be used in different ways and in different contexts (Evans et al., 1998). Schlossberg's theory focuses on individual, relationship and work transitions of adults (Goodman et al. 2006). However, although many full-time college students may not experience work transitions while attending college, Schlossberg's theory does help conceptualize their individual and relationship transition experiences. For example, Schlossberg et al. (1989) used Schlossberg's theory as a framework to help explain how institutions of higher education could work more effectively with non-traditional aged students. This application points to the usefulness of Schlossberg's transition theory as a useful theoretical perspective from which to view the transition experiences of student veterans, because it provides a conceptual framework that helps to understand the transition process of college students, both as a group and individually (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press). This transition model helps to explain transitions, and "incorporates the notion of variability while at the same time presents a structural approach so that counselors and helpers do

not need to approach each situation anew” (Goodman et al. 2006, p. 31). In fact, prior studies of the transition of student veterans back into college following war zone duty used Schlossberg’s theory as a guiding framework (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press).

Based on the tenets of Schlossberg’s theory, Goodman et al. (2006) described a transition as “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33) and events can be either anticipated or unanticipated. An event can also be a non-event when something a person expected to happen does not actually happen (e.g., having children). They further stipulated that an individual must perceive the event as a transition for it to be characterized as a transition in that person’s life. Transitions can also have both positive and negative effects on a person’s life (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

Finally, Schlossberg’s theory described “moving in”, “moving through” and “moving out” as key transitional processes (Goodman et al., 2006). Each of these phases of the transition are linked closely to each other, and the rate at which an individual goes through each depends on a number of factors, including how much the individual is prepared to cope with the change (Goodman et al., 2006). During the “moving in” phase, the person takes on new roles, begins to identify changes in his/her life related to personal relationships, and lets go of old ways of doing things. In the “moving through” stage, individuals continue to search for ways to adjust to changes in relationships and previous habits. This can also be a time of confusion and emptiness, since the transition process progresses; however, as the process continues, individuals ideally begin to feel more hopeful and optimistic about the changes in their lives (Goodman et al., 2006). Then, as

the transition ends and becomes integrated, the individual moves out of the transition process and begins to think about goals and possibilities that lie ahead.

Schlossberg's theory as a framework to investigate student veterans' transitions

Looking at the transition experience as “moving in,” “moving through,” or “moving out” can help investigators more deeply understand where the student veteran is in the process of transition—which could be at any one of the three points of the model. For example, a war zone deployment as an event introduces many changes into a person's life. Deployment could be described as an event that is anticipated—*as well as* unanticipated (e.g., in terms of timing), which can have positive and negative effects on a person's life (Rumann & Hamrick, in press). Student veterans re-enrolling in college have some previous knowledge and experience about how higher education works, but they most likely experience a noteworthy transition: according to prior research, they are re-entering college as changed people and students, and specifically, people with different perspectives and attitudes (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press).

The 4 S's

Goodman et al. (2006) adopted Schlossberg's theory for counseling settings, and elaborated on the four factors that affect people's ability to cope with transitions: Situation, Self, Support and Strategies (the four S's). Situation impacts the degree to which a transition affects a person's functioning. The Self refers to the individual's personal coping mechanisms and how well personal characteristics, such as resiliency and self-efficacy, enable the person to deal with transitions. Support is made up of outside resources an individual has in her or his life, such as family, relationships, friends, and community that make the transition more or less difficult to handle. Finally

Strategies are the means by which the person faces and handles the transition process itself, as well as tools she or he uses to cope with the situation. Goodman et al. argued that counselors could better understand individuals' transitions by first assessing their assets and liabilities in accordance with the four "S's", and then developing more effective plans to assist them. They noted that, "an individual's appraisal and reappraisal of a transition and of his or her resources for coping can be examined in light of the 4 S's" (p. 58).

A similar strategy seemed appropriate for investigating veteran students' transitions to college, with modifications to make it more appropriate for data collection, rather than counseling. For example, therapeutic relationships tend to be longer in duration, and focused solely on the mental health needs of the client. In this study, the researcher/participant relationship was more short-term during the course of the study. Although participants disclosed some psychological or emotional difficulties related to their return from deployment, the interviews focused on other aspects of their transition experiences. This study, therefore, did not address student veterans' mental health issues and concerns. Additionally, interviews with participants were more structured than is normally the case for counseling or therapy. This issue will be addressed further in Chapter 3.

Individual, relationship, and work transitions

Schlossberg's transition theory also identified three different areas in which people experience transitions: individual, relationships and work lives but specified that major transitions can include two to three areas, instead of only one (Goodman et al., 2006). For example, a person experiencing a work life transition (e.g., loss of a job)

likely experiences relationship (e.g., changes in relationships with family members and former co-workers) and individual transitions and changes (e.g., role changes and having to find another job) as a result of being out of work. The transition experience of a student veteran in college may best be described as an individual process, because the person is experiencing the transition on an individual level; additionally, changes in relationships and work life may also be occurring.

Other theoretical perspectives

Having clear precedent in previous studies, Schlossberg's theory of transition was used to guide this study of transition processes of student veterans. However, other theories of transition and related issues, like grief and loss, were also taken into account when characterizing this transition process. For example, Ebaugh (1988) viewed transitions as endings where individuals leave certain roles in their lives. This theory could aptly describe student veterans who go from being full-time servicemembers to college students, and could be used to examine role changes when trying to understand the student veteran's transition process. Goodman et al. (2006) argued that "changing jobs, moving, and returning to school all are transitions in which adults mourn the loss of former goals, friends, and structure" (p. 50). In other words, with transitions, people also often experience loss, so the use of theories about grief and loss may be helpful when investigating individual transitions. Kubler-Ross (1969) identified a five-stage model of suffering, loss and its aftermath: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Knowledge of these stages may help to understand grief and loss among student veterans. For example, returning from a military deployment might entail the

loss of relationships, possessions, or unmet goals, so grief and loss theories, such as Kubler-Ross', may be useful when exploring student veterans' transition experiences.

During the data collection and analysis processes participants' perceptions of their identities based on their newly acquired veteran status emerged as a thematic finding. Identity re-negotiations or re-examinations have been identified as a potentially prominent factor for people who are experiencing life transitions (Goodman et al., 2006). Therefore, Abes et al.'s (2007) multiple identities model—which is a reconceptualization of Jones and McEwen's (2000) model—was also used to help understand participants' experiences. This was also the case in Rumann and Hamrick's (in press) study of student veterans' transitions where this model helped to conceptualize their participants' transition experiences. Abes et al.'s model emphasizes individuals' meaning making process and self-perceptions of their concurrent social identities. These social identities are “roles or memberships categories that a person claims as representative” (Deaux, 1993, p. 6). In this case, participants were negotiating how they envisioned their newly acquired social role of “veteran” with pre-deployment social roles such as “servicemember” and “college student”. In addition, these social roles are more or less salient depending on environmental cues and social factors in the person's life along with external influences such as peers, stereotypes, and sociopolitical conditions (Abes et al., 2007).

Using transition theories to help understand the challenges and successes of returning student veterans as they progress through the transition process is appropriate; Schlossberg's theory of transition provides a reasonably comprehensive framework from which to investigate the transitions of the participants, regardless of where they are in the

transition process of re-enrolling in college. For the purpose of this study, it also highlights the need to explore strategies, coping mechanisms and support systems that the participants utilized to deal with the positive and negative aspects of returning to college. In addition to theoretical perspectives it is important to consider the type of institution to which student veterans return. For example, community colleges possess features that make them potentially well suited to assist student veterans returning from deployment (Eckstein, 2009; Moltz, 2009). Appropriately, two community colleges in the Midwest were the sites for this study.

Community Colleges

Since military operations began following the September 11th, 2001 attacks, approximately 80 percent of all colleges and universities, and 91 percent of public community colleges, have had students withdraw during an academic term upon activation for military service (Ashby, 2006). Large numbers of student veterans are enrolled in community colleges (Field, 2008), and many student veterans will re-enter or return to a community college following their tour of duty. For example, in the state that is the site for this study, as of February 2008, 1,081 veterans were attending community colleges using GI Bill funds (out of a total community college enrollment of nearly 126,000 students), compared to 677 veterans attending the state's public universities (out of a total undergraduate enrollment of nearly 52,000 students) (T. Beasley, personal communication, February 2, 2008). Overall, student veterans tend to be more highly concentrated at two year colleges compared to all other institutional types (Radford, 2009).

Community colleges may offer student veterans a more appealing setting for higher education than do universities. Nationally, the community college population is becoming increasingly more diverse (Bragg, 2001). Student veterans are often married, and usually older than the traditional college student (Field, 2008; Radford, 2009), and many community colleges gear services toward non-traditional students (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). Community colleges provide students relatively open access to flexible curricula at lower costs than most universities (Bragg, 2001) making community colleges a more viable financial option, since veterans' educational benefits are often not sufficient to cover the full costs of going to college—especially at private and public universities (Farrell, 2005; Field, 2008; Stringer, 2007). However, it is now more likely student veterans will be able to afford to attend public, four year institutions with higher tuitions since funding from the Post 9/11 GI Bill will cover tuition costs up to the most expensive public, state institution (Radford, 2009). In addition, the Yellow Ribbon Program discussed earlier further expands student veterans' enrollment options at private non-profit and for-profit institutions (Eckstein, 2009). On the other hand, community colleges have historically served more student veterans so they already have some of the infrastructure in place to support these students and may be better prepared to support contemporary student veterans (Eckstein, 2009; Moltz, 2009). Community college campuses are also often conveniently located (e.g., near military bases) (Field, 2008), and do not require relocation or long commutes, which may be especially important considerations for National Guard and Reserve servicemembers who must continue their National Guard or Reserve responsibilities following their deployments, and who cannot relocate without being assigned to a different unit. Community colleges

are also taking the lead in providing education to student veterans through innovative distance education programs (Halligan, 2007) and courses designed to help student veterans transition back to civilian life (Quillen-Armstrong, 2007). For example, Mount Wachusett Community College in Massachusetts will have an on-campus residential treatment center for veterans from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq who have disabilities as a result of their military service (Mangan, 2009). Veterans in the treatment center will also be able to take courses for free at the college and use various campus facilities.

For these reasons, community colleges appear to be well prepared to help ease the transition of students, and community colleges possess a number of characteristics that make them geographically and financially appealing to veterans who re-enroll in college (Field, 2008). On the other hand, while community colleges do not offer military training programs like ROTC, community college students who subsequently transfer to four year colleges are eligible for membership in ROTC (Neiberg, 2000). Choosing community colleges as the sites for this study was also practical, because larger numbers of veterans attend two year colleges than four year public or private non-profit institutions (Field, 2008; Radford, 2009).

Summary

U. S. higher education and the military have long standing relationships, and veterans have had varying degrees of influence on colleges and universities through time, principally as re-enrolling students. Veterans have faced challenges and successes in college, but outside of academic achievement and degree attainment, few studies have focused on holistic aspects of veterans' post-deployment college experiences. Higher education institutions, and particularly community colleges, have begun to develop

programs, flexible policies and systems to help support returning student veterans. However, comparatively little is known about these veterans' transition experiences following a war zone deployment. This lack of knowledge makes it difficult to design effective policies and programs to support ranges of experiences, needs and concerns for returning student veterans. Further research in this area will yield more information about the transition experiences of student veterans returning to college following activation and military service.

Using Schlossberg's theory as the initial framework, this study examined more closely the transition experiences of student veterans re-enrolling in college. Chapter 3 outlines the study in more detail, including methodology, theoretical frameworks, researcher's role, participant and site selection, research methods, trustworthiness, ethical issues and considerations, delimitations and limitations and a brief description of a pilot study conducted as preparation for this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY, DESIGN, AND METHODS

The focus of this study was the transition experiences of student war veterans who re-enrolled in college at one of two two-year institutions following deployment. I selected a qualitative research approach to investigate the nature of the students' transition experiences. Qualitative researchers investigate how people construct meaning of social situations and interactions with their environments (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 2002). I investigated participants' perspectives on their experiences of returning to college and the meanings they ascribed to their transition experiences. An interpretive theoretical perspective grounded in the epistemological view of constructionism was an appropriate framework for this study because this approach allowed me to better understand how the participants made meaning of their experiences returning to college. The epistemology of social constructionism presumes that people construct meaning and knowledge through their interactions with the world, and in light of particular cultural influences (Crotty, 1998). In addition to adopting a social constructionist epistemology and an interpretive theoretical perspective I adopted a phenomenological methodology. According to Merriam, "the defining characteristic of phenomenological research is its focus on describing the 'essence' of a phenomenon from the perspectives of those who have experienced it" (p. 93). Phenomenological research was most appropriate for this study because data collection and data analysis focused on understanding and portraying the participants' transition experiences through my analysis and interpretation of data.

Schlossberg's theory of adult transition served as the primary framework for this research study (Goodman et al., 2006). This particular theory has been an effective

framework with which to investigate and understand college student and adult transitions (Evans et al., 1998). Additionally, the theoretical constructs of “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out” of a transition assisted me in gauging relative progress through their transitions back into college. In addition, the model’s “4 S’s” (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) guided the interviewing process, including generation of interview questions, as well as some aspects of data analysis. This theoretical framework provided an initial sense of the factors and issues of which to be aware as I sought to understand the participants’ experiences and perspectives.

As the study progressed and data were collected other theoretical models were considered. For example, if the data had revealed that role changes were central to the transitions for the participants, then Ebaugh’s (1988) theory of transition would have been used to understand the data. Also, since losses as a result of being deployed or returning are likely grief and loss theories such as Kubler-Ross’ (1969) were consulted. However, while role changes and losses were identified by participants as aspects of their transitions, they were not central to the overall transition process. Also, Schlossberg’s theory of transition proved to be an effective framework from which to help understand the participants’ overall transition experiences. Finally, Abes et al.’s (2007) model of multiple identities—which is a reconceptualization of Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity—was used to help explain participants’ perceptions of self and their identities which was also used to help explore identity issues in a previous study of student veterans’ transitions (Rumann & Hamrick, in press). The ways in which the model was used is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Researcher's role

In this qualitative research study I was the primary data gathering tool, and it was impossible to separate myself from the research process and presume objectivity (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 2002). As noted by Esterberg “who you are and what qualities you bring to your work matter” (p. 62). Consequently, I needed to identify, understand, and be aware of my positionality as the researcher throughout the course of the study.

My more than ten years of experience (six at a community college) as a professional student counselor provided me with relevant theoretical knowledge, improved interviewing techniques, and strong human relations skills. These skills were utilized in this study, and they have been a major focus of my counselor training and ongoing professional development. This strong foundation helped participants feel comfortable in interviewing situations and helped me listen more carefully to their responses and formulate appropriate follow up questions.

I have never served in the U. S. military. However, a number of my friends served in the National Guard, some of whom had been deployed in January 2004 to serve in Iraq, and others who were not deployed but lived with the possibility of being activated. As a community college counselor, I worked with college students who, when activated, had to withdraw from college, and I worked with some college students who were considering re-enrolling following their deployments. My relationships with people who have served or are currently serving in the military were beneficial because it gave me a sense of the student servicemembers' apprehensions and concerns about deployment and, in some of the same cases, re-enrollment in college. My own lack of

military service may be viewed as a disadvantage since participants might not have felt comfortable talking to someone without similar experiences or without a personal understanding of military culture. However, my honesty with participants about my own background and my motivations for undertaking this study, as well as my counseling skills, helped offset this potential disadvantage.

Between June and December 2006 I interviewed six returning student veterans at a four year institution who had re-entered college following their earlier activation and deployment to Kuwait, Iraq, or Afghanistan. The findings from that study (Rumann & Hamrick, in press) helped me appreciate the sacrifices of these student veterans and the importance of universities providing appropriate support for returning veterans.

In February 2008 I spent an afternoon at a nearby National Guard Armory and spoke with a number of individuals there who were either part time National Guard members participating in weekend drills or full time National Guard members. Two primary contacts cultivated during my visit were the Education Services Officer and the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel. This visit provided some additional exposure to military culture and people who serve in the National Guard. Reactions to my study by these two individuals were consistently positive, and they were excited to hear about my research interests and the benefits my findings could have for military personnel returning from deployments. In addition, I have presented programs or papers at five national conferences, including the Department of Defense Worldwide Education Symposium in June 2009, focusing on the transition experiences of student veterans re-enrolling in college and attended the Veterans Symposium in Louisville, Kentucky in February 2009. All of these experiences helped me to connect with others in the military

and academia who are concerned with understanding transitions of student veterans attending institutions of higher education.

Finally, before data collection and throughout the course of the study I met with the VACO at both research sites. The VACOs are not directly affiliated with the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). However, they assist students in applying for educational benefits and act as a liaison between the student and the DVA. The VACOs and I discussed the transition issues they see veterans facing when they come to college. They also discussed their role in helping those veterans to access educational benefits information and receive support resources both within and outside the college. These meetings helped me understand the perspectives and insights of two student affairs professionals who work to support and assist student veterans. The VACOs also served as my primary contact point for recruiting participants. Both of these student affairs professionals were important “gate keepers” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 66) for my study because, although they could not grant me formal permission to conduct research at their college, they played a critical role in helping me to gain access and be accepted in the research setting.

Research sites and selection of participants

The participants for this study were six student veterans who were deployed to a war zone within the past eight years and re-enrolled at one of two community colleges—Dove Community College and Killdeer Community College (pseudonyms)—in the Midwest following their return. Participants were five men (pseudonyms of Jeff, Frank, Josh, Toby, and Matt) and one woman (pseudonym of Tanya). As of August 31st, 2008—just before data collection for this study began—there were 227,839 deployed

male servicemembers compared to 25,630 deployed female servicemembers (44,795 males compared to 5,213 females in the National Guard and Reserves)². Participants were National Guard or Reserve servicemembers rather than full-time enlisted military personnel and traditional aged students. This was anticipated because it was more likely that National Guard or Reserve servicemembers would have an interruption of their college education because of a deployment. Participants had been re-enrolled in college between one and seven semesters: Jeff and Toby for one semester, Matt and Josh for two, Tanya for three, and Frank for seven. Please see Table 1 for additional self-reported participant information. In addition, a more detailed profile for each participant is provided in Chapter 4.

Purposeful sampling strategies were used to select participants. Purposeful sampling strategies are commonly used in qualitative studies (Seidman, 2006) because they allow qualitative researchers to “intentionally sample research participants for the specific perspectives they may have” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 93). Purposeful selection was critical because the study’s primary objective was to understand the experiences of student veterans who had re-enrolled in community college, so accessing a wide range of experiences helped me achieve the stated purpose. Participants were also able to describe their pre-deployment college experiences and more recent experiences to help investigate how they compare.

² This information was received from Mr. Randy Noller of the National Guard Bureau Office of Public Affairs via an email attachment. Mr. Noller asked me to cite the Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs (OSD-PA) as the source for the data. The report was prepared by the Defense Manpower Data Center on September 24, 2008.

Table 1. Participant Information

Name*	Academic Major	Age	Class Standing	Affiliation	Military Occupational Specialty (MOS)	Months Deployed
Jeff	Political Science and International Studies	22	Sophomore	Marine Reserves	Infantry	12 months
Frank	Interdepartmental Studies	23	Junior	Air National Guard	Security Forces	7 months
Josh	Culinary Arts	21	Sophomore	Army National Guard	Administrative Specialist and Infantry	11 months
Tanya	Social Work	24	Sophomore	Army Reserve	Combat Medic	13 months
Matt	Fire Science	23	Sophomore	Army National Guard	Combat Engineer	13 months
Toby	Mechanical Engineering	28	Junior	Army National Guard	Communications ¹ then Postal Specialty ²	12 months ¹ 11 months ²

*Names are pseudonyms

¹ 1st deployment to Afghanistan

² 2nd deployment to Egypt

Community colleges were chosen as the research sites because, as outlined in the literature review, they offer a number of attractive qualities to student veterans re-enrolling in college. Community colleges offer advantages such as adult-oriented student services, scheduling and curriculum flexibility, and lower costs that make them viable options for student veterans returning from a war zone deployment. The first research site, Dove Community College, is one of five satellite campuses of a large, urban community college in the Midwest which enrolls over 25,000 students, employs more than 300 full and part time faculty members, and offers 75 certificate or degree programs. The specific research site is located within 10 miles of the community college's main

urban campus and is the site where the VACO's main office is located. However, she also visits the other satellite campuses on designated days. At the time of data collection approximately 335 student veterans receiving GI Bill funding were enrolled at Dove Community College. The second research site, Killdeer Community College, is also a large, urban community college in the Midwest, which enrolls over 22,000 students, employs nearly 300 full and part time faculty members, and offers 120 plus certificate or degree programs. The specific research site was the college's main urban campus and is the site where the VACO's main office is located. Overall, Killdeer Community College has 11 locations serving a 7 county area in the State. At the time of data collection approximately 450 student veterans receiving GI Bill funding were enrolled at Killdeer Community College. Both research sites enrolled more student veterans compared to other institutions in the State including four year, public institutions at the time of data collection for the study.

Initially, I planned to use only one research site, Dove Community College, for this study. However, due to the low number of student veterans I was able to recruit at that site who matched the eligibility criteria for this study a second research site was located. Appropriate steps were taken to secure Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study and the change in protocol concerning the additional research site. The community colleges' designated representative at both sites agreed to my conducting the study at their institutions.

I first contacted the community college Veterans Affairs Certifying Official at Dove Community College because she had direct contact with student veterans. She agreed to forward an email from me to all the veterans on her campus (and other satellite

campuses) who had been certified to receive GI Bill benefits asking them to contact me if they thought they matched the selection criteria and might be willing to participate in the study. I anticipated this email would go out at the beginning of the Fall 2008 semester, but due to the VACO's extremely busy schedule the email did not actually get sent until October 2008. The email also went out to student veterans at all of the college's seven satellite campuses. As a result of this request approximately 25 student veterans contacted me about the study; however, only four of the student veterans who responded actually met selection criteria but all four initially agreed to participate in the study. However, one of the participants (a woman) had to withdraw due to a personal health issue before the first interview could be completed. Also, first interview meetings were scheduled with another participant (a man), but he did not show for the first meeting due to a scheduling conflict and had to cancel the rescheduled meeting due to a death in the family. Numerous attempts (by phone and email) to schedule another meeting were unsuccessful so following a final email request no more attempts were made to contact that particular student veteran.

Lastly, following an initial meeting with one of participants, Matt, at Dove Community I was not sure he matched the selection criteria because of the large gap between his initial enrollment and his re-enrollment in college (Spring 2006 to Fall 2008). Matt's intention was to continue college after he joined the National Guard during the Summer of 2006 but following boot camp and advanced training—both of which often interrupt servicemembers' college attendance—his unit was deployed before he could re-enroll. Consequently, he was deployed from Spring 2007 to Spring 2008 and re-enrolled in college in Fall 2008. Then, after talking to him again and upon further

reflection I decided to include him in the study because ultimately his college education had been interrupted due to a military deployment *and* he did eventually re-enroll. I interviewed Frank and Jeff both of whom had re-enrolled at Dove Community College following a military deployment, but I was unable to recruit other participants at this site. Therefore, a second research site was located.

I contacted the VACO at Killdeer Community College who agreed to assist me recruiting participants for the study. In total she sent an email request to 10 student veterans she believed matched the eligibility criteria for the study based on the type of GI Bill funding they were receiving. As a result of this request, four student veterans contacted me. All four matched the eligibility criteria, and all four agreed to participate in the study (Frank, Josh, Toby, and Tanya).

Throughout the participant recruitment process I did employ snowball sampling techniques (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) in which I asked participants to refer other student veterans to me if they thought they might match the selection criteria. I also maintained contact with the VACOs at both research sites and asked them to continue to refer student veterans if they thought they might be willing to talk to me about participating in the study. Finally, I attended Veterans Day activities and a Student Veteran Club meeting at Dove Community College and an ROTC Club meeting at Killdeer Community College in an attempt to meet other student veterans at each college. No other prospective participants were identified as a result of these strategies. However, during the data analysis process I found that I had reached a point of data saturation in which I was seeing the same categories and emerging themes over and over again

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and decided no additional participants were necessary for the study.

An individual meeting either by phone or in person was scheduled with each of the interested individuals to inform them of the study design, discuss their role as a participant, and determine their willingness to participate. As noted above, six student veterans agreed to participate in the study. Following the initial meeting the data collection process began through interviews and a limited number of observations.

Data Collection

Phenomenological research focuses on how people experience or make meaning of a particular phenomenon from their unique perspectives (Merriam, 2002). Consequently, choosing appropriate methods of data collection are critical when conducting a phenomenological study (Esterberg, 2002) because methods need to facilitate exploration of the essences of participants' experiences and how they make meaning of those experiences (Merriam, 2002). Although a number of different data collection strategies can be used for phenomenological research, "interviewing is the primary method of data collection wherein one attempts to uncover the essence, the invariant structure, of the meaning of the experience" (Merriam, 2002, p. 93). In this study a series of three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. A three interview series (Seidman, 2006) was conducted to provide rich and descriptive data for analysis. The broad interview topical questions (See Appendix B) were designed with Schlossberg's 4 S's in mind and included focuses on participants' situations returning to college, their self assessments, support systems relevant to the transition, and the strategies they adopted to assist them through the transition itself.

Following an initial meeting with each participant to explain the nature of the study and his or her rights as a participant in the study (and obtain signed informed consent), the first interview addressed many of the interview questions in Appendix B and was used to gather background information about the participants' transition re-enrolling in college (and some military experiences) in order to contextualize the participants' transition experiences (Seidman, 2006). When possible the informed consent document (See Appendix A) and interview questions were sent to the participants via email prior to the first interview. This first interview was semi-structured to make the interview situation more open so the participants had more control over what they chose to share and how they answered the questions (Esterberg, 2002). Interviews also gave me the opportunity to use my abilities to ask follow up questions and probe in order to further clarify the participants' initial answers which produced more rich and thick data (Esterberg, 2002). During the initial interviews trust began to develop between me and the participants; however, building trust is a "*developmental* process" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 303) that takes time. One advantage of conducting a three interview series was more time to establish trust with the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following the first interview the participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcript and asked to check the transcript for accuracy and to provide any feedback they deemed necessary for clarification purposes. Participants were asked to clarify any points they (or I) deemed necessary and make corrections or additions to the transcripts themselves. These requests resulted in only a couple of the participants making minor corrections and clarifications to their transcripts typically related to military jargon and/or their college re-enrollment and deployment timelines. For example, because Toby had been deployed

twice, his timeline was challenging to depict accurately. His feedback concerning his timeline was helpful so that I could more accurately describe his deployment and re-enrollment in college timelines. Other changes also included spelling corrections and clarification of deployment locations for some of the participants, but overall no substantive changes were required based on participants' reviews of their transcripts. Two of the participants made sure they clarified how they felt about their relationships with long time civilian friends, and this is described in more detail in the trustworthiness section of this chapter. None of the clarifications resulted in a change to the transcript itself.

The questions and issues addressed during the second interview arose from the data gathered during the first interview with each of the participants, and it also provided the participants with a face to face opportunity to clarify points from the first interview and my preliminary analyses. Similar to the first interview questions, the questions asked during the second interview were developed with Schlossberg's 4 S's in mind. The questions varied from participant to participant, but I did ask some similar questions of all the participants during the second interview such as (a) What advice would you give to faculty, staff, administrators, and military personnel for working with student veterans and (b) How would you recommend approaching student veterans? During the second interview I asked the participants to provide more detailed information about their transition experiences (e. g., relationships with peers, family, and faculty) than was the case in the first interview so that more descriptive data could be collected (Seidman, 2006). Following the second interview participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcript for their review and asked to make corrections and/or add

clarifications if necessary. As noted above, some of the participants made only minor changes and corrections while others made none at all.

The third interview was less structured in nature than the previous two and was conducted to address emerging themes and to clarify any points I and/or the participants deemed necessary with regard to my data analysis. Building on the data gathered during the previous two interviews I asked the participants to reflect on how they make meaning of their transition experiences re-enrolling in college and how being in the military interacts with their current situations being college (Seidman, 2006). As was the case during the second interviews questions varied from participant to participant. However, four common questions were asked during all of the third interviews (a) What does it mean to you to be a veteran? (b) What does it mean to you to be a college student? (c) What does it mean to you to be a college student veteran? (d) What has the process been like for you participating in this study? Both the second and third interviews were opportunities to strengthen the member checking strategy (described in more detail later) employed for this study rather than relying solely on other sources of communication such as telephone and email correspondence. Member checking should be an ongoing process and can be “both formal and informal” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). During the interview process I initiated immediate member checking with the participants at various points during the interview itself as well as investigated participants’ feelings and reactions regarding my data analyses and theme development in a more planned and systematic way (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Also, prior to the third meeting participants were provided with a copy of an initial theme development summary I wrote for each of the participants following my review and coding process (described in the data analysis

section below) of the transcripts from the first and second interviews. Participants were provided with a copy of the third interview transcript for their review. No changes were necessary in the transcripts as a result of those reviews. Finally, I presented each of the participants with a 10 dollar gift certificate to a local restaurant for their participation in the study after all of the data collection was completed. This protocol was approved by IRB through the appropriate modification request and review process.

Observations

Observations of three of the participants in various classroom and extracurricular activities were conducted with the participants' permission. Data from these observations complemented interview data. I observed Jeff as he gave a speech about the Marines during a speech competition at Dove Community College. I also observed Frank during a biology class at Killdeer Community college and Josh during one of his cooking classes where they were being taught to prepare a chicken dish. Observation data was gathered through careful note taking and documenting my reflections immediately following the observations (Esterberg, 2002). These data were then used to supplement the interview data and strengthen the findings through data triangulation (Esterberg, 2002). These observations provided further insights into the participants' experiences transitioning back into the college environment following military deployment to a war zone and an opportunity to observe participants and their interactions in their daily environments. By observing the participants in their roles as student veterans and comparing that data with interview data I gained a deeper understanding of the meanings participants made regarding their transition experiences. However, the small number of observations I was able to conduct with only three out of the six participants limited the amount of

observation data I was able to collect. Consequently, observation data were used primarily to supplement interview data. On the other hand, observations served as another trust building activity because it strengthened the depth of my prolonged engagement in the study and confirmed to participants that I was genuinely interested in understanding their transition experiences. It showed that I was invested in understanding their experiences by collecting information in different ways (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Pseudonyms were used for all of the participants and identifying information was removed from transcribed data to protect their anonymity (Esterberg, 2002). For example, I did not identify specifically where participants were from or specific sites or units where they were assigned in the military and the research sites were not identified. Steps were also taken to ensure the confidentiality of audio tapes and transcripts (Esterberg, 2002). My major professor and I were the only people who had access to audio tapes and transcripts, and they were stored in a secure location at all times when not being analyzed. Anonymity and confidentiality provisions were also addressed as part of the IRB approval process and the informed consent document.

Data Analysis

The data for this study came primarily from the three semi-structured interviews conducted with each of the participants. I audio recorded interviews with participant permission and produced verbatim transcripts. Transcription is a common technique to record interview data and serves as one of the primary sources for data analysis when interviews are used in qualitative studies (Esterberg, 2002). After each interview I wrote or audio recorded memos about my observations, thoughts, and feelings as they arose

during the process to assist me with the data analysis. These memos were notes that I wrote to myself or audio recorded to help me document my research activities and insights about the collected data and emerging themes (Esterberg, 2002). All of the audio recorded memos were later transcribed soon after they were recorded.

The first two interviews with each of the participants were transcribed soon after each interview (Esterberg, 2002) and reviewed prior to the subsequent interview allowing me to clarify points and form questions to help guide the second and third interviews. Participants were also provided with a copy of their interview transcripts prior to subsequent interviews so they could clarify any points that were unclear and make corrections. I continued to memo following each transcription review in order to document potential emerging themes, observations, thoughts, and feelings and maintain an audit trail throughout the duration of this project to assist me during the data analysis process (Esterberg, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I also maintained a reflective journal on nearly a weekly basis throughout the course of the study documenting why and how I made decisions regarding data analysis and other methodological activities as well as emerging questions, concerns, or potential problems (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Once all interviews were completed and transcribed, and any observation data recorded, I immersed myself in the data to identify themes first using the open coding process outlined by Esterberg (2002). Through this open coding process I carefully reviewed each transcript and identified categories in the data. I then reviewed the transcripts again and identified general patterns and emerging potential themes. These general patterns and emerging potential themes were shared with each of the participants prior to the third interview. I then utilized a more systematic and structured approach

called focused coding (Esterberg, 2002) to re-examine transcripts line by line, with initial themes in mind, generating additional potential themes only where initial themes were judged inadequate or lacking. During this line by line re-examination and more focused analytic process I identified overarching themes and looked for discrepancies in the data to identify issues and perspectives that may differ among participants (Creswell, 2003). The data collection and analysis process continued until the point of saturation at which no additional categories or emerging themes were identified (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). At this point, I decided that no additional participants were needed for the study. Throughout this iterative process I received feedback from my major professor and the participants concerning the theme development process. Four themes emerged as results of this process, which were shared with the participants for their review.

Finally, the data collected during the observations were analyzed primarily in light of the interview data and resulting themes. In other words, observation data supplemented the interview data in the sense of strengthening or questioning the previously identified themes.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a crucial element of any qualitative study. Four aspects of establishing a study's trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and different techniques are employed during the study to address each of those aspects (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam (2002) identified the strategies of triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement to strengthen a study's trustworthiness.

Credibility

Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation make it more likely “that credible findings will be produced” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). In addition peer debriefing provides an external check on the inquiry process, and member checking tested my findings and interpretations with the participants from which the data originated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002).

Prolonged engagement. Prolonged engagement is a necessary facet of a study’s credibility because it addresses the need to be build trust and rapport with participants and a deeper level of engagement by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) which I addressed through prolonged engagement with the participants and discussions with military personnel and student affairs professionals (e.g., the VACOs) who work with student veterans. The use of a three interview series (Seidman, 2006) also increased the amount of time I spent with the participants gathering data and fostered more in depth analyses, making the findings of the study more credible. Using observations to collect supplemental data added another element to my engagement with the participants in my study and were another strategy to help build trust and rapport as well as augment interview data.

Persistent observation. Persistent observation provides more in depth involvement during the study and can be addressed by the researcher through detailed description of the research process and how the persistent observation was carried out (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By being “tuned into” the details of the research process and observations I identified relevant and less relevant characteristics of the phenomenon

strengthening the credibility of my study. Also, I maintained an audit trail that helped to trace the unfolding process of the study (Lincoln & Guba; Merriam, 2002).

Member checking. The strategy of involving the participants in the data analysis and asking them for their feedback concerning theme development is characterized as member checking (Esterberg, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). Member checking is an ongoing formal and informal process and was a critical strategy to maximize my understanding of this phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks not only clarify findings but also are “the most useful technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). It was important that the participants in my study were invited to give feedback regarding data accuracy and data analyses because of the phenomenological nature of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Their input in these phases of the study strengthened and added credibility to the findings. Participants were provided with their interview transcripts and involved in the theme development process. Participants were also provided with documents addressing potential themes, the final thematic findings, and participant profiles inviting them to respond, clarify, or correct any information they deemed necessary. This process typically resulted in only minor changes and clarifications; however there were instances when participants did clarify the data analyses more deeply. For example, Matt and Frank both clarified that while they felt distanced from some of their civilian friends initially over time they re-formed strong relationships with certain long time civilian friends rather easily. Finally, the third interview was used primarily as a means of member checking by creating a space and time in which

participants could share their thoughts and feelings about the emerging themes that had been identified.

Peer debriefing. Gathering different perspectives about findings and data from educated but uninvolved peers and checking analyses of the data are the primary objectives of peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing helped me to make sure I was aware of my role in the study and not letting emotions or preconceptions unduly affect the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It also served as a check on my emerging interpretations and data analyses and contributed different perspectives on the data. The peer debriefer should be my peer and “someone who knows a great deal about both the substantive area of the inquiry and the methodological issues” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308-309). The peer debriefer should also be a person who will take his/her role seriously and be willing to challenge me about the research process and findings even if difficult while doing so in a manner that is not overly critical (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A fellow doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program agreed to be the peer debriefer for my study. He has been trained in qualitative research and has experience in qualitative methodology and data gathering and analysis. He also had knowledge of my study’s topic through conversations we had regarding my work during the past 1.5 years. However, he had not been overly involved with my topic and because we have a strong peer relationship he provided constructive and honest feedback about my findings and critically examined my data analyses. I provided the peer debriefer with a document of potential themes for his review. He commented on those themes and whether or not he saw them as accurate based on our discussions about the study. I also met with the peer debriefer to discuss in detail his

thoughts and reflections concerning the emerging thematic findings. This meeting was audio recorded and transcribed so I could refer to it during the final stages of the data analysis and theme development process. Overall, the peer debriefer supported my analyses but also helped me be more specific about and descriptive of the final themes that were identified as a result of data analysis and the theme development process.

Triangulation. Triangulation is the use of more than one data collection or analysis strategy in qualitative research and can strengthen the credibility of findings (Esterberg, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). Four different types of triangulation are multiple investigators, multiple theories, multiple sources of data, and multiple methods to confirm emerging findings (Denzin, 1978). Each data collection strategy has its own strengths and weaknesses, making data triangulation that much more important when conducting qualitative research (Esterberg, 2002). I used two different data gathering strategies (multiple interviews for primary data and observations for supplemental data), and I interviewed multiple participants to collect data from a variety of perspectives. Also, as described earlier, I incorporated peer debriefing and member checking strategies to strengthen the credibility of my study's findings. Finally, while taking other theoretical perspectives into consideration as themes began to emerge may not be a recommended method of triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) it allowed me to consider other theoretical frameworks that may have been pertinent as I analyzed the data.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is akin to external validity however; a qualitative researcher cannot determine the external validity of his or her findings

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Instead, “he or she can provide only the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). I addressed transferability by immersing myself in the data and providing rich and thick descriptions of the data and findings to strengthen credibility (Merriam, 2002).

Dependability

Dependability within qualitative research is not absolute, because it is based on the understanding that realities are continuously being constructed and are always changing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All of the activities (prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation, and peer de-briefing) I used to strengthen the credibility and potential transferability of findings also strengthened dependability and led to increased trustworthiness of my findings. However, in order to address the issue of dependability specifically I maintained an audit trail that helped to explain the process of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002).

Confirmability

One of the most useful techniques for establishing confirmability is to have an outside source conduct an audit of the study; maintaining a detailed and accurate audit trail is the first step in conducting the audit process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail is a collection of records kept by the researcher throughout the study that includes raw data, process notes, personal notes, methodological notes, and ideas generated during the iterative theme development process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail is necessary to facilitate an audit process, but whether or not an audit is carried out maintaining an audit trail is important (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I did not plan to have an

audit completed by an outside source, but I maintained a detailed and complete audit trail consisting of the above items as well as a reflective journal of my thoughts, reactions, initial impressions, and feelings regarding the data gathering and analysis phases of the project.

Each of the techniques and strategies described above strengthened the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings of my study leading to increased trustworthiness overall. Preparing for and developing a consciousness of potential ethical issues also complemented the trustworthiness of my findings. Those issues and considerations are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Ethical Issues and Considerations

I considered ethical issues and circumstances that may arise at various times during the study (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 2002). Esterberg (2002) noted two of the most relevant ethical considerations for qualitative researchers: informed consent and participant anonymity. Participants have the right to be informed of all aspects of the study before they agree to participate (Esterberg, 2002). They have the right to know that their participation is strictly voluntary and that they can withdraw from the study at any point. Participants in this study were fully informed of their rights as participants and were provided with a complete description of all critical aspects of the study such as data collection procedures, researcher's role, participants' role, and plans for reporting the findings. This information was provided via the informed consent document that was created as part of the IRB approval process (See Appendix A). During initial meetings with participants, I explained fully the informed consent document and the procedures of the study. I also answered any questions about the project and procedures, and then

asked each participant to sign the informed consent document if they agreed to participate. All of the participants agreed to participate and signed the informed consent document.

Maintaining the anonymity of the participants was another critical ethical consideration, especially considering the potentially sensitive and personal information participants were asked to share with me (Esterberg, 2002). Anonymity can never be absolutely guaranteed but I took steps to maintain the participants' anonymity and confidentiality to the fullest extent possible (Esterberg, 2002). These steps included using pseudonyms for each of the participants, not identifying the research site in reporting documents, and keeping any identifying documents and audiotapes in a secure area at all times. Access to all data collected was limited to my major professor and me. Observations were conducted so as not to single out the participants as the objects of the observation; however, due to the small class sizes of two of the observation sites (i. e., Frank's class and Josh's class) this was a challenge. However, steps were taken to not single out the participant as being in a study due to his student veteran status. Also, all of three of the participants who were observed voluntarily agreed to the observation and indicated they were comfortable with me observing them in the college environment.

Researchers often develop close relationships with their participants (Esterberg, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). I established close relationship with some or all the participants in this study, and I had to take this into consideration. Most importantly I wanted to make sure that I was not exploiting the participants in any way or using my relationship with them in a way that would affect their telling of their story or their feedback on my findings and interpretations. Closely related to this issue was

ensuring that participants felt safe disclosing the type and level of information solicited without feeling pressured to tell me more than they were comfortable disclosing (Merriam, 2002). The topic of this study was a potentially sensitive subject for the participants, and simply telling their stories of returning to college could have given rise to unexplored and difficult emotions. I prepared for this possibility by enlisting support resource references from the college and the returning student veterans' community and preparing a handout listing referrals and services before interviewing started. My training as a mental health counselor was also helpful in these situations as was my recent experiences interviewing six returning student veterans. However, I did not engage in therapeutic exchanges with the participants and the availability of appropriate referral sources was crucial. Many of these ethical issues and concerns were also addressed through the IRB process and/or on the informed consent form.

Delimitations

The scope of this study was confined to student veterans at two specific community colleges who had been in college prior to being deployed. The study focused primarily on the college transition experiences of the student veterans rather than their experiences during their deployment. However, those experiences were discussed when the participants chose to talk about them for context purposes and to address how those war zone experiences affected their transition back to college.

Limitations

Prolonged engagement with the participants through a series of interviews, observations, and member checking strategies was crucial to the study. However, due to time limitations and some of the challenges I faced recruiting participants, the depth of

participant engagement may have been limited. Time limitations also limited the number of observations I was able to conduct during the course of the study. The findings are limited to student veterans at two community colleges in one Midwestern state. So, while the findings may be useful to help understand student veterans' transitions they are not intended to characterize all student veterans' transition experiences.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in Fall 2006 for an independent study project. For that project I interviewed six student veterans (who had returned to college at a four year university following a military deployment) about their transition coming back to college. This study differs from the pilot study because I interviewed students who had re-enrolled at a community college rather than a four year institution. Consequently, the participants in the pilot study had an ROTC program available to them which was not the case for the participants of this study. However, transfer students at four year colleges and universities are eligible for ROTC and its programs (e. g. SMP) (Neiberg, 2000). For example, Killdeer Community College has an ROTC Club which helps prepare students for the ROTC program once they transfer to a four year institution. Three of the six participants in the pilot study did join ROTC upon their return to college and found it to be a supportive environment during their transition. Through the pilot study I was able to learn more about the qualitative research process and my strengths and limitations as a qualitative researcher. I was also able to identify areas in the research design that needed improvement (e. g. interview protocol), and I made those improvements for this study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the transition experiences of student veterans who had re-enrolled in college following overseas, military deployment, primarily to Iraq, Afghanistan or Kuwait. The study was guided by the research question:

- What are the transitional experiences of student war veterans re-enrolling at a community college and resuming their college student roles and lives?

Interviews served as the primary data gathering strategy to address this question, with a limited number of observations serving as supplementary data sources. In addition, discussions and meetings with the Veterans Affairs Certifying Official (VACO) at each research site served as complementary information to help explore participants' transition experiences returning to college. Schlossberg's theory of transition provided the theoretical framework for the study, with regard to examining participants' transition process as "moving in", "moving through" or "moving out." This model also describes transition events in a person's life as either anticipated, unanticipated or as non-events. A student's experiences with returning from deployment could be composed of all three types, depending on the circumstances.

This chapter presents participant profiles and the findings from the data analysis. It begins with a description of the six participants, followed by a description of the themes with supporting evidence.

Participant Profiles

These six brief participant profiles are intended to provide background for each participant. The next section of this chapter, entitled, "themes" incorporates the

participants' profiles in its discussion. The profiles are not intended as detailed descriptions of participants' life stories, so each profile briefly discusses participants in terms of their family, military, college and personal backgrounds. Table 1, presented in Chapter 3, provides a summary description of each participant.

Jeff

Family. Born in Lima, Peru, Jeff is a 22 year-old male college student veteran. His family moved to a large metropolitan city in the Southern United States when he was five years old, and then to the Midwest when he was 10—where he resided until going to college after graduating from high school. Jeff is the older of two children. He has a younger sister, who is 13 years old. Jeff described his family life as a “strict, military family kind of,” in which his mother “taught [him] a lot of values on working because she didn’t have that much when she grew up.”

Military. Jeff’s family has always had strong military ties; both his biological father and current step-father were in the military. This generational service had a strong influence on how Jeff, from a very young age, viewed the military. He was taught to respect veterans and understand that freedom comes as a price that veterans pay for everyone else. This family influence was also one of the primary reasons Jeff decided to join the military:

It was kind of even, because. . . my mom has always liked the military because my first father was an officer. But, she always told me the military was my thing. I guess when I was little I used to love seeing planes and everything. And seeing my dad and the way he presented himself and the way—I mean I’ve never seen that man cry except my graduation day at boot

camp. And it was just the respect and the honor he had. I mean he loved putting on that uniform every day, and so I saw that, and said that's what I want, that's what I want to be, and I just looked at him more than anything and that's what drove me to the Marine Corps.

Jeff joined the Marine Corps Reserves in January 2005. His Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) has been in infantry, or as he described it, a "grunt" or "front line" servicemember. This decision, too, was motivated by family influences, but this time in contrast with his father's MOS in the Marines which was, according to Jeff, also in infantry but as a "mortar man": "I guess I wanted to be kind of better than him, so I said I'll be a grunt, *front line*, so that's why I chose that."

Jeff's unit was activated in September 2007, and was shipped for training that month, slated to go to Iraq. They arrived in Iraq in January 2008, and remained there until their return to the United States in August 2008. While in Iraq, Jeff's activities included "foot patrols, meeting the people, going on vehicle patrols, finding IEDs, doing security for the police officers, [and] doing security for any high generals that would come by." Jeff described his deployment as "almost like a vacation experience" where "nothing happened," which "was good." At the time of our initial interview in October 2008, Jeff was unsure when he would be deployed again. However, during one of our final meetings in May 2009, Jeff informed me that he had volunteered for deployment to Afghanistan, which is set for January 2010.

College. At the time of data collection, Jeff was a full-time sophomore at Dove Community College, where he is majoring in Political Science and International Studies. Jeff had been re-enrolled in college for one month at the time of our first interview. He

actually started classes about two weeks after the Fall 2008 semester had begun. Jeff could have left his unit and started college at the beginning of the semester, but chose not to do that. Prior to his deployment Jeff, was attending another community college in the state (Killdeer Community College). He had completed two semesters at that community college at the time of his deployment, but decided to re-enroll at Dove Community College because he wanted a change and a place to start fresh. Dove Community College is also closer to the site where his unit drills one weekend a month, so transferring translates to a shorter commute for his drill weekends.

Personal. At present, Jeff is planning on working for the FBI, but he is also considering a career in the Marines as an officer and possibly a pilot. At the time of our final interview, he was still undecided about whether or not he was going to re-enlist. In the past, Jeff has considered obtaining a history degree and becoming a history teacher as something to fall back on if his other options did not work out.

Jeff is not currently working and he attends college full time. His GI Bill benefits cover most of his living and educational expenses at this point, but that probably would not be the case if he were not receiving the added compensation combat pay provides.

Frank

Family. Frank, a white, 24 year-old male college student from a medium-sized Midwest city, and is the elder of two children (his younger sister recently graduated from high school and is now attending college herself). Frank comes from a military family: his father has been in the Army Reserves for more than 20 years. Frank describes his family's extended military background:

Yeah, that's weird—it seems like I'm guessing maybe it's just my family, but

. . . both my grandfathers were in the military, and my grandma's brother was in the military, and then my dad was, and then the next in line would have been my cousin, who was in the Navy, [and] who is I think a year older than I am.

Military. Frank had been in the Air National Guard for nearly five years at the time of data collection. He completed basic and advanced training in June 2005, but his formal enlistment date was June 29, 2004. He had the option of postponing basic and advanced training, which he did, so he would not miss any college due to his enlistment. His enlistment will be fulfilled in June 2010. Frank's primary motivation for joining the military was to help pay for college. Frank disclosed that he sometimes feels guilty about joining for the purposes of solely getting money for college. Frank noted, "I feel kind of guilty for just saying that. . . I just joined for money to go to college," but he further noted: "I feel like [with] that deployment, I kind of did my time, and that the military got their money out of me."

Frank originally wanted to pursue an optometry technician career field in the military, but there were not enough openings in that MOS when he joined. He also decided that the training for the optometry MOS would be longer than he wanted, so he chose security forces (e.g., military police) as his MOS. While deployed, Frank primarily worked at security posts and checkpoints. However, he would occasionally volunteer to do "fly away missions":

I went on what they called, fly away missions, where you'd take a C-130 and you'd do different types of missions, like you'd transport like AAFES [Army and Air Force Exchange Service] employees [to] the BX [Base Exchange] and

PX [Post Exchange]—kind of like the little grocery stores or whatever you know. . . . And I think I did that twice, and both times coming into Baghdad, one coming in and coming out we got shot at, and after that I was like, “Screw this I’m done with that [job].”

Frank then spent the duration (February 2006 to September 2006) of his deployment in Kuwait at an air base. He was in Kuwait for 181 days total (Most Air National Guard deployments are shorter than other branches of the military.). Frank tended to understate his role while on deployment because of the length of his stay and the nature of his duties there; compared to other servicemembers in other branches of the military he feels his role was less important.

Frank will likely not be deployed again before his time in the Air National Guard is completed in June 2010; at this point, he has no plans to re-enlist. However, he has not ruled out rejoining after he has completed his chiropractic degree. Frank does not want to re-enlist, primarily because he does not want to have his schooling interrupted again by a deployment—a likely scenario given re-enlistment.

College. Frank has always known he wanted to get a college degree, and he has focused on that goal since graduating from high school as he noted. But he chose to begin at a community college to ease the transition to university-level studies. So, after one semester at one community college, followed by basic and advanced training, he enrolled at Killdeer Community College. Frank also wanted to have a different experience from his friends from high school, who all attended one of the four-year universities in the state. In his words, “it seemed like they were just partying a lot and

not getting a lot of school done.” Instead of wasting time at a large school, he chose to attend community college before transferring to a four-year institution.

Frank completed one semester at a satellite campus for Dove Community College in Fall 2004 before he went to basic and advanced training. He then enrolled at Killdeer Community College for the Fall 2005 semester, which he completed. Then, in January 2006, Frank was deployed. His deployment was announced unexpectedly, after he had enrolled for classes for the Spring 2006 semester, so he had to withdraw, return his books and move back home before he left for Kuwait. By the time Frank returned from his deployment in September 2006, he felt like it was too late to get started with the Fall 2006 semester, and instead waited to re-enroll for the Spring 2007 semester. He has been back in college since that time.

Personal. Initially, Frank enrolled at a four-year university upon his return from deployment. He then attended Killdeer Community College again during the Summer 2008 semester. At the time of data collection, he was enrolled in courses at both places, effectively making him a part-time student at both institutions.

Now a junior, Frank will be a senior in Fall 2009. He hopes to graduate in May 2010, with a degree in interdepartmental studies, with an emphasis in health. He plans to attend chiropractic school soon thereafter. He would consider being a chiropractor in the military in the future, but right now, he wants simply to complete his education without further interruption.

Toby

Family. Toby is a white, 28 year-old male college student veteran. He is the youngest of four children. He has two older brothers and one older sister. Toby is from

the same city where the community college he currently attends (Killdeer Community College) is located. Toby's family does not have a long history of military service, and none of his siblings (nor extended family members) has served in the military. However, Toby has a brother who considered joining so he could serve alongside Toby, but Toby successfully advised his brother against doing so.

Military. Toby's father was drafted during the Vietnam War, but never actually went to Vietnam, and his grandfather served during World War II. Toby joined the military out of concern for his own feelings of self-worth:

I didn't want to look back on my life six years down the road and be like, "Well, what would my life be like if I had joined or hadn't joined?" And I figured, "What the heck?" and I gave it a shot.

Toby felt he was at a point in his life where he could use some more direction, and thought the military might be able to do that for him. So, he joined the Army National Guard in July 2002. He has been deployed twice, once to Afghanistan and once to Egypt. He has also been trained in two different MOS's—communications specialist and postal supervisor—and worked a different job during each deployment. Toby also recently re-enlisted for another six years in the Army National Guard, which was not an easy decision. His decision to re-enlist was driven by different reasons:

Part of the reason for me re-enlisting I would say would be that financial backing. Also, it's kind of nice to have the job security while you're . . . gonna get a check from . . . your monthly drill or whatever . . . and then the other part . . . is I feel a need to kind of help out some of the younger [servicemembers] that have been in my shoes, so that way, because the senior

command is not always gonna look after [the] best interest of the soldiers.

They're not always gonna do things to take care of them.

Toby was deployed to Afghanistan in May 2004 (actually mobilized in February 2004), where he worked with computer and radio communication systems (i.e., communications MOS). He returned to the US from Afghanistan in May 2005. Then, he was mobilized to Egypt in January 2008, and actually arrived in there in March 2008. There he was re-trained as a postal work supervisor. Toby returned from his Egypt deployment in January 2009. At the time of his first interview for this study on February 5th, 2009 Toby had been back in the United States for less than a month.

College. Toby's pre-deployment training for post office supervision interrupted his college studies. Indeed, military deployments and training periods have disrupted his college enrollment on a number of occasions, and it was difficult for me to keep track of his timeline during the interviews. In response, he drafted a personal timeline to keep his military experiences organized, and for when the need arises to explain his absences to potential employers.

Toby went to college for a year at a small, private four-year university after graduating from high school. He then entered the workforce and "hated it," so he went back to college for a "technical type" of degree, working with computer systems.

At that time he joined the Army National Guard with the intention of finding a direction and learning discipline. He subsequently decided to pursue an engineering degree, and enrolled at Killdeer Community College in Fall 2003. He was able to complete that semester before being put on alert for deployment to Afghanistan (mobilized in February 2004). He re-enrolled at Killdeer Community College when he

returned from Afghanistan in Fall 2005. By the end of the Spring 2007 semester, when he learned that he would probably be deployed to Egypt, he had just completed his Associate Degree in Pre-Engineering.

Toby had planned to transfer to a four-year university after earning his degree in Fall 2007, but the Egypt deployment changed those plans—he had to attend training for re-classification with the military throughout that summer and fall. He was then mobilized in January 2008, and arrived in Egypt in March 2008. Returning from Egypt in January 2009, Toby re-enrolled in college at Killdeer Community College for that spring semester (two weeks late). He had only been re-enrolled in college for a couple of weeks at the time of the first interview.

Personal. Originally, Toby planned “to be lazy for a few months” and start college again at the university during Summer 2009. He then decided to join ROTC to gain leadership skills and put himself in the position to “have a positive impact on some of the [young servicemembers’] lives, so that way they’re not just overlooked as a number, like a lot of times people are.” Toby will receive an ROTC scholarship, and therefore will be non-deployable while in ROTC. However, after having spoken with ROTC advisors, he realized that in order to be eligible for the ROTC scholarship offered with the Army National Guard he had to be commissioned as an officer by the time he was 31—which meant he had to start coursework immediately:

And so I’m 28, so if I wasn’t starting this semester and then doing summer and just squeezing in classes like crazy, [then] there’s no way I would meet that deadline. So, that was kind of a determining factor in jumping into a couple of classes. I jumped into two classes here [Killdeer Community

College] two weeks late.

Toby plans to transfer to a four-year university in Summer 2009 and, along with his ROTC training for becoming an officer in the Army National Guard, will major in mechanical engineering. At the time of data collection, he was not sure what path he would pursue as an officer (he has many choices), but he knows that he wants to work in an engineering field, because that is what he has been working toward for a long time.

Josh

Family. Josh is a 22 year-old, white male student veteran who was born and raised in a small, rural town in the Midwest. He is the elder of two children, with a 14 year-old brother. Josh's parents are divorced, and his father is remarried. Josh is especially close to his mother, who has been his primary source of support throughout his life.

Military. Josh does not come from a military-oriented family, except that his cousin had been in the military, and even was deployed along with Josh. Initially, Josh wanted to join the military on active duty status, but while in high school was introduced to a program called *Talent Search*, which influenced him to consider college. So, he decided to join the Army National Guard, while in high school in 2004, so that he could later attend college full-time while being in the military part-time:

I had a cousin who was in the military, so I thought it was kind of cool and wanted to do that. I wanted to go active duty for four years and make all that money, save it up, and then have all this money when I got done.

Josh was able to attend drill weekends before he went to basic and advanced training. As of June 2009, Josh had been in the Army National Guard for five years. His

discharge occurs in June 2010, and he will then be classified as inactive duty status for four years. Josh went to basic and advanced training in the summer of 2005, and returned to college in September of that same year.

Josh trained in the official military occupational specialty of administrative assistant, and worked in that capacity during his deployment to Iraq. He was later switched to an infantry MOS during the deployment. Josh was deployed to Iraq in June 2007, and returned to the U.S. in April 2008. Josh had a tumultuous deployment experience, because of a strained and conflict-filled relationship with his Captain:

And I kind of had a, really don't know what it was, kind of a personality conflict with our company commander. I saw like you know he came out of active duty so he had a complete different view of how things should be done in the office. Well, I'd been in the Guard for five years, and I know how we do things in the Guard, everything's different from manuals to papers and we didn't get along and he was just, I was gonna say he was kind of a dick I mean he was, just, he had a horrible personality, he was all about him and nobody else.

Josh also described situations where his Captain would verbally berate him, call him derogatory names, and haze him by making him walk back and forth long distances between offices multiple times to deliver papers or get out of bed at 3 a.m. to do paperwork. Eventually, Josh had a confrontation with this Captain, and he went to the battalion's command, who met with the Captain about his behavior. In retaliation, the Captain re-assigned Josh to an infantry patrol position. Josh did one patrol "outside the wires," or off-base—which he had not been trained to do—but he then did not pass a

subsequent physical training test, so he was “not allowed” to go on additional patrols. Eventually, Josh was assigned to perform security detail at a checkpoint or in a base tower, the capacity in which he ended his deployment.

At this writing, Josh is uncertain about his chances of being deployed again, because he is so close to getting out:

I mean they discussed it with me, and supposedly I don't have to go because the only thing that's saving my butt is [that] I get out next year. My ETS [expiration term of service] date says you're done on June 10, you know 2010, your choice. You go inactive Guard for two years and hope you don't deploy with a bigger unit from a National Guard elsewhere, or you can sign up for another year, but then you'll go on the deployment.

Basically, Josh has to decide whether or not he wants to chance being re-activated after he goes to inactive duty status, and deployed with a different unit or re-enlisting. But if he re-enlists and his unit gets deployed, he will have to deploy with them. Josh has transferred to a different unit, so he is no longer under the supervision of the Captain with whom he had a conflict while in Iraq. He also said that he receives more support from the commanders in his new unit. While he has no plans to re-enlist, he is still unsure how that decision will impact his chances of being deployed in the near future.

College. Josh graduated from high school in the spring of 2005, and then went to basic and advanced training, from which he returned that September. Consequently, he did not enroll in college until the spring of 2006, when he began attending a community college [not Kildeer Community College] satellite campus near his hometown.

When I started college, most people are 18 so I've always kind of been pushed

back, because I know kids that have gone to [state universities] in my class and they're graduating, and I'm like "I am yet to even come close to graduating" because I pushed back one semester, and then I couldn't go to school, and then you know, I managed to get some prerequisites out of the way [at the satellite campus in spring 2006].

Josh began attending Killdeer Community College during the Fall 2006 semester. He was deployed in June 2007 but was able to complete the Spring 2007 semester. Josh was out of school between June 2007 and the summer of 2008. He re-enrolled in college at Killdeer Community College while still in Iraq, and began attending classes again during the Fall 2008 semester. Josh had decided to rest during the summer he returned from deployment before he started classes again.

Personal. Before his deployment, Josh wanted to be a photographer, and had majored in mass communications, with an emphasis in photojournalism. But those plans changed after he returned from his deployment—partly because he preferred not to be reminded of what was going on in his life just before he was deployed. Being involved in activities and situations he did just before being deployed reminded him of the unpleasant deployment experiences he simply wanted to forget. So, he changed his major to culinary arts, and is now a first-year student in that program at Killdeer Community College. Josh said he always planned to study culinary arts—he was going to complete his photojournalism degree first. But now he switched the order of his interests, and plans to pursue photography again in the future after he completes his culinary arts degree. Josh would like to own his own restaurant, and already has a good idea what that

restaurant would look like. At this writing, he works part-time as a customer service representative at a clothing store to supplement his military financial aid.

Tanya

Family. Tanya is a 24 year-old, white female college student veteran who was born and raised in a large city in the Midwest. She currently attends the community college in her hometown. Most of Tanya's family still lives in her hometown, as well, and she considers them to be the primary support system in her life. Her family does not have a long history of military service—only Tanya's grandfather served in the military—but they are supportive of her while at the same time concerned that her military service means she may be deployed again.

Military. Tanya joined the Army Reserves soon after she graduated high school in 2003, and she re-enlisted for another three years in January 2009. At this writing, she is assigned to a medical unit, and her MOS is medical/physical therapy.

Tanya describes joining the military as a result of boredom after high school. However, her decision to re-enlist is financial in nature:

I didn't know what I was gonna do, so I went to the mall and thought I'd join the Army so that's what I did It's interesting, because from the people I've talked to that have come back from deployments, a lot of people want to go back. I don't know if it's cause they're having difficulty with the transition, or they feel like they just need to go help out more, or if it's because people are on their fourth deployments and they don't think that they've done their part to help, but with me, it was mostly for the money. But I also wouldn't mind going back, just because I know that I would be that

much better of a medic. And I do feel that I could help a lot more people this next time around, and kind of be a mentor to the people [deployed for the first time].

Tanya attended community college at Killdeer Community College during the 2006–2007 school year, and was able to finish her second semester before being deployed to Iraq in May 2007. She had orders to serve for 400 days, which included pre-deployment training. She was attached to a different unit based in another state than her own and eventually assigned with six other servicemembers to a ground ambulance unit as a medic in Iraq. Tanya did not deploy with her home unit and is actually the only member of her unit who has served in Iraq. She explained that her unit is one that can have members pulled from when servicemembers are needed for other units. Tanya was unaware of this fact when she first joined her unit—something that surprised her when she found out about it.

Tanya spent the majority of her time in Iraq at a forward operating base (FOB) in the hospital. However, her duties took her outside the wire on many occasions:

Our mission was basically to go outside and pick up the Iraqis who had been injured by IEDs [improvised explosive devices] or mortars or whatever they got injured by, and treat them on the ambulance back to the CSH [combat support hospital], which is the hospital on the FOB. Another aspect was the Americans could be brought right up to the hospital, so we would just have to take the patients out of the gun trucks or the tanks or whatever, and get them into the CSH. So we got to see all kinds of injuries, Iraqis, Americans, men, women, children, everythingThe environment it was, Mosul was pretty

active when I was over there, so we got mortared on a regular basis I would say, and they had VBIDs [vehicle borne improvised explosive devices] every once in awhile [and] mass cal [mass casualty] situations.

College. Tanya returned from Iraq in June 2008, and re-enrolled at Killdeer Community College that same summer. At the time of data collection, she had been back in country for eight months, still attending college (her third semester) full-time at Killdeer Community College, and majoring in social work.

Prior to her deployment, Tanya was uncertain of the direction she wanted to take career- or major-wise (maybe physical therapy), but since her return, she is clear about her future career. Tanya wants to complete a social work degree and work with military veterans who have returned from war zone deployments. Tanya said her deployment experiences contributed directly to this new-found focus:

We brought in a lot of KIAs [killed in action] as far as US soldiers, and those were always the toughest. And so um, it would be like their comrades, you know, other American soldiers bringing in their buddy who had just been killed kind of thing, and it killed me to look at those guys that were having to deal with their buddy being killed. You know? And . . . you can't come home from something like that and not be changed, you know, and so just like, the look in their eye made me want to help them in some way.

Personal. Tanya hopes to transfer to a local private college soon to continue pursuing her social work degree, and then obtain her master's degree in social work at one of the state's public four-year institutions.

Tanya currently lives by herself in a condominium she bought with some of the money she earned from her deployment and from a loan program for military servicemembers returning from deployment. Tanya works part-time at a local hospital as a physical therapy technician. She also is doing an internship/work study at her local Vet Center, which offers free counseling for military veterans.

Matt

Family. Matt is a 23 year-old, white male college student veteran. Matt grew up in a small, rural town in the Midwest, living in what he described as, “both worlds, as far as the small town and the farm,” because his parents had divorced. His mother lived in town, while his father lived on the farm. Matt is the youngest of four children (he has two older sisters and an older brother). None of Matt’s siblings are or have been in the military.

Military. Matt had been interested in joining the military for quite some time, and it was something that was always in the back of his mind. However, he wanted to be able to serve in a part-time capacity, so he didn’t have to relocate and could continue to live close to family and go to school. Eventually, Matt chose to join the Army National Guard, which would allow him to serve part-time. He also had acquaintances in the Army National Guard, so he felt like he had reliable sources of information about the kind of life that joining entailed. Matt joined the Army National Guard in the fall of 2006. He spoke about how boredom and the desire to do something new and different motivated him to join the military:

I joined in the fall of 2006, when I was 21 years old. I didn’t decide to actually join . . . until I was 21, and then I finally kind of started taking it more

seriously. I'm not sure exactly why, I've always just kind of thought it was just because I got bored. Really, life just got really plain . . . and boring and that's when I kind of wanted something new, something different and was still always toying around with the thought of joining the service, so that's when I started taking . . . well, a stronger interest in it. . . . At the time, I was living with a guy who was a member of the National Guard, so I could ask him any question I wanted, and so it started sounding like a better idea, and I think within a week of bringing it up, I decided to join, and a few weeks after that, I was shipped off to training.

About a month after Matt returned from basic and advanced training in January 2007 (which caused Matt to miss the Summer and Fall 2006 semesters, and the Spring 2007 semester), he was notified that his unit had been activated for deployment to Iraq. This activation was unexpected, because his unit had just recently returned from a deployment, and when Matt joined, he thought he might actually never be deployed. However, in June 2007, Matt was deployed. After pre-deployment training, he was sent to Iraq, where he spent approximately nine months. Matt returned to the United States in June 2008, so status-wise, he was officially on federal orders for one year.

Matt served as a combat engineer in the Army National Guard, and his unit's primary mission was to clear roads of roadside bombs. Matt was the gunner in the lead vehicle of the search vehicles (typically made up of 5–8 vehicles), so he had many different responsibilities and had to be on alert nearly all of the time:

I spent most of the time gunning, and I was in the lead vehicle, so we were really, we really did or really tried to pay attention a lot to what we were

doing, because we're the first guys, and if something goes off behind us, not only is it, "yeah it's your fault, you shoulda seen it," but you don't always see everything, so it's kind of understandable. But still you feel bad like, you know, "If I would have spotted that or, you know, and maybe backed off and got people away from it, [then] that truck might not of [sic] got blown up, and those guys don't have a headache now." And if it's a bad one, you know, they-- somebody could get hurt. So lead vehicle, yeah, you're really, really watching the road, but then you also gotta deal with traffic control.

Matt's vehicle had an IED explode directly underneath it during one mission, but thankfully, because the vehicle they were in was heavily armored, neither Matt nor the other two people with him were seriously injured.

Yeah, I mean I've been by several ones that were close to the vehicle and everything, but only had one that was a direct hit, and that was underneath the vehicle and-- and that was that vehicle was down for like two weeks. It was the longest any one of our vehicles was, was down with repairs, because of that blast, so it was a pretty good thump, but none of us were seriously injured. We got checked out medically, and they gave us like, or they put us on . . . 48 hours of quarters.

College. Matt did not begin attending college directly after high school, instead choosing to work, so he could save money before moving and starting college. Then, approximately two years after graduating high school, Matt enrolled at Dove Community College for the Spring 2006 semester. Matt attended Dove Community College that semester, and then joined the military that summer. Basic and advanced training

prevented him from enrolling in college for the next school year, but he planned to re-enroll for the Spring 2007 semester. However, his training time extended too far into January for him to be able to do so. He was then deployed in the summer of 2007, and did not return to college until the fall of 2008. At the time of data collection, Matt had been re-enrolled in college for two semesters.

Matt is pursuing a fire science degree, which he hopes to complete in the spring of 2010. Matt wants to be a fire fighter, which has been his plan since he first enrolled in college:

My major is fire sciences. And that is a, you know, obviously more leading up to being a fire fighter, which . . . was my plan from the start from before joining the Guard. [I] kind of kept going with it all the way through my military experiences up to now, and then when I came home kept with the same plan. [I'm] still going to school for the same thing; [I] just picked up exactly where I left off.

Matt was excited to get back into classes and start working toward his degree again.

I wanted to make sure that I was set up and ready to get back into classes, and I was actually pretty excited about it after the little over two [year] break that I had taken from classes, and what I had done in that break . . . relaxing a little and going to class sounded pretty good to me.

Personal. Matt currently rents a house with two other college students (one is Matt's best friend from high school). Initially, according to Matt, they did not interact that much, but lately that has been changing, and they are spending more time together.

Matt tends to be the one who is responsible for making sure bills get paid on time, and has to remind his roommates often to write checks. Matt likes to know what is going on with the bills, so he doesn't mind the responsibility. He also feels like, "I kinda gotta take care of those guys. I think they'd be lost without me."

Matt does not have to work while he is attending college, because most of his expenses are covered through military benefits (i.e., tuition assistance and GI Bill funding), which gives him more time to pursue hobbies like wine making and riding his motorcycle—a much different schedule than he experienced before his deployment:

And that kind of eliminates a lot, because before to not only support myself, but then to have, you know, the money to try to save a little or to spend on other stuff, you know? You'd really have to work a lot and then it was also that first semester I was taking 13 credit hours, working full-time. It was a busy schedule. Now, I don't have to work as much because [of] the GI Bill.

At this point, Matt is unsure if he will re-enlist once his initial six-year enlistment is completed. He does, however, believe there is a possibility his unit will be deployed again before his enlistment time is completed. Matt would accept another deployment, but hopes he will have graduated from college before that happens:

If I get deployed, I'll be okay with it. I mean, I'd like to graduate first. I really would, but I guess it's just one of those things, you know, if it happens to come sometime in the next year, or I don't get quite done, alright, I'll finish when I get back.

Matt plans to get a wine making certificate once he completes his fire sciences degree.

Summary of Participants

The participants in the study ranged in age from 22 to 28 years old. All of the participants self identified as white, except for Jeff, who identified himself as Latino. As would be expected, their family backgrounds were diverse, with some participants sharing a family legacy of military service and others none at all.

Participants also varied in their motivations to join the military, but only one, Frank, expressed financial assistance for college as the primary reason he initially joined. However, both Toby and Tanya stated that financial incentives were at least partly responsible for their decisions to re-enlist. Participants represented different branches of the military: three participants served in the Army National Guard, one in the Army Reserves, one in the Marine Reserves, and another in the Air National Guard. At the time of data collection, most of the participants had been back from their deployments for less than a year. Finally, one participant had been deployed on two occasions, whereas the others had been deployed but once.

One participant, Josh, stated that he was a first generation college student; the others all noted that they had siblings and/or a parent who had received a college degree. Four of the participants were attending college full-time, and one was technically a part-time student at two different institutions, basically making him full-time (Frank). Two of the participants chose to work part-time to supplement the financial assistance they received through the military. The participants were in the early stages of their degree programs, except for Frank who planned to graduate by the end of the next academic year. For the most part, participants were making good progress toward meeting their academic goals and degree completion.

The participants in this study seemed to be at different points in their transition process of either “moving in,” “moving through,” or “moving out.” However, it appeared the “moving in” and “moving through” points of the model were the most salient for participants, given their descriptions of their experiences transitioning back into the civilian world and the college environment. The next section of this chapter focuses on the transition process and describes the four themes that emerged from data analysis.

Themes

The transition of returning to college and civilian life for the participants was an ongoing process, complete with successes, challenges and personal insights. After the interviews were completed and the data collected and analyzed, four themes which represent the nature of the transition experiences collectively for the participants emerged: negotiating the transition, interactions and connections with others, changes in perspective and heightened maturity, and re-situating personal identities.

Each of the four themes appears in its own section. The discussion begins with the first theme describing the participants’ general experiences negotiating the transition back into civilian life and then into college—specifically, the participants’ shared experiences and meaning making processes regarding the transition process. Next, the participants’ relationships as civilians and servicemembers, and then more specifically as college students, are explained. The discussion then shifts to the individual nature of the transition, while continuing to explore participants’ common experiences regarding personal changes they identified during the transition. Each of the themes culminated with the participants searching for a clearer understanding of themselves as veterans,

students, and college student veterans. The final theme described in this section focuses on this process of re-situating their social identities.

Negotiating the Transition: A Shift in Environments

Participants returned home with different expectations about what home life would be like, but they all shared the anticipation and excitement of seeing family and friends. Participants also felt eager to return to college, but for different reasons. Some resumed their studies shortly after their return, while others took more time to settle in before starting classes. This theme's discussion follows a chronological order, beginning with participants' initial experiences upon their return, followed by their meaning making process as the transition progressed, and ending with participants' transition experiences upon returning to college.

Returning home. Initially upon their return, participants were happy to be home and back in the civilian world. However, this excitement was short-lived, as participants began to feel overwhelmed and anxious about being back in the civilian world. This anxiety was especially present during the beginning of their transition processes, in which participants described feeling uncomfortable being back home—an unexpected feeling for some. Matt was especially surprised at the way he felt on the day he returned to his hometown (which also happened to be the day of an annual celebration):

I was kind of a buzz kill you know. . . . I didn't really feel like even talking to a lot of people. I didn't drink very much . . . casually drinking some beer and socializing and talking to different people, but there was so many people, it was so loud, so packed, so much going on I just wanted it to stop. I wanted it to be calm. I wanted it to be quiet. I wanted to relax. I was kind of thinking,

“coming home and relax,” and that wasn’t really relaxing and I didn’t know why I wasn’t enjoying it. I was pretty much in a bad mood and it shocked me. I thought I’d just be so happy and just wild and energetic and drinking and having fun, and I was the opposite, and so it was just, it was the opposite—I was actually surprised. I surprised myself how I reacted when I came home.

Further complicating the beginning of the transition was what participants described as “chaos” when they first returned, where they felt pulled in many different directions because so many people (i.e., friends and family) wanted to see them. Matt went on to say that in addition to being surprised by his initial reaction, he also “had a lot to do, a lot going on that first week especially everybody wanted to see me, wanted to hang out.” Tanya felt similarly, and explained how the servicemembers and the family and friends might have different expectations about the return:

Well, there’s so many expectations upon first coming home, like what you’re gonna do, like who you’re gonna see, where you’re gonna go, all of that stuff. And some people come home and they’re just frazzled and people are disappointed, because you’re not spending enough time with them, and then the veteran or the soldier might be disappointed just because they didn’t expect things [not] to be the way that they had hoped, I guess. So, it is very stressful, initially, coming home.

The first days of their return home also proved difficult for participants, in that they became more aware of how much they had missed while they were gone (e.g., weddings and graduations) and that while they were away much had changed. Similar feelings about their college experiences also became evident (e.g., feeling behind in

college compared to their peers), a phenomenon discussed later in this theme description. Jeff noted that it was “weird seeing that, because I don’t know, everything changes—like my buddies are dating new girls or they’re a year ahead of me. They have new cars or living in new places, and it’s like, okay, I’m back where I left.” However, Jeff further explained that this feeling of losing a year of his civilian life does not mean he holds animosity toward civilians whose lives had gone on while he was gone: in some ways, it gave him more motivation to keep moving forward:

I mean I’m trying to understand it as everyone’s point of view. I’m trying to get in their shoes and be like, you know what I’ve left, they’ve kept going. I can’t be mad at them because they kept going, because it’s life, it’s life in general because if I wasn’t in my shoes and I was in theirs, I wouldn’t stop life because some guy left. I mean I’d keep going. I mean you have to. So, I’m looking at them . . . and I’m just starting to accept it and be like, you know, that I’ve now gotta catch up to them. I’ve gotta keep going on with my life, because this deployment is not going to stop me . . . it’s not going to stop me from school, it’s not going to stop me from life, I’m just going to keep moving on.

Others, like Frank and Matt, missed important family events (e.g., Frank’s sister’s graduation from high school and the birth of Matt’s niece just before he left), and reflected on how disappointed they felt about missing those milestones. For example, Matt noted that:

So much changes, I mean like I kind of mentioned before, friends move, move on with their lives. My sister had gotten pregnant shortly beforehand, and I

wanted a niece so bad. I had my nephew. I wanted a niece, a little baby girl. Just right before I left she gave birth to a baby girl. . . . It's like I missed that whole little baby stage of my niece.

A change in environments. Participants' excitement about being home was further tempered by what they described as a dramatic shift in environments between the military environment and the civilian environment. At the core of this shift were the differences in structure, going from the more structured military life to the less structured life as a civilian. Frank explained this aspect of the transition by saying, "that was kind of a weird transition . . . going from real structured military deployment to, you know, as much freedom as I could handle when I got back, because I was just living at home and didn't have a job or anything and just had all this money to blow." Josh described the military as "a completely different world than the civilian side . . . you have all those rules and regulations. . . . There's only one way to do things [in the military]."

As participants negotiated this aspect of the transition, many of them noted how the change of pace from the military to the civilian world was particularly challenging to manage. As Toby pointed out:

Compared to over there, yeah, it's chaotic . . . which is very true not only for myself but for a lot of people who have spent time overseas, you know, it's very structured and very simple and—boom!—then you come back here, and you have to kind of like balance everything just so.

In fact, Toby noted the most challenging part of his second return so far was "probably getting used to the pace of life here, because everything's like constant, it seems like life is so much simpler over there." Here, Toby alludes to the "simplicity" of

life in the military, meaning that while servicemembers are deployed, many of the decisions are made for them by the military as an institution, and by their commanders.

Consequently, military deployment seems simple, in the sense that there is no need to attend to as many “life details,” as there is in the civilian world. Other participants characterized this phenomenon in similar ways. For example, Tanya said of her deployment, “there are a lot of things that you don’t need to think about . . . like home situation, or cats or bills, for the most part.” Consequently, for Tanya, it was “nice once in awhile to forget about civilian life,” because in the Army, “you don’t have all the responsibilities: like, the Army tells you what to do, when to do it, where to be, what uniform to be in . . . as opposed to here, where you do just have to be more self-sufficient.” Also, Jeff describes how, while deployed, “we always had the decisions made for us. For a whole entire year straight, everything was set. I mean, we didn’t have a calendar.” Jeff further noted that he and a number of his peers with whom he was deployed actually missed being in Iraq at times, because while they were there, they didn’t have to deal with as much of the “drama” as in the civilian world.

Different environmental cues in the military versus civilian environments, and having to be more aware both of details in the decision making process and everyday stressors made, for some of the participants, being in the civilian world more stressful than being deployed. Structure in the military is maintained so that military personnel can focus on their mission at hand, rather than have to decide what they will have for dinner. So, while servicemembers experience stress in the military, it is caused by different factors than those of the civilian world. Matt explained that despite having

experienced highly stressful missions, he wondered if he were not more stressed now, at home:

I'm probably more stressed out living at home dealing with everyday stresses of being a civilian. I think I'm more stressed out now than when I was overseas—I mean, it was structured. I knew I had a mission. There was always a plan in the next few days, you know they had a schedule out, what's going on and stuff, and it was structured, [you] kinda knew what you were doing. You knew your job So, I mean you always, you did have a sense of security, even though there was a pretty great sense of danger where you lived.

Military mindset versus civilian mindset. For participants, having been in the military environment for an extended period of time has put them into a different type of mindset than they were accustomed to in their civilian lives. So, part of the transition process was having to “switch gears” from the military mindset—which had been reinforced throughout their deployment and during their military training—back to what they described as a civilian mindset. During the transition, participants found themselves reacting to situations the way they would while on active military duty, and often had to remind themselves they were back in the civilian world. For example, Tanya, especially when she first returned, found herself very aware of what was going on around her, and would begin to think like a medic again as she prepared for anything that might happen next:

That was another thing, like looking back: I did that all the time, like every time I went out or anything, I would just make up this scenario in my mind

and go from step A to step Z as far as how I would help them if they were hurt in a crazy fashion. But once in awhile now, like if I see somebody doing something stupid, I'm like, "Hmm, if they fall off that ladder, this is what I'm going to do," but I don't do it nearly as much as I did previously.

Josh and Jeff described this feeling by not only mentioning feelings of insecurity in social situations, but also having acute awareness that they didn't have their weapons with them, like they had at all times in Iraq. These feelings of insecurity, as Josh narrated, were often heightened by a lack of trust around people they did not know:

Just that mindset they put me in before we deployed and during training was: "You don't know 'em, they're probably bad and you have to figure this out," so it's kind of one of those things like "Okay" . . . and [upon returning home], just the way I did things [not wanting to sit with his back to the door], too, like people would look at me funny.

Returning to college. Participants also had to manage the transition of returning to college, and many of the experiences described in their transitions back to the civilian world also affected their college experiences—specifically, simply attending college. So, while participants re-enrolled at different points during their transitions (from immediately to up to three months later), the participants noted common elements of the college transition.

Generally speaking, participants described a relatively smooth transition re-enrolling in college, from an administrative perspective. That is, they did not note or experience delays with the administrative functions of re-enrolling in courses upon their

return. In fact, Jeff—with the help of his family—and Josh both re-enrolled while they were still overseas. Matt described the process of being readmitted in this way:

First thing I did is, since I'd been gone, I went and talked to admissions and you know and it was so simple. I just went and told them you know this is what I did, this is what was going on, now I'm back to classes. She goes, "All right, you're good to go." "Sweet," that was simple. My next step was going and talking to the VA rep. here at [Dove Community College], went and talked to her and she was great, really helpful, everything I needed, everything I was curious about, even stuff that I wasn't sure that she would bring up that, cause she's done it enough and she knows it well enough.

The Veteran Affairs Certifying Officials (VACO) at both sites were cited as key contact persons for each of the participants because, without them, student veterans would not be able to access their GI Bill benefits. However, both sites' VACO also played a significant role in helping ease participants' transitions to college. The nature of the participants' interactions with these individuals will be discussed in more detail in the theme description section entitled, "Interactions and Connections with Others."

Participants described the initial contact with the certifying official as a necessary step to receiving educational benefits, but they did not typically elaborate on how they knew to go to that person at the college. As noted by Jeff, "Just common sense, I knew that every school that is public has a VA rep, so [I] just knew where to go." It seems unlikely that the participants would have received that type of information during their debriefing sessions with the military, because most participants felt rushed and shuffled

through the debriefing process so they could get home to see family and friends.

Describing his debriefing experiences Toby said:

They don't focus on like returning to college. I mean, they might bring it up, but they don't focus on that. They're more so worried about getting you processed, so that way you can get home to see your family and, uh, it's kinda good and it's kinda bad. I mean, you want things to be moved along quickly, but at the same time you want everything to be taken care of and you want you know it [will] be a smooth transition.

Frank, on the other hand, noted that he attended a debriefing session that was helpful, where he learned about being eligible for unemployment benefits. However, he also noted that educational benefits were not discussed in much detail at the same meeting. Still, for the most part, these meetings were rushed, and occurred at a time when participants found it difficult to focus on much more than being back home. Tanya shared:

It's just so much different when you get back and you don't— you aren't thinking about what's at hand. You're thinking about going home and what you're gonna do. The first thing you're gonna eat, the first drink you're gonna have, you know, all of that stuff so . . . and benefits aren't really important at that point—it's just getting home.

Tanya further noted that she felt that veterans had to be proactive, which was a sentiment shared by many of the participants in regard to being informed by the military about transitioning as they processed out of their active duty status.

Nobody is gonna just come to you and be like, "Here, have this," kind of

thing. You have to go out and seek it. . . . To a certain extent, I think there's a responsibility factor in it. But then again, if you don't know about it, then [it is a] "How are you going to seek it?" kind of thing. And I think they are trying to get better at telling you what's available, but it's just, you know, the military: it's just so much information at once and there's just gotta be a better way so that you do know what's available to you.

Just as they felt like they had missed out on part of their civilian lives while away on deployment, participants also felt behind compared to their college peers, and behind in regard to their academic pursuits. Tanya described this as "kind of depressing actually" because "I'm so far behind . . . just seeing all my friends graduate, and I am still here, but they all tell me, 'Well, you have life experiences that we don't,' and I'm like, 'I don't care; I want to graduate. I'm sick of school.'" For the participants, the feeling of having fallen behind was often accompanied by a pressure to get done with school more quickly, either because they felt behind and they wanted to finish before they were deployed again, or like those in Toby's situation, who had to complete college before he turned a certain age to be eligible for an ROTC scholarship. For example, Frank initially "felt like [he] needed to play catch up with [his] friends and peers." However, with time and through discussions with his father (who is also in the military), he began to be less concerned about being behind in college. As he noted:

So two years, you know, that really doesn't bother me all that much, because even guys that I graduated with [in high school] they still haven't graduated. They'll graduate this May, so that'll be like a year behind if you compare it to some of those people. . . . My dad was pretty good about, about calming me

down with that, saying you know, “Don’t rush it, what’s the rush?” You know, people are graduating at all different times . . . and so it’s not that big a deal.

Military mindset versus academic mindset. Still, most participants felt anxious about being behind in school, which impacted the transition process in various ways and to different degrees. In addition to feeling behind, participants also described what was closely related to shifting from the military mindset to the civilian mindset, except that this shift was more specifically related to the college environment. In the collegiate environment, this shift in mindset—from the military mindset to the student mindset—had more to do with thinking critically, which many of the participants felt they did not have to do while deployed. Consequently, getting back into the swing of things academically was a challenge. For Frank this meant making intentional plans to transition:

I guess maybe some people are different but, like, for me, when I started back at school, it was like starting fresh, completely over. [I am] maybe exaggerating, but it was like having to learn the alphabet again, you know? So, I took a lot of, like, pre-calculus or pre classes, just to try and get back into the swing of things.

Toby described his second transition returning to college as more challenging than previous experiences, largely because when he was deployed the first time, he was not in the same type of high-level courses he enrolled in the second time he was deployed. This made his transition back into coursework more challenging.

I mean, that that’s the main focus is the transition, it’s much more difficult I

think this time around to transition because the first time [that] I came back, I was just getting started. I wasn't really into any hard classes or anything. I wasn't in with a group of people that was studying one thing yet, before I left the first time to go to Afghanistan.

Military environment versus college environment. Along with trying to transition academically, participants noted challenges with re-adapting to the college environment after being deployed and having served in the military full-time. For example, many decisions are made for servicemembers while they are in the military, and they are not encouraged to question authority. The case in college tends to be the opposite, and proved to be an adjustment for some of the participants. Josh described these differences in this way:

I've always looked at college in the sense of it's kind of more gray area. It's more for you to—“Here's the issue, here's the problem, find a way you can solve it...you know this is the issue, here you go. As long as you can fix the problem, find the answer to it, we don't care how you do it.” But the military side is . . . here's the problem: “This is how we think you fix it and this is how you're going to fix it, whether it works or not.”

For other participants, just being back in college and around fellow students created frustration. Tanya expressed frustration with the different structure by saying, “When I got back into class here, there were like cell phones going off and people talking out of turn without raising their hand, and I'm like ‘What are you guys doing?’ you know, ‘Show some respect to the teacher,’ people walking in late—that pisses me off, really.” It was at these times that Tanya had to remind herself that she was back in the

civilian (i.e., college) environment. She went on to say, “But you just had to keep an open mind and remind [yourself] that you’re not military anymore, that you are playing a civilian role.”

These interactions with civilians, as well as family and friends, had a significant impact on participants’ transition processes. Also, the fact that participants had missed important events and that civilian people’s lives went on despite servicemembers’ absences brought about myriad feelings for the participants. Being gone and not present as others’ lives continued on affected participants’ relationships and interactions with others. These interactions, how the participants described feeling at times more connected and at other times less connected, emerged as the next theme.

Interactions and Connections with Others

As participants negotiated their transitions back to their civilian and college lives, they experienced a shift in their relationships, in which connections with people in their lives were strengthened or weakened, formed and/or re-formed. Participants described their interactions with others in terms of having various levels of connections with people, which influenced their transitions and the ways in which they approached relationships. At the core of this thematic finding is the way in which participants experienced these interactions, and how such interactions affected them personally and in their relationships—including varying levels of trust in their interactions. This theme varied in two ways: in terms of participants’ stronger to weaker connections on a more general level, and then more specifically—again from stronger to weaker—at the college level.

Family. Overall, participants' relationships with family members were strong before, during, and after their deployment experiences. For example, Josh had always had a close relationship with his mother, which was evident while he was in Iraq, as evidenced by the fact that "Her phone never left her arm's reach when [Josh] was overseas," for fear of missing a call from him. Or, as Toby noted, "My main support structure would be my family. They were the only ones that I could really know for sure that I could count on while I was away." Frank echoed this sentiment, saying, "Well, I'm sure it's kind of cliché or everyone says it but I mean family was definitely the top support system." Participants acknowledged family relationships and interactions as being integral to managing their transitions back to the civilian world and college. Matt summarized the significance of family as a safe support network by characterizing his own family's response to his return: "So I had my family there—anything I needed; but then they also understood I needed my space. So they supported me, in being there for me, but also keeping some space and distance."

Some participants also disclosed that these familial bonds seemed to strengthen during and after their deployments, and that their interactions with family members had increased in regularity. For example, Frank discussed missing his sister's graduation while he was deployed, and how that made him feel closer to her.

I think my sister and I, since I've been back we've grown closer. . . . I talk to her every other day. . . . I guess I really haven't thought about it before this, but now kind of looking back on it, I felt kind of guilty because when I was over in Kuwait I missed her high school graduation. And I knew that was obviously important, an important step. . . . So, I wrote her this nice note like

this two page note when I was over there and sent it with the gifts that I got her, and I feel like ever since we've been a little bit closer. You know I told her I was proud of her, stuff like that you know. And so, yeah, I feel like we're definitely closer.

Jeff shared similar feelings, noting that his relationships with his family members grew even stronger and interactions more frequent while he was deployed, which then carried over when he returned:

With family, [being away from family while deployed] made it stronger. I mean, before I left I rarely hung out with my sister. . . . Nowadays I mean, I think every other day I was in Iraq, I called home. I talked to my mom; I talked to my dad and everything. And now I talk to my dad three times a week, my mom calls me every single day. . . . And now my sister, I mean I hang out with her as much as possible. I've realized that family, I never know when I'll lose them, so it's like I really want to spend as much time as possible with them. So, and with friends it's like I've realized that— I mean friends come and go, but family's always going to be there for you. So I mean friends, I'll hang out with when I can, or if I have time to, but my family's coming first no matter what.

For Frank and Jeff, their fathers' military backgrounds were especially helpful with the transition process, because they felt their fathers could relate more directly with what they were going through. For example, Frank explained how he was helped in his transition process by his dad being able to relate to his experiences: "He kind of knows

the system a little bit better, and kind of knows what the transition processes are like, so I definitely kind of look to him for a little bit more guidance.”

Military peers. Other military connections, relationships and interactions outside of family members were further noted by the participants as being important. They formed strong bonds and close connections with the military peers with whom they were deployed, and at multiple locations. Their interactions with these other servicemembers took place nearly 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, for up to one year (or more in some cases), and participants expressed deep levels of trust, camaraderie, and friendship that developed among them. They also described the disconnection they felt once they returned home. Tanya described her feelings in this way:

Just everything like my roommate and I, she’s one of my good friends that I still talk to now, we were together every single day, we slept in the same room. Like every hour together for over a year. And it’s like, you know, like boyfriends and stuff at home you don’t even spend that much time with them. So you get to know these people like inside and out and when you come home you don’t have that. So it’s just different . . . when you’re with somebody that long, it’s like “Oh my god” you know, “Just give me some alone time,” you know, “Stay away from me,” and so it was nice for like the first hour and I was alone and I was like “Oh shit, what am I gonna do?” and so of course I call her on the phone.

Jeff further explained these feelings of disconnection, and shared how he missed being around his peers from the deployment:

I miss it . . . there’s times I look back and remember like the things that me

and the guys talked about, like on post we'd sit there and have therapy sessions with each other and we'd just like, I just remember [fellow servicemember] trying to be my therapist and I'm sitting there just throwing everything at him and then he tells me one thing, and I'm like "Oh, I didn't realize that," and it's just weird now. It's like here— it's like I kind of miss that, I miss hanging out with them.

These testimonies point to the fact that interacting with other servicemembers in a war zone environment creates a situation where the type of relationship that develops between military servicemembers cannot be easily, if at all, replicated in the civilian world. Participants discussed a sense of camaraderie and level of trust that characterizes those deployment connections and relationships more profoundly than most others. Jeff described it this way:

It feels like we've known each other for years, but we've only really gotten to know each other for one year. But it's like once you put yourself up to [the idea that] "I'm going to risk my life for you," and they do the same, it's just a different world. So, it's like I have been with these guys for a year, and my closest friends I don't even have as much trust in them as I do these guys. So it's like these guys have another side of my friendship and my loyalty than my friends from high school and everything do.

Matt described his relationship with one of his close friends from deployment in this way:

It was because we lived and grew together and we experienced . . . combat deployment. You're not going to get that with anybody else. You can have a

good relationship with somebody like that, but it still— it's not the same. I mean you've kind of got this mutual understanding, a mutual respect for the other person, because you know them so well and you've seen them do crazy stuff. . . . You don't have that with, like the guy you just kind of met in class that you went to the bar and hit on some girls and played pool with. You got your camaraderie there, but it's not near the level you do with somebody like that.

Josh's experiences while deployed presented him with a different set of circumstances than many of the other participants, however, and—unlike most of the participants—he did not connect with the people with whom he was originally deployed in Iraq. But, he did make connections with servicemembers from other units in the battalion, who supported him during difficult times and with whom he maintained connections at the time of data collection. All of the participants maintained connections with people with whom they were deployed and view those as important connections in their lives. According to Toby, “I'll probably stay in pretty good touch with several of the people that I grew closer to over there. . . . The military guys are really good people, too, like there's a group of 'em that are, that you know I'd probably do anything for if they needed anything.”

In general, however, maintaining these connections can be challenging—especially in the case of servicemembers (like Tanya and Toby) who were not deployed with their home units. In addition, typically when units return from being deployed, there is an extended period of time before they meet again for drill, and then they only meet for one weekend per month and two weeks per year. Josh, on the other hand, transferred to a

different unit, but in many ways feels more supported by the officers in that unit than he did in his original unit. Also, participants maintain contact with their deployment peers and visit them, despite there sometimes being long distances between them. For Tanya, this means traveling to a different state, but it is important for her to maintain the relationship and have that interaction and connection: “Just keeping in touch. . . . We visit each other, she comes here, I go there . . . we get together with all our military friends.” Maintaining these relationships with the people with whom they were deployed is also a key aspect of negotiating the transition, because it gives participants people to talk to about their transition experiences, people who can relate and understand their unique situations, because they had been deployed with them. For example, Matt maintained that:

If you do have kind of issues relating to the deployment, PTSD, stuff like that, [if] you try to talk to somebody else, they’re not going to understand. Even if they try to or pretend to, they can’t fully because they don’t know, but [my fellow servicemember] was there with me the whole time. So, if I would say have an issue, I could talk to him and he’d understand. So yeah, you’ve got different relationships with different people.

The shared deployment experience brought participants together with other military servicemembers, and they created strong connections with many of those individuals during the deployment. Furthermore, because those types of interactions could not be replicated with other people (including other servicemembers with whom the participants were not deployed overseas), this results in an element to their relationship that cannot be matched by their relationships with other people. In addition

to this feeling, participants described feeling a unique bond—though not as deep as with their deployment peers—and sense of camaraderie with other military servicemembers and veterans.

Participants' interactions with other military veterans, and older veterans, were characterized as empathetic, with a sense of camaraderie between people serving or who had served in the military. For example, Frank had met two other servicemembers in his apartment complex after he returned, and described their interactions as "Everyone seemed like we were all on kind of the same track, and kind of the same mentality that, yeah, we all hate going to drills on the weekends, but yeah the money's good. . . . It seems like we all have kind of a positive outlook and kind of the same ideas."

Some participants distinguished between their interactions with servicemembers who had been deployed and those who had not. Describing his interactions with a group of veterans at his college, Toby noted that at least two of those student veterans had been to Iraq and "so there's kind of like that common bond like, you know, somebody else who has been there; they know what the situation 'down range' is . . . as being overseas." This was also the case for Tanya, who appreciated feeling free to be candid about her deployment experiences. For example, she described an interaction she had in the college's veterans' lounge with another student veteran who had been deployed to Iraq: "We could tell each other the most horrific stories, and we wouldn't like frighten the other person . . . there's just that mutual understanding." She went on to say, "Well, with veterans that have been deployed, it's just, you can basically tell them everything like the good and the bad." The nature of the interactions with servicemembers who had been deployed was defined as a unique bond because of the mutual understanding with

somebody who had been there. These interactions were not limited to veterans from OIF and OEF: a number of participants shared their interactions with older veterans from other wars, and described them as a source of support and understanding.

Jeff and Frank's somewhat unique situations, with their fathers also having been military servicemembers, added another element of mutual understanding to their relationships over and above the family connection. For Jeff, his father's military service facilitated interactions with other veterans at the local Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), where he would spend time with his father and other servicemembers. Now that Jeff is a veteran, those interactions and relationships have an added quality they did not have before. They now ask Jeff to join them in local parades, where he gets to "wear his blues" and carry the United States flag. He also now has his own stories to share with the older veterans at the VFW. "So it's always nice to hear their stories and their tales, and like we talk now about Iraq and stories that we have, and the laughs that we have, all the laughs that they had with their buddies." For Jeff, and other participants, these types of interactions with other veterans, even those who had served in other wars, were made more meaningful by this sharing of experiences and mutual understanding.

Being a veteran and having this shared experience and deepened level of understanding was also evident in some participants' interactions with older veterans in environments that did not necessarily have a military connection. For example, at the time of data collection, Tanya worked at a local hospital as a physical therapy assistant, where she occasionally interacted with older veterans. For the most part, these interactions were positive: "It's the older gentlemen, you know, like I work at the hospital in [local city], and if I call them 'sir' or something and they're like 'Oh, are you

military?’ And then we can talk for like an hour, you know?” Tanya also noted that, “It’s funny, cause the people who give us support are usually the old veterans. Those guys are just wonderful; they were at the airport when we came home from deployment, and shook our hands and everything else.” Thus, the participants’ interactions and relationships with other veterans were an important aspect of the transition process.

That being said, all of the participants enrolled at Killdeer Community College appreciated the establishment of the veterans’ lounge there, because it showed them the college cared about and appreciated its student veterans. It also gave student veterans a central location to interact and connect with each other. Frank saw the veterans lounge as “just kind of a place to relax, which is cool, and I know I appreciate ‘em . . . and 99% for ‘em [veterans] that I talk to, I mean they love the USO and love like lounges and stuff like that for us.” He also saw it as a place to “meet new veterans . . . and people you can relate with.” Tanya, who frequented the veterans’ lounge at Killdeer Community College, shared an example at the college, specifically to describe the veterans’ lounge as a place to meet other veterans:

Once in a while, I still bring up stories from Iraq or from the Army in class, and people kind of look at me funny, and they opened a new veterans’ lounge I enjoy that thoroughly because there’s always guys in there, and we can tell our war stories and what not and it’s actually nice to relate to other people that have been in the same situation . . . just because— if you’re telling the stories in the classroom, it’s hard for other people to relate to you.

Civilians. Indeed, the participants described their relationships with civilians and civilian friends in markedly different terms than when discussing family and other

servicemembers or veterans. Participants' interactions with family members were a solid source of support and connection throughout the deployment process, including upon their return. Furthermore, participants established strong allegiances with fellow military personnel through interactions and relationships that seemed to be built around a unique sense of trust and common experiences.

On the other hand, relationships and connections with pre-deployment civilian friends seemed to fade away or change considerably when compared to the nature of those relationships before deployed. This was especially the case for participants who felt they could not relate to those friends, and vice versa, in the same way they had before they were deployed. Tanya experienced this change in relationships, and explained her interactions with her civilian friends in this way:

And it was different hanging out with friends, because they didn't understand, you know, what my life had been for the last year or so. I had a couple really good friends when I was deployed and I'm better friends with them still, now being home . . . [but] still distant from my friends that are here. I don't want to sound mean, but people are kind of ignorant, kinda it felt like. Like my friends here . . . I went out with one of my guy friends, and he's like, "So did you get to see like arms blown off and legs blown off?," and I'm like "Actually" and he was joking, he didn't really think that that happened and so it's, it's just that kind [of] disconnect I guess.

Jeff's experiences with his civilian friends echoed Tanya's:

But that's the hardest thing, is coming back from hanging out with the guys and coming back to your so-called friends, and just not looking at them the

same, because like, “You weren’t there when I did this, you weren’t there when this happened,” and it’s like kind of hard to relate back to your friends. That’s what I’ve had an issue [with], like most of my friends aren’t really talking to me now. . . . I can’t really talk to my friends about it, because they really don’t care to listen to it. They’re like, “Oh all you’re doing is just bitchin’ about stuff.” It’s like you can’t really find a friend that’s really interested cause he or she wasn’t involved in it. They weren’t there, so I guess their mindset [is] if I wasn’t there [then] I don’t care.

In these two cases, Tanya and Jeff measure their civilian friends against their deployment peers to some degree, and acknowledge that their lack of common experiences creates a disconnect or divide. Other participants described that their friends had moved on in their lives, or that they do not feel as close to them once they returned. Matt noted:

You lose touch with people. I didn’t have the big group of friends that I had before. It was cut down quite a bit because people move. People are kind of getting married and they just don’t socialize with you as much anymore, and people [you] just used to hang out [with before] didn’t much [now].

During Josh’s interview, he attributed the distance he felt with some of his civilian friends to changes he felt in himself following the deployment, such as being more focused and goal-oriented in life:

There’s some things that are different. Like friend-wise, I think most of the friends that I kind of had before that I talked [to] on a regular basis all the time, I don’t talk to them much anymore. . . . But after changing in the sense

of being more focused you know I seem to have more like goal-oriented friends, friends that are more focused on what they want in life, because [one friend] doesn't know what she ever wanted and before, I could deal with that and I kinda knew, you know, because I was kind of that way in some sense in life. . . . And then you go overseas: it's kind of like you're more mature when you get back, because you dealt with things, you've known things that, you've seen things that make you more mature. So, I kind of pushed them away because they just didn't seem to fit me, because you know your friends usually reflect who you are.

Josh also shared that he was discouraged by how some of his civilian friends treated him while he was deployed, which then led him to wonder who he could count on—especially if he was deployed again. Josh noted, “In general, I'm probably more leery in like relationship[s] because before I had those friends and they really didn't support me, like I had said [while I was] overseas.” Jeff shared a similar reaction:

With people now, it's like the friends that supposedly told me that they were my friends never wrote to me, never sent me care packages, never did a thing. And I realized who were my two friends and who weren't—the ones that actually, no matter what it was, they would answer my call, even if it was two o'clock in the morning and just talk. So that's the trust, it's like, “Okay, who can I really trust? Will you backstab me later on or not?”

Josh and Jeff's comments speak to the uneasiness they felt interacting with pre-deployment friends who they felt were not supportive of them while they were deployed.

Consequently, they felt less connected with these people, which also made them question who they could trust in establishing new relationships.

In contrast, while some participants felt disconnected from their civilian peers, others noted that they were able to maintain and/or re-establish strong connections relatively easily through their interactions with the civilian friends to whom they felt especially close. Frank noted that, “Yeah, relationships: they, you know, re-formed pretty, easily I think.” Also, during our final interview, he wanted to make sure he clarified how he felt about his relationships with his civilian friends, compared to his military peers. Frank explained he felt the same level of closeness in relationships with some of his long term civilian friends (e.g., high school friends) and his friends he had been deployed with to Kuwait. On the other hand, he did not feel as close to his peers in his unit who had not been deployed with him.

Maybe I should clarify that. I would say that my high school friends and my close friends, you know, are pretty much at the same level as the guys that I deployed with in different aspects . . . each group knows something different or whatever, you know, or has different experiences. But then clear below that are my mutual friends [those friends who had not been deployed] at my unit. And those guys, those guys are just kind of on drill weekends.

Matt also acknowledged that while civilian friendships were different than the relationships with his military peers, there were some civilian friends he still felt very close to, but in a different way than with his military friends:

I guess you still got your friends from before, and your family that you can still talk to. I mean you might not have that level with some of your other

friends, but you also have friends that you've had for a lot longer. Like my buddy [friend's name] that I live with now, we were friends growing up and through high school. . . . We're on a certain level, too. I can tell him anything, and I know he's told me stuff that nobody else is going to know. So it's just like you've got your different types of friends, but they can still support you in different ways. Even stuff from the deployment, I can still tell him. He won't necessarily probably help me too much, but at least I can tell him stuff.

Toby, having been deployed twice, was in a somewhat unique situation compared to the other participants. When he returned from Afghanistan, he said, "A lot of the guys that I was hanging out with before I went to Afghanistan have moved on. A lot of them finished their degrees, moved to bigger cities, and that kind of thing." Consequently, after returning from his first deployment to Afghanistan, Toby began to form relationships with a small group of friends who he described as "a very diverse group" in terms of age and relationship status. When he returned from Egypt, Toby felt like he was able to pick up where he left, in regard to those interactions. "I came back and I was able [to] meet up with some of them, and I was kind of in the process, I guess, of developing some of those new friendships before I left, and like I said, we picked up where we left off." Toby also became involved in a romantic relationship when he returned from Afghanistan, which continued when he was deployed to Egypt. However, that relationship ended during that second deployment, which has complicated this most recent transition for him:

That might be part of the reason that Egypt seemed like so long, as well, because when I went over there, I was in a pretty serious relationship, and

things didn't work out, so coming back it's, it's difficult because, yeah I'm not gonna lie, it's difficult because you know you had things one way when you were at home, and then coming back, it's well it's coming back and that person's no longer there. . . . It definitely doesn't make the transition any easier.

Some of the participants were not sure what to expect from their interactions with civilians when they returned, and some of them wondered how they would be welcomed home after they considered the way in which many Vietnam War veterans were treated when they returned. For Josh, this meant concealing his veteran status when he first returned. "There for awhile, I kind of kept it as a little secret that I was overseas and I came back, but I didn't know how people would perceive that." However, his fears turned out to be unfounded, and he noted, "I mean [how] it gets portrayed by the media and maybe even some other things that when we come back everybody is like all against the war, but even people who are still support you." Toby echoed other participants' experiences about his reception upon returning from deployment:

It's kind of cool to see the support because you know a lot of times, people will just come up and thank me if they found that I just got back or whatever. So, it's kind of nice to see that people appreciate that even though [they] might not agree with the past president and with the wars going on. It's kind of nice to see the support, because like back during the sixties and Vietnam, there was not support for anything. There's a lot of support, which is good I mean, I'm very thankful to be a veteran now versus like Vietnam time era.

Interactions with civilians, either direct or indirect, stirred up different emotions for participants, at times. For example, when Toby first returned from Afghanistan, he felt animosity toward civilians:

I think I generated a lot of resentment towards like the general public when I went over to Afghanistan the first time. When I came back, I'm just kinda like riding in a train through a big airport or something, and I just kind of look around at people, and I was kind of resentful for the fact that like a lot of these people were carrying on with their lives like nothing was going on, and for me that was kind of like, it was kind of frustrating because I mean they don't have to sacrifice. I mean, and I'm sure they do, maybe it's me just being . . . not thinking about the whole big picture.

Tanya also found herself becoming frustrated and angry during some of her interactions with civilians, and viewed people's reactions to the war and attempts at support in a different way than Josh and Toby did:

Yeah, and people get pissed off about the politics and then forget about the soldiers or whatever it is, and then the soldiers are coming home, and like I said before, people don't understand them. And even if they try to explain it, people either don't listen or they sympathize but can't really empathize. When people would sympathize with me, like if I was telling 'em stories about what I had seen or the patients I had treated . . . they would offer me the sympathy, but that kind of pissed me off a little bit, because I didn't want their sympathy. But then again, I didn't really want them to understand, either, because that's why I went and they didn't . . . kind of like a protection.

Many of the participants shared these frustrations about civilians' lack of awareness about what was going on in the world, and their complaints about what participants perceived to be unimportant or trivial. This type of judgment seemed to add to the disconnect participants felt at times with civilian and their civilian friends. At the core of this disconnect seemed to be an issue of trust, which varied depending on the context and how participants perceived trust in their interactions with others. For example, Jeff described feeling insecure about whom he could trust in the civilian world, compared to his military peers:

And you talk to them [other military servicemembers] and you know that no matter what, even if that guy does not know you with anyone, I mean you live on the other side of the country he's gonna risk his life for you. And here, it's like I don't know if one of these kids is gonna shoot me up or not for looking at 'em wrong, so it's just different, different overall.

While not necessarily to the same degree, this issue of trust was apparent in many of the participants' interactions with civilians, especially when compared to their military relationship experiences. For many of the participants, trust in their military relationships was based on life-or-death situations, and was one that could not be replicated in the civilian world, where it is atypical to even wonder if the person next to you will put their life on the line for you. Additionally, participants were put into situations where they were required to live with and interact with others constantly. That is not the case in most civilian environments, where people have the luxury of being selective about who they interact with on a daily basis. Therefore, outside of their military and family relationships, participants found it challenging to negotiate their interactions with others

at some level. Additionally, in those interactions, civilians are at a distinct disadvantage, because, according to participants, there is no way non-military peers can replicate the type of common-experience relationships that participants had during their deployments.

Participants also shared their thoughts and perceptions of interactions with people specifically in the college environment. They discussed their relationships with faculty, staff and peers, and described a range of connections as they negotiated their transitions back to college. These interactions ran the gamut between feeling more connected and less connected. Pertinent to this study are participants' interactions with the VACOs at their respective sites, their interactions with instructors, and their relationships with their college peers.

Veteran Affairs Certifying Official. Participants at both college research sites consistently recognized their relationship with the VACO as an important factor in their transitions re-enrolling in college. While participants described the administrative aspects (i.e., admission and enrollment in classes) of re-enrolling in college as a relatively seamless process, the VACO was highly influential in ensuring that process proceeded smoothly—especially with regard to servicemembers receiving their educational benefits. Toby described his VACO's role in that process by saying:

[VACO at Killdeer Community College] is, she's awesome and effective getting things lined up for you . . . your tuition assistance and that kind of thing, getting the ball rolling with that. I mean she's constantly working her butt off and she has . . . I think more veterans at [Killdeer Community College] than the rep has at [four year university].

Jeff, who was enrolled at Dove Community College, shared that the VACO there was his primary source of support during the transition process of returning to college:

The biggest support that has helped me would have to be the VA, the VA representative here. I mean she's helped me fill out my GI Bill. She's helped me with financial issues, encouragement for classes, and things I want to do.

Frank was sometimes frustrated by the organization of the VA system, and saw the VACO at Killdeer Community College as a buffer or mediator between himself and the VA:

So, I think [for] most of the student veterans, that's their biggest concern, is with the benefits, because the VA if it's just you against the VA, then they just throw you around . . . from the experience I've dealt with, I mean it's nice to have that support from a VA rep., and then also benefits, and then . . . anything kind of student-university related.

While receiving educational benefits was a primary concern for the participants, many of them also noted how the VACO at their college would go out of their way to be helpful and supportive, in addition to helping them with their financial benefits.

Participants noted they would seek out the VACO for assistance with other issues—as Jeff and Frank describe above—if they needed something outside of their benefits information. Jeff noted that, “If I need someone to talk to, I can go to the VA, and she can help me out. If I need something about my classes, I really mostly go to her.” Tanya felt the same way about her interactions with the VACO, and said, “[the VACO at Killdeer Community College] has been a big help, actually. I can just go in there and talk

to her about anything.” Josh also was appreciative of the VACO’s support at Killdeer Community College, and viewed her as an important resource person:

I mean [the VACO at Killdeer Community College] for the veterans . . . if I need help with anything. I mean things she’s really not supposed to have to do. But, she knows people that can get me the help I need elsewhere. I mean college-wise, the veteran’s affairs side, [Killdeer Community College] I think is probably the best that I know of.

So, many of the participants felt like they could go to the VACO at their college for things outside of their military educational benefits—which they appreciated—but participants were not always specific about the concerns they would go to their VACO about. However, participants described their interactions with the VACOs in a way that indicated they appreciated, and were grateful for, the care and support they showed them, through their actions. Matt described an interaction he had with the VACO at Dove Community College that exemplified this gratitude and reliance:

I mean, and it’s like if I ever had any questions, I could stop in and ask her and call her, and she leaves herself available to us. There was even one time where I came in to talk to her, and it was after work, and the offices were already closed . . . and she was gone or leaving, and I was like, “Man, I missed it,” and I rushed here after work and everything, and she came driving by and asked me if I needed anything, and answered my questions there in the parking lot while she was sitting in her car.

The VACO's willingness to take the time to talk to Matt in the parking lot impressed him, and was an indication of her willingness to go out of her way to be supportive. Matt went on to say:

The level of dedication of the individual person is what is the big factor in it. She's really great. She works hard for you. She makes sure you understand everything and leaves herself open if you don't, or if you ever come up with any questions . . . I know I can always contact her, and she'll help me out.

This type of relationship was also the case at Killdeer Community College, where participants' interactions with the VACO also indicated to them she cared about them and had their best interests at heart. For example, Josh described his interactions with her as being always friendly and cordial, despite her very busy schedule:

I mean [VACO at Killdeer Community College] is busy all the time. She's got, I'm surprised she remembers my name, but when she sees me in the hall, "Hey [Josh]," and it's like you got about 10 other thousand people here, and you know their first name every time. [VACO at Killdeer Community College] is like, well, here's my number, here's my card . . . if you have issues, call me. Or if you need help, call me. She keeps really close.

Just as important to the participants getting information from the VACO at their colleges was the nature of the interaction with that person. The VACOs' actions and interactions with the participants showed they cared which helped the participants feel more comfortable and supported during the transition process. My interactions with the VACOs at both sites further supported this sense of care when, during my meetings with them, they regularly shared their dedication to the student veterans and their desire to

make their transitions easier. The VACOs at both sites also disclosed feeling overwhelmed in their positions and frustration with the amount of work that was expected of them. They were especially concerned about the impact the new GI Bill would have on their workload and the expected increase in the number of student veterans coming to college.

Faculty. Instructors at the colleges also influenced the nature of participants' transitions. For the most part, participants described supportive and positive interactions with the faculty at their colleges, which seemed to ease their transition re-enrolling in college. For Jeff and Toby, this support was especially critical, because they started classes nearly two weeks into the semester (but at separate sites). Jeff acknowledged that, "My teachers are encouraging. They give me leeway, since I showed up late. So, the faculty's not bad. The teachers aren't bad . . . so far it's helped me. They understand my situation and stuff." Toby also felt like his instructors were understanding and sensitive to his situation, exemplified by his request to enroll in one instructor's class after the semester had started:

And then coming back, I was like, "Hey can I jump in your class?" This is my story, this is what's going on . . . and he was just like overly friendly and overly understanding to my situation, and he went on to talk about a personal situation that he had of a brother-in-law or somebody that he had that was in the military, as well, and so he could kind of relate a little bit on that level. But, yeah, he was just really cool about working with me and allowing me to turn in some homework late to get caught up in the semester, and all that kind of stuff, and let me into the class and all that.

Toby also felt the relationships he had established with faculty members before his deployment to Egypt benefitted him when he returned, and made him feel more comfortable about starting classes again. For example, when he first returned, he approached the head of the math and sciences department—who he knew previously through a scholarship program he was involved in—about late enrollment. Toby found him to be “very understanding and very flexible to work with because he knew who I was, and also he knew my situation. So, that was nice.” Toby also appreciated his former physics instructor, and described their interaction after he returned:

One of the first people that I met with was the physics instructor who, I mean, practically lived in his lab for the year before I left, so I came back and spoke with him and you know, he wanted to hear about my experiences and stuff like that and . . . then he also offered if I wasn't going to be taking classes that I could maybe, if I just wanted to try and jumpstart the brain again, that I could come and sit in his physics class. Just to try and get my mind thinking about that stuff again, which was pretty cool. I appreciated that.

Some participants felt like the campus environment itself made their interactions with instructors easier and more helpful than if they attended a larger college, like a university. Josh noted:

You know you can get support from instructors. Being in a smaller school, I mean, I think this is kind of [Killdeer Community College] to me has kind of got that . . . big feel. You know, seems like a big school, but we're so close and small still. It's kind of, it's nice But I think instructor-wise, especially. They kind of seem to, every instructor I've had, except one, in the

last 2 years ha[s] always understood my military obligation, even while I was on deployment.

Tanya appreciated her instructors relating some of their curriculum to the military, and was particularly struck by her interactions with her communications instructor, noting, “But my teacher was wonderful . . . he would relate some of his classes and lectures to the military and try . . . I don’t know, he was just wonderful. I felt like I could talk to him. I could tell him stories.” Tanya had a similar experience interacting with one of her social work instructors, a similarity she attributed at least partly to the smaller class sizes at Killdeer Community College as compared to four-year institutions:

In my social work classes right now, most of ‘em are about domestic violence and child abuse and that kind of stuff, and that’s not specifically something I want to work with, because I want to work with the veterans. So, I told my teacher that and so she’s been very good lately about incorporating social work aspects for PTSD and different mental health issues and just issues surrounding veterans. Just to try and link it back, because I mean it helps, it definitely helps, just to kind of know where your students are coming from, and I think it’s better at this school, cause they can kind of zone it in to specifics [as] opposed to [four-year universities], where there’s just a hundred people in a classroom and the big lecture style classes.

Tanya also mentioned that her social work instructor also had a personal connection with the military: “Well her brother is a soldier, also so she has kind of a personal connection with that as well.”

Participants, for the most part, also appreciated faculty members who took an interest in their experiences. For example, Jeff said, “Some of the teachers are really interested in what I’ve been through, and want to hear it, so I mean its nice hearing that kind of stuff.” Sometimes, this meant instructors asking participants to share their stories in classes—as was the case for Josh:

But then actually, when school-wise when I came back, everybody was really open-minded, like instructors. They’re like, “Oh wow, let’s have your experience benefit the class and what we’re learning today.” Like my intro to Islam class, he’d say something like, you know, “This is how the Muslim culture does this,” and then he’d look at me and sa[y], “Is that how you know when you were over there did you see it this way or that way?” Because, they can do it two different ways. So it’s kind of nice that I can aid in the learning process.

For the most part, participants did not seem to mind telling their stories, as long as the person was willing to listen. However, Tanya noted that, “Once in a while, I’ll bring up stories from Iraq or the Army in class and people will kind look at me funny. . . . If you’re telling people stories in the classroom, it’s hard for other people to relate.”

College peers. Tanya’s classroom experiences exemplify many of the participants’ interactions with their college peers. While the interactions with their VACOs and instructors were positive, for the most part, and seemed to ease their transitions returning to college, some participants reported strained relationships with their fellow students. A number of them felt as though their college peers were both oblivious of the participants’ veteran status and were uninformed about the war. Matt

said, “Yeah, just because for me, personally, it makes a difference [being a veteran], but for my peers, I don’t think it makes a bit of difference.” Matt also wondered if other students even knew when there were student veterans in their classes. In regard to interactions with other college students, Toby reflected:

I mean people will ask questions here and there, but most, some people are interested and some people are just kinda like, “Okay, whatever,” you know, or just don’t ask about it, or they either don’t care or they’re not interested or whatever, which is fine.

Tanya was more pointed in her perception of her college peers’ reactions to her as a veteran and the war:

It’s the college students that seem to— I don’t know if they’re just like immune to the reality of it, just cause it’s always in their face, you know? But they don’t really care, to be honest. Like you say you just got back from Iraq, and they’re like “Hmm” you know?

In contrast, other participants found their college peers to be very interested in their experiences. Jeff felt like he made some connections:

Like now I’ve been in school for like a month, and I’m already friends with all the guys, because I mean everyone always asks about what I did, or some girls: their brothers are in the Marines, and they would talk to me about stuff like that.

Josh was additionally surprised by other students’ reactions to his disclosure that he had been in Iraq:

I think there’s a lot of people who were actually just really open-minded about

my experience, and wanting to know more. . . . I didn't expect that. No, when I came back, I didn't expect that at all. I figured they like, "Oh, you went to Iraq. Okay. Whatever. I don't care," you know? But there's a lot of people who, you know, were just like, "Wow," and then they asked you questions, and they want to hear everything. You know, "What was this like and that like? Is it really the way the media says?"

Josh also felt like he was making connections with other college students primarily through the culinary program "like now, I've made a lot more friends through that . . . culinary program"—which he also described as "kind of our own little world."

Josh was not alone in forming connections. Toby was glad to have found a group of engineering students with whom he could study in the math lab, like he had before his deployment to Egypt. Interestingly, however, many of those students were also student veterans. Other than the students with whom he studied, Toby did not socialize much, if at all, with other college students. Instead, he tended to spend time with a group of friends who did not have ties to the military or to college. This tendency was also the case for Tanya, who had made some connections with classmates, but none that she would describe as being friendships outside of the academic environment:

There's a couple females that I'm becoming friends with, and one I'm going to Australia with [on a study abroad trip], and then another girl in my class that I have at nine. So, I mean, it's not like we go out and hang out, but if we have homework questions or something like that, we have each other's numbers and can communicate that way.

Matt added to this theme by saying, “I haven’t really met anybody necessarily here [at the college] that I consider like a good friend that I could go to and stuff, but I mean that’s just how it goes.” However, he did feel like the college environment afforded him the opportunity to interact with other college students—which he appreciated:

So then coming back to school doing the college life, you were able to socialize more. You know, you meet new friends. You meet new people. You know, even if they’re people that are just your friends for that semester. Still, it’s interaction, and so I say between the two big things, the socializing aspect of it and then just taking classes, in general, opens you up. You know, [it] gets you thinking about stuff.

Regardless of how participants felt about their interactions and relationships with their college peers, participants generally felt more mature and more focused than other college students. They also reported feeling a greater sense of purpose and perspective after coming back to college and the civilian world. These personal insights form the next theme: “Purpose: Increased maturity and changes in perspective.”

Purpose: Increased Maturity and Changes in Perspective

Participants shared that, following their deployment, they felt like they approached life with a more determined sense of purpose, which affected different areas of their lives: educational pursuits, relationships, and decisions about their future. Participants also described feeling more mature and intentional in their actions than their college peers, which they attributed at least in part to the “life experiences” of their overseas deployments. This theme description first addresses participants’ reported

increased focus on their academic pursuits and life goals (e.g., career objectives) and maturity. Next, participants' perspectives on life following their deployments—including cultural awareness and appreciation—are discussed, including participants' feelings of difference from many of the college students around them.

Increased focus and heightened maturity. Many of the participants surmised that they felt more focused on their life goals, and looked more toward their futures.

According to Jeff:

Now, it's like I've realized . . . I need to start being an adult. And after this deployment, I've realized that I need to be an adult, and start worrying about my future, and if anything happens, I can be financially stable, I can have a career, I can be set and don't have to worry about it. So, that's what I've realized.

This increased focus included feeling more motivated in meeting their academic goals—a feeling Toby reinforced, by saying:

When I came back from Afghanistan, I was driven and I was focused in classes, and like before I went, I'd go to class and I didn't care, and I'd sleep through it. So, yeah I cared a lot more. . . . I think I'm much more driven now. . . . I have a very, very, very strong desire to succeed. . . . It's made me very driven to get that degree. Like I said, it's not really an option to drop out or to quit or anything like that.

Some participants attributed this increased focus on obtaining their degrees to experiencing the military full-time as enlisted personnel, and not wanting to have to rely

on that status as a career goal. This realization translated to increased motivation for Frank, as well:

Yeah, I think for me . . . I definitely feel more motivated, you know. While I was on my deployment, I was definitely more motivated after seeing some of the active duty guys with no education, or just if I didn't get an education what might happen. . . . And so that was definitely the biggest motivator when I got back, was the feeling of not being educated when I was over there.

Toby also narrated how his feelings toward military life focused his academic goals:

If I go back and look at my transcripts, my grades before I went to Afghanistan and after are like night and day. Because I had a completely different focus, and I was like, I knew what I didn't want to be doing [was] working . . . for the Army in combat zones. . . . So, I really focused on school, and I think I was on the Dean's List every single semester.

However, while Toby and Frank acknowledged experiencing certain military duties as motivation to get their degrees, they also noted that getting their college degrees meant they could be commissioned as an officer in the military. At the time of data collection, Toby was actively pursuing that route through the Army National Guard by joining ROTC, and Jeff and Frank were considering being officers in the military as possible career objectives. Other participants' career aspirations were also influenced by their military service. For example, Tanya credited her deployment experiences with helping her to decide on a career field that gave her more of a reason to pursue her college degree:

I'm definitely more focused now on my studies . . . previous to [my] deployment, I really didn't know what I wanted to do. And now, I definitely know what I want to do. I want to counsel veterans coming home from the combat zone. So, it's given me direction. And that's a great thing. I can concentrate more on my homework, and kind of apply it more, and I'm just getting a lot more out of school now, it seems.

Matt, on the other hand, did not make changes to his academic and career plans:

My goals and my plans really just kind of stayed the same. I mean, I planned on getting a degree in fire science, which [I'm] still working towards. I plan on becoming a career firefighter. I just wanted to be in the Guard, because it was something where I could serve.

However, Matt disclosed that, at times, he struggled with his motivation for college and that sometimes, "I stress out about it [college] too much," despite having a 3.14 GPA. On the other hand he noted, "The life experiences I learned definitely made it easier to come back to college and transition back into life, just because I was a little more aware of what I was doing, and what I wanted, and how I needed to go, and what I had to do." The importance of "life experiences" was expressed by other participants as well, and seemed to be closely related to their feelings of heightened maturity and having a focused life perspective—especially compared to their college peers.

Matt added to his sentiments by saying that his life experiences helped him understand more material in his college courses:

I've had experiences from overseas that [I] have been able to relate stuff in class [to], that you normally wouldn't have. . . . So, it's just one of those life

experiences that just open you up to the world. It can even, just with your college classes, help you understand more. So, when you're sitting there in class, and they're talking about stuff and even on a more personal level, you understand it, which it's still a better understanding of it. So, I've even experienced that in my classes already. You're just like, "Yeah, I get that." It makes a little more sense. Then, you think: "I get it more now than I probably would've before."

Tanya echoed this sentiment, saying that she felt "like the old woman in class," but also acknowledged that:

Coming back to school . . . I was definitely more confident than before, like in class, I used to never say a word, never voice my opinions, and now I don't shut up. Like, if I have something on my mind, I'm gonna tell the teacher. . . . But with that, I am one of the older students in the classes now, and so there's a tendency for them to look up to me, so I always feel kind of obligated to voice my opinion and be the spokesperson for the group—which I absolutely hate. I don't know, I don't think it's a bad thing, but just feel more comfortable, more confident in classes.

Change in perspectives. Tanya's perception of herself as "the old woman in class" exemplified the ways in which participants not only felt more mature as they transitioned back into the college environment, but also the ways in which their perspectives changed. Again, these changes were attributed at least in part to participants' life experiences during their military service. Jeff explained it this way:

So it's like being mature, it's weird, being 23 and all the friends I've made

here at [Dove Community College] are only 19 and 20. . . . But I mean, I don't know, it's nice . . . knowing that I've matured in that way. Knowing that I've done things that not everyone can do and can be like . . . if someone needs help with something, that they can call me and be like, "You know what? You've done things. Give us advice," and it's like, "Okay."

Like Tanya, Jeff identified his age as being a factor in his perceptions of his increased maturity; however, participants also acknowledged that their life experiences in the military had changed their perspectives about what was important to them.

Frank summed this change in the things he valued by saying, "And it's like, 'Why get worked up over all this little shit you know?' When you could be in 140 degree weather, working a b.s. post or, even worse, in Iraq getting an IED thrown at you." Many of the participants shared the belief that worrying about the little things in life was not something they found themselves doing so much after their deployments. Tanya explained:

That was one of the big changes I think in myself upon coming home, once again: priorities. Some things back home now that used to upset me don't upset me as much as they used to. . . . So, like if the printer doesn't work, then I won't completely freak out. It'll just be like, "Okay, I just need to go to Staples and get some ink or whatever it is." Because it's not as big of a deal as I once thought it was, cause there are more important things to worry about, you know, and we are lucky . . . and most of the time we just forget about that.

These changes in perspective also included, for most of the participants, a change in awareness and sensitivity to cultural differences. This was especially the case for

participants who had more direct and sustained contact with people from ethnic backgrounds different from their own. For example, while in Iraq Josh befriended two young Iraqi boys who he “became friends with.... [It] kind of felt like they were my brothers kind of by the time I left.” Similarly, Toby “became friends with some Egyptians . . . even taking a couple trips to Cairo [and had gone] to an Egyptian wedding.” Before his deployment, Josh—who felt open-minded before his deployment—was concerned that “I was afraid when I went over [that] it was going to close my mind a little. I wasn’t going to be able to see out of the box as much, but actually [it] did the opposite of what I was thinking, actually opened it up more.” Jeff, on the other hand, went into the deployment with a much less open view of the Iraqi culture. However, his experiences with the Iraqi people had a significant influence on his attitudes toward them:

It taught me that they’re not, they’re not all terrorists. I mean, when I went over there, all I heard were the stories of little kids, I mean, walking the streets with bombs on and just blowing up guys. Even moms and kids doing it, and it just made me upset, and when I got over there, that’s all I saw them as, is “nothing”—they were like lower than me. And I just hated them because of 9/11 and everything else, and I was like, “Why would you do this?” But once I got to know them, I mean, they’re just like me and you. They’re just like my mom; they do work every day. They’re like a human being. I grew to understand their way of living, their culture, how they’re not like the terrorists are from 9/11. They’re nothing like them.

Not all of the participants had such an extreme view of a different culture as Jeff did, but their experiences overseas did seem to give them a different appreciation for parts of their lives they often took for granted before their deployments. Participants tended to be more appreciative of their privileges after their return. Consequently, participants sometimes felt frustrated with other people, especially other college students, who seemed to be concerned about minor issues, or who were closed-minded about things going on in the world. Tanya saw this difference as being one of priorities:

The priorities are different, and I know sometimes I was like, you know, there are more important things to worry about, there's people dying over there, and you're worried about your outfit you're gonna wear out tonight, that kind of thing. But then I'd have to step back and think to myself, you know this is their life, you know, this is what's important to them right now, and they don't know any different, you know?

Toby described similar feelings, with more of an emphasis on people not being open to differences:

Yeah, there's a lot of people I think in the states that are very, very sheltered, I mean . . . I know for a fact there's still lots of people that are openly racist, and it's almost the same to me if you're racist against a religious group, because some of those people have ties to certain other groups. I mean, I just think that's silly, so that in a sense has opened my eyes to different things, and I'm a lot more lenient or open-minded when it comes to that kind of thing.

So, as participants became more aware of these internal changes (i.e., increased maturity and focus, increased openness and receptiveness to different perspectives), some

of them also became even more attuned to the problems resulting from people acting in ways the participants perceived as being less mature. As Matt explained:

I came out of my shell more, just because of the life experiences, you know? I mean, I'm older. I grew up a little bit. I've seen some stuff. I've definitely experienced some stuff. So you come back and, yeah, you're different. You're more open and you're just like, yeah, but at the same time, you know, it's just the stupid things people do. It just drives you nuts. It's like: "Really?!" But then you come home from something like that, especially the experiences that I had with such a dangerous job, and then you got these people, these floaters. Sometimes, they just do stupid stuff that's unnecessarily stupid. Like the people that speed around in their cars and dodge through traffic and almost hitting people, and just don't care. You're just like, "What's wrong with you? Is it really that hard just to drive?"

Overall, these new perceptions of themselves and others shaped the ways in which participants felt different from many of their college peers. Participants did not feel like typical college students, students who wanted to go out and party all the time. Instead, they found themselves less concerned with having that type of lifestyle. As Frank noted, "I rarely go out anymore." Or as Matt echoed, "I don't really want to go out and drink and do all that." Toby even explained that he felt little concern with fitting in with other college students:

I have a lot less desire to try and impress, you know, these 18, 20 year-old kids that are running around here. I mean, I don't seem to want to or have the time for them, really. I mean, I have my own group of friends and I don't, I

just don't have like, like the party atmosphere that I'm sure there is. I just am not interested, really, in it, with these people.

Participants' perceptions that they felt differently about themselves than typical college students, and even other civilians do, go beyond lifestyle changes—especially since they were negotiating who they were as people now that they were veterans. This additional aspect to their identities affected their transition processes, as they figured out how being a veteran—with all the life experiences that went with that identity—shifted their identity as a whole. The final theme, “Re-situating and Negotiating Identities” explores this process.

Re-situating and Negotiating Identities

An important part of the transition process for participants was the process of re-situating their identities in light of their new status as veterans. A major factor in this process was their attempts to understand how their newly acquired veteran status impacted them as individuals, including their identity, their social roles, and their negotiations of their environments. Specifically, participants frequently expressed uncertainty regarding how to manage the feeling that they now existed in two worlds that did not seem to be readily straddled: the military world and the civilian world. As they transitioned back into their civilian and college student lives, participants realized that their veteran status had become part of their lives and personal identities, which created added responsibilities, newly acquired status, and the need to reflect on and understand how they and others saw themselves in the world. Throughout this process, participants also had to negotiate the impact of their veteran status on their re-enrollment in college and the meaning of their identity. This theme addresses how participants understood and

enacted in the processes of re-situating and negotiating their identities. The following section addresses and discusses participants' feelings about their individual identities as veterans and as college student veterans, and also how environmental and internal cues affected their perceptions of themselves as civilians, college students, and veterans.

Re-situating their identities was an important aspect of the transition process for participants, since they experienced dissonance concerning who they were as people after they had returned. Matt explained that dissonance this way:

You kind of come back, you know, it's almost like you forget who you are and what you kind of do. You got an idea, but it's like you're trying to remember. And then just over time, you remember more and more. . . . It's kind of something like that, to where you just feel yourself gradually changing back.

Matt's explanation focused, then, on trying to find his place in the world as the civilian he was before he left.

However, nearly all the participants also seemed to find themselves within the processes of both making meaning of their veteran identity and exploring how their identity as a veteran affected their overall identity makeup. In other words, while they were transitioning back to their civilian lives, they also recognized that their veteran status was now a part of their overall identity makeup. This process of changing back, then, involved negotiating how a new social identity of "veteran" fit into their lives. Some participants saw their veteran role as being one of multiple social roles in their lives. Jeff, for example, noted:

I don't look at us like, okay, someone looks up to me, "Oh, you're a veteran: I have to give you all the respect in the world." I mean, I'm not just a veteran, I'm a college student, I'm a brother, I'm a son [and] it's like the same thing as everyone else does. It's just I have a deployment, and that was it.

Tanya described how the roles she played in her life depended on context or social situations and were made somewhat more challenging to negotiate as she transitioned back to the civilian world following her deployment. Tanya explained how she took on different roles depending on the situation:

Everybody has different roles at different times, and like when I have a uniform on, I'm in the military soldier role, you know? When I'm at work, I'm playing the physical therapy role, you know, when I'm at school, the student role. So it's just, you have to, I guess, mentally prepare for the different roles, especially when you come back from being military and [in] that mindset for so long. You just have to consciously kind of force yourself to get back in the civilian roles.

Negotiating among being a veteran, a civilian and/or a college student was a process of determining the most salient identity, depending upon participants' awareness of context and situation. For example, as a civilian, Jeff's reactions to certain situations were dependent upon the environment and his internalized sense of self—a dual perception that the other participants shared. Tanya noted: "I was kind of caught between [the] civilian and military mindset[s] for quite awhile, I think. Once I got home, it was kind of like a battle . . . [I] had to constantly remind myself that I was a civilian." Toby further described this "battle" as trying to negotiate between two different lives:

It's tricky sometimes [pause]. I guess the weirdest thing for me going back to drill last weekend, having the two separate lives, like for the last year, you know, I was friends with these people and I saw them everyday and this and that, and since I've been back, I've been going to school and . . . I haven't connected with any of those people, so it's like turning the sheet of paper over, you know? And it's like completely different now. . . . Well, that, and I mean I'm trying to maintain two lives, two careers at the same time, you know, you're having your civilian education and life, and then you have your military on the other hand.

Matt also felt the struggle between these two lives when he first returned. He found that working for the National Guard, where he could wear his uniform on a daily basis in a less structured and less dangerous environment, helped ease the transition—which also clarified his description of the process as one of “changing back.”

I needed to get away from it, I needed more downtime than I gave myself, and even then, I quit there [his pre-deployment job to which he had returned after his deployment], and still worked full-time for the National Guard. Figured, all right, I can still work, make even more money, not work as hard and be in the uniform again—maybe that will help me transition a little more wearing the uniform, kind of more civilian. . . . I mean, it's not necessarily, like just in the civilian world . . . and then I did that for two months and after that, I just really mellowed down.

Moreover, finding ways to relieve this tension seemed to be part of the transition process, and participants were at different places—specifically concerning their

understanding of the ways they enacted their social roles. For most of the participants a sort of duality emerged. On the one hand they saw their various roles as being separate and disconnected; on the other hand, they also grappled with integrating the roles into their personal identities.

Still, the need to live in two very different worlds—the civilian world and the military world—and the process of negotiating their different social identities was a common experience among the participants with their newly-acquired veteran status plus their service in a combat zone. Having served in a war zone deployment added a layer of role and identity complexity for participants as they struggled to decide when and how to disclose their veteran status and how to integrate their civilian, college student, and veteran identities. At times, participants preferred not to be recognized as veterans or military servicemembers, because they were not always sure how they would be received. In this way, the particular environments surrounding them influenced how they were situationally negotiating and integrating their veteran status. For example, Jeff noted that despite trying to conceal his veteran status by “growing out [his] hair and getting a goatee, and getting away from it, and not wearing anything Marine Corps-related,” he would still be identified easily by some people as a Marine. For example, Jeff recounted being recognized as a Marine in the mall by a person who said he knew Jeff was a Marine simply by his demeanor and the way he carried himself. Jeff was concerned about people’s general perceptions of servicemembers, because he did not want to be identified as being some sort of warmonger or war criminal:

Different people just realize, they’re like, “Oh, they just shoot and kill people” and it’s like, “No, I’ve helped build schools, I’ve helped watch little kids,

babysit little kids while other guys had meetings, I mean, played soccer with kids.” We’re not always like fighting, we’re not always kicking down doors, we’re interacting, we’re getting to know the people. So, it’s like sometimes you [want to] just cover it up, and just like get away from it, because it just bugs you, but then you kind of know that you can’t get away from it. . . . So, I mean it’s not like Vietnam or anything like that, I’m really happy for that, but there is support, and that’s what I’m happy for and . . . that there’s some people that just think negative[ly] about us.

Tanya also preferred not to be seen as a “military chick” because of the way people might stereotype military servicemembers as somehow being different from civilians:

You know, I kind of like the fact that people don’t recognize me, because I guess . . . how do I put this . . . people don’t realize it’s normal people, males and females alike, that are getting deployed, so when I come home and I’m like, “I’m in the military, and I was deployed,” they’re like, “Oh,” you know, kind of thing. Because they don’t realize it’s people like them that are being deployed.

Tanya’s gender also came into play when people found out about her status as a veteran and made further assumptions about her by speculating about the role she fulfilled during her deployment:

So even though I do surprise people by saying, “I am military and I was deployed as a medic,” they’re like “Oh, you know she couldn’t have been doing anything important, I bet she was just in the hospital, safe and cleaning

up after whoever,” you know? With the males, you kind of automatically assume that they were right on the front lines, you know, protecting our freedom in a blaze of glory kind of thing. So there is, you know, just the stereotype again, I guess.

Other participants also felt as though they were not easily recognized as veterans because, as Frank noted, “like you look at me and you don’t see I’m in the military, you know, maybe with my haircut, but that’s about it.” Matt shared this sentiment, and mentioned that even he had difficulty identifying who was or was not a military servicemember. However, Matt and others did not necessarily mind being identified as veterans, and they would speak up in class or in other places to share their experiences if people seemed interested. According to Matt:

You just like, don’t know most of the time . . . there’s a lot of other veterans that are probably walking around, and I don’t see them any different[ly], just cause, who’s to tell? So, you feel a little different, just because . . . most people don’t [recognize I am a veteran], so it doesn’t really matter. It can be kind of a fun topic that comes up in class. Like the teacher asks something, and I’d be like, “Yeah, I’ve seen that.” “Where?” “Iraq.” “Oh, really?”

Then, they start out asking questions, you know, and they’re kind of surprised and stuff, but so I mean we don’t stand out in any way. It’s not stamped on my forehead.

Regardless of whether participants chose to disclose their veteran status, none of them wanted to be seen as flaunting their status. However, participants felt proud of being veterans and of being different in some ways from people who were not veterans.

Josh explained, “I’m proud to be a veteran in the sense that I served my country.” He went on to add, “It kind of seems you’re more of a veteran if you [were] deployed.”

Other participants, like Toby, also recognized their relative uniqueness within the general population:

One percent of the nation is serving in the armed forces, maybe, and even [a] smaller percentage of that is actually serving like in a combat zone or overseas, and that makes me [part of] a very small percent of the population that’s doing this, which kind of, you know, it makes me proud that I’m able to do that.

Matt recognized the uniqueness of what he had done, as well: “It’s [being a veteran] something that’s really positive that’s a smaller . . . percent of the population, so being a part of that is really cool.” However, he also expressed wariness about broadcasting his status: “As far as being a veteran in general, you always got that little something, like not many people do that. So it’s almost like you feel you got something on everybody else, but I don’t get cocky about it.” None of the participants wanted special treatment because of their veteran status. However, they unanimously agreed that they appreciated sincere gestures to recognize and thank them for their service. Frank said:

Well, for me, this is just me personally, I’d just like to be treated like anyone else and . . . I think I also said that the only real acknowledgment that I would like is just maybe indirect acknowledgment, you know, like having a student veteran lounge or maybe, you know, if there was a campus movie theater having benefits for veterans at a discounted rate . . . stuff like that. But, yeah,

I don't expect anyone to come up to me and [say], "Hey you know what? I really appreciate what you do." It's nice to hear you know . . . when you come back, people are always like, "Oh, thanks for what you've done" and stuff like that, and that's always nice to hear, but . . . I was just kind of doing what I signed up for.

Frank later qualified his remarks about gratitude by saying that he did not want people to feel obligated to thank him for his service. Avoiding the discomfort that might arise was at times influential in his choice not to advertise the fact he was a veteran. This perspective was typical for most of the participants, who wanted to make it clear that they were proud of their service, but did not want people to put them on a pedestal. Consequently, participants not only had to negotiate how their veteran identity was perceived by others and how they wanted to be seen as a veteran, but also how they saw themselves as a veteran.

Overall, while participants clearly delineated their various social identities, they were also in the process of negotiating how all of their identities fit into their sense of self and how their identities as veterans impacted their daily lives as civilians and college students. This integration of veteran social identity into their lives was an ongoing process for most, if not all, of the participants. As depicted above, participants' attempts to define their identity were dependent upon many different factors including the situation, people's reactions to their veteran status, and complications arising from living in two worlds and enacting many different roles in their lives.

Summary

Chapter 4 described four themes that emerged from an exploration of the participants' transition experiences based on data gathered primarily from interviews with the participants. The four themes were: negotiating the transition, interactions with others, changes in perspective and increased maturity, and re-situating personal identities. Participant profiles were also presented. Chapter 5 presents conclusions and limitations of the study, ethical considerations, implications and recommendations for higher education practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

**CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS,
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE
RESEARCH, AND RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY**

This phenomenological study investigated the transition experiences of student veterans who had re-enrolled at one of two community colleges in the Midwest following overseas deployment to locations including Afghanistan, Iraq and Kuwait. Using a three-interview series and a limited number of participant observations, data were gathered about the lived experiences of the participants to help understand how they made meaning of the transition process back into civilian environments, especially the college environment. The thematic findings were discussed in Chapter 4.

This chapter presents conclusions, limitations and ethical considerations. I will also discuss implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Conclusions

Schlossberg's theory of transition (Goodman et al., 2006) provided the theoretical framework for the study, specifically with regard to defining participants as "moving in," "moving through," or "moving out" [of] their transition processes. This model also describes transition events in a person's life as either being anticipated, unanticipated or as non-events. As student veterans, the participants' experiences (from deployment to their return home) could be composed of all three types, depending on the circumstances. The participants in this study seemed to be at different points in their transition processes, where some were "moving in," others "moving through," and still others "moving out." However, it appeared the "moving in" and "moving through" points of the model were

the most salient for participants, given their descriptions of experiences transitioning back into the civilian world and the college environment. Schlossberg's transition theory also identified three different areas in which people can experience transitions: *individual*, *relationships* and *work lives*. These areas can overlap, and major transitions can include more than one area (Goodman et al., 2006). However, this study focused specifically on both the *individual* salience of the transition for participants and the ways in which their *relationships* affected their transitions and vice versa. For example, two of the participants (Josh and Tanya) worked part-time at the time of this study. However, rather than serving as a primary transition process for them (i.e., returning to work), *working* turned out to be more of a tertiary aspect of participants' transition processes.

As presented in Chapter 2, Schlossberg's 4 S's (Situation, Support, Strategies and Self) affect how people are able to cope with major transitions. To briefly revisit, *Situation* pertains to the degree to which the transition affects a person's functioning, while *Support* is the outside resources in a person's life that make the transition either more or less difficult. *Strategies* constitute the ways in which an individual handles the transition process itself, as well as the tools he or she uses to cope with the transition. Finally, *Self* refers to how well prepared a person is to deal with the transition, based on personal characteristics such as resiliency and self-efficacy. Goodman et al. (2006) argued that the 4 S's—when used in a counseling setting—could help counselors better understand individuals' transitions. Prior research has used Schlossberg's theory to frame and help understand student veterans' transition processes (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press). Consequently, the theory was appropriate for this study—with modifications to make it more appropriate for a research setting—to help understand

the participants' transition experiences from military deployment. These modifications were necessary because it was not the purpose of this study to enter into a therapeutic relationship with participants. Therefore, the theoretical concepts were extrapolated from the counseling setting into a more general research setting. In other words, the 4 S framework was used to help understand the participants' transition process—not to help them negotiate the transition itself. However, though not directly intended, it is important to recognize that asking participants to divulge their transition experiences for the purpose of this study might have had therapeutic benefits for them.

Using Schlossberg's theory of transition as a framework for this study and the 4 S's to understand the participants' transition experiences, proved to be an effective strategy to conceptualize the participants' transition processes. Consequently, the following conclusions are ordered according to the 4 S sequence.

Situation

Playing key roles in the participants' transitions were (a) personal expectations and expectations of others, (b) change in environments (i.e., military to civilian), (c) difficulty getting back into the academic mode of thinking, especially initially, and (d) the ways in which participants perceived the college environment. This study foregrounded the college environment as a predominant setting for participants' return to the civilian world. Because participants had prior experiences both as civilians and college students, one might expect that their overall transitions might be relatively easy. However, their military deployments and spending extended periods of time overseas made their transitions more complicated—even to the participants themselves. Situations vary, of course, when a person faces a transition, and a number of factors can influence

those situations, such as timing of the transition, duration (i.e., either temporary or permanent), control, role change and previous experience with a similar transition (Goodman et al., 2006).

Overall, participants described relatively uncomplicated transitions, on administrative levels, returning to college, since they reported few, if any, obstacles with re-enrollment paperwork or eligibility. This process, being less cumbersome than what some of them had experienced when they first enrolled in college, was a welcome change when participants re-enrolled in college. On the other hand, a number of other factors complicated participants' transitions back into the civilian world and into college, primarily at the beginning of their transition (i.e., as participants were "moving in" to the transition). Specifically, participants felt overwhelmed, in that the unaccustomed chaos of the civilian world made many of the participants long for the order to which they had grown accustomed during their military deployment, and where their sole focus was on the mission at hand.

Most of the participants expressed excitement about being back home and getting back to their civilian lives. However, this excitement was tempered by the awareness that their adjustment to civilian life was not going to be as easy and exciting as expected. For example, Matt surprised himself at his reactions to being home, because he found himself just wanting to be alone rather than interact with friends and family. Participants were excited to see their friends and family, however these interactions also often resulted in participants feeling the weight of others' expectations. Therefore, expectations of self and others played a significant role in participants' transition experience, especially initially. Tanya, for example, suggested that family members' expectations in general

often put pressure on returning servicemembers, who might feel pulled in many different directions. Matt added to this observation by suggesting that, as a student veteran, he and others needed to remember to put themselves first and not feel obligated to meet other people's expectations—especially upon their immediate return. Here, Matt's sentiment echoes the need to take control of certain aspects of the situation, which can be a major factor in negotiating a successful transition process (Goodman et al., 2006).

Changes in environments, and negotiating those changes successfully, played the second key role in participants' situation. Participants often acknowledged feeling like they had little or no control over their environment during deployment; however, once they returned to the civilian world, they suddenly had more freedom than was the case during active duty. This jarring change in environments, of having more control over their lives but with less structure, was common among all participants and further complicated their transitions. This experience was also reported by other student veterans in previous studies (DiRamio et al., 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, in press). This change in structure often made participants feel overwhelmed with the types of details of their civilian lives that they did not have to attend to while overseas. For example, during the transition to the civilian world, participants experienced very different environmental cues than they did in the more structured environment of the military. This sudden change in structure led some participants to conclude that dealing with life details in the civilian world was actually more stressful than dealing with overseas deployment. While deployed, much of the day-to-day decision making was absent, and they could concentrate on their missions. Transitioning back into the civilian world, where they had to again be concerned with things like paying bills and grocery shopping, constituted a

radical shift from the mandated daily schedules of the military. Goodman et al. (2006) noted that “often transitions in one area stimulate other stresses” (p. 64)—a finding that certainly seems to be the case here, and which further supports this study’s conclusion that transitions for student veterans are complex processes.

Returning to college was also a challenge for many of the participants. They found it difficult to get back into academic life and relearn how to think critically, a finding that is consistent with previous research (Rumann & Hamrick, in press). Some participants like Frank felt they were not challenged to think critically while deployed. This aspect of the transition was even more difficult for Toby, who was re-enrolling in college after a second deployment at the time of data collection. Toby had been taking higher-level coursework prior to his (second) deployment to Egypt than when he returned from his (first) deployment to Afghanistan. Toby’s perception that at least some aspects of his transition were more difficult the second time around is noteworthy, since one might assume that experiencing a similar transition would make a second transition easier (Goodman et al., 2006).

Furthermore, half of the participants (Frank, Josh, and Matt) chose to take some time away from college before they re-enrolled (up to three months), which they believed helped to ease their transition back into the college environment. Others—either by choice (Jeff and Tanya) or by necessity (Toby)—enrolled soon after they returned from being overseas and in two cases (Jeff and Toby) nearly two weeks after the semester’s start. For Toby to meet the graduation deadline eligibility requirements of the ROTC scholarship he had received through the National Guard, he was forced to re-enroll immediately, regardless of the fact that his was a late enrollment. Notably, military

educational policy imposed these time limits on Toby's degree completion, and military deployment policy was the reason his college education had twice been interrupted. Regardless of when participants chose to return to college following their military deployments, returning to college itself was a key factor in their situations and played a significant role in negotiating their transitions.

The college environment itself also posed a significant change to participants' situation. In the military, they had grown accustomed to obeying the authority of their superiors. They were not typically encouraged to question authority or take initiative to solve problems, whereas such initiative was routinely encouraged in college. Additionally, the lack of both a direct authoritative structure in college classrooms and the lack of respect normally present in military culture (e.g., students coming late to class, and cell phones ringing), caused frustration for some participants and resulted in antagonistic feelings toward their college peers. So, even though participants had experienced a college environment prior to their deployments, their military experiences significantly affected their post-deployment student experiences. Goodman et al. (2006) noted that experiences with previous, similar transitions can be a positive mitigating factor for people in transitions. However, participants' transitions back into college were complicated by their deployment experiences (which obviously was not the case when they first enrolled in college).

In many ways, the other three categories of the 4 S's either overlapped or were influential in participants' situations (such as the added stress of family expectations). On the other hand, with regard to support, family members were instrumental in supporting participants in nearly all aspects of their return (i.e., before, during and

following their deployments). Indeed, even though the initial transition was the most cumbersome transition experience for participants, it was not the passage of time alone that eased those transitions. Their ongoing relationships with others primarily provided them with the necessary support—from family members they could rely on to the VACO at their respective institutions who could help them navigate military policies and college paperwork.

Support

Participants accessed and experienced supportive relationships in both their civilian and academic environments. Support sources ranged from family members, military peers, VACOs, some faculty members (especially those who had some type of military connection), and for some, the newly established veterans lounge at one college. Support from their civilian friends and college peers was not necessarily present, since some participants described interactions with those groups of people as mixed.

Goodman et al. (2006) described different types of support an individual could receive from family, friends and communities. At the core of this notion of support were intimate relationships, and the participants in this study also described their relationships and interactions with others as being major factors in their transitions. Somewhat unexpectedly, participants referred to a heightened emphasis on trust (or lack thereof) in determining how they judged their relationships with others. Trust is mentioned as an element of intimate relationships, but not specifically as an element of support in Schlossberg's theory of transition. While I anticipated that relationships would play a major role in participants' transition processes, participants' emphasis on trust was not

foreseen as a key element of those relationships or a significant factor in the ways participants felt supported. This issue of trust will be discussed throughout this section.

Consistently, participants described their families as being their primary sources of support before, during and after deployment—which is consistent with the notion that the family unit can play a key role in helping people negotiate a successful transition by being supportive and affirming (Goodman et al., 2006). While participants described their return from deployment and subsequent interactions with family members as being hectic, their various interactions with family members also helped to ease their transitions. For some participants, parents or other family members had helped to take care of their business affairs while they were away, or had enrolled them in classes while they were still overseas. Family members maintained these liaison and proxy roles with schools and other organizations while participants were away. Thus, when participants returned, they typically found that their relationships had strengthened with family (especially immediate family members), and they would thereafter turn to them for support. For Jeff and Frank, whose fathers were also military veterans, this connection was especially helpful because they found that their fathers could relate to their transition experiences.

Participants did not explicitly express that they trusted their family members, but trust was implicit in the ways that they described knowing that under any circumstances family members would be there to support them and vice versa. This certainty helped to deepen their relationships during and after their deployment experiences. Family members who stayed in touch while participants were away and had perhaps passed an

implicit test of loyalty. As Toby noted, his family members were the only people he knew who he could count on consistently to be there for him.

Also, participants often reached out to their deployment peers and sought them out as sources of support because they felt a strong sense of camaraderie with them. They were the only people who could truly relate to the participants' deployment experiences, because they had "been there" with them. A number of the participants cited missing this sense of camaraderie and connectedness as one of the challenges of their transition. This challenge was exacerbated because units would often not meet together for extended periods of time: drill weekends were typically postponed for months after they returned. Or, in Tanya's and Toby's cases, they were not deployed with their home units, and their deployment friends were, particularly for Tanya, long distances away. Also, they did not have the opportunities to see them once per month at drill, as was the case for most of the other participants. An interruption to a person's support system due to a transition is important to consider when assessing that individual's assets and liabilities in the transition process (Goodman et al., 2006). For the participants in this study, a sudden loss or disruption of that consistent support system seemed to complicate their transitions.

Furthermore, the levels of trust participants felt with other veterans who had been deployed—especially their unit peers—were noteworthy. Their shared deployment experiences and mutual understanding of protecting each other's lives created a level of trust in their relationships that was profoundly deeper than even relationships with family members and close friends. Of course, this mutual trust was missing for most of the participants when they returned from deployment, re-enrolled in college, and again began

to interact with civilian peers and students. This comparative superficiality of participants' relationships with their civilian peers could be anticipated considering the high stakes environments from which they were returning (i.e., war zones), the less intense college environment, and the lack of understanding participants felt when interacting with civilians who had not shared in their military experiences. Participants' relationships with non-military peers will be discussed in more detail later in this section of the chapter.

Participants also noted that other veterans were sources of support, in the sense that they could discuss military experiences without having to explain the jargon or circumstances. There seemed to be a unique bond between veterans, regardless of whether any single veteran had been deployed, as indicated by participants' interactions with other veterans within and outside the college environment. The type of kinship that participants expressed as being inherent among veterans did not extend to other relationships—specifically with participants' pre-deployment civilian friends.

In any person's life, the loss of friendships can be a consequence of a transition (e.g., moving away), and can make the transition process more difficult (Goodman et al., 2006). The participants in this study resumed contact with pre-deployment friends upon their return, but relationships with some—if not all—of their civilian friends were altered which, in turn, affected the level of intimacy that participants felt toward them. The 4 S framework accounts for the fact that participants found themselves principally turning to family members and military peers for support, rather than to pre-deployment friends. The reasons for this change in relationships can be attributed to a variety of factors, including civilians' lack of knowledge or sensitivity to participants' deployment

experiences and civilians' inability to relate to those experiences. The participants' lack of trust in their civilian peers also changed the nature of servicemember-civilian peer relationships.

Participants often felt distanced from their pre-deployment civilian friends when they returned from their deployments because they could not relate to these friends, or to their friends' general lack of awareness of current events, especially the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Interactions with civilian friends became awkward for some participants. One example of this disconnection was the scenario where Tanya's friend asked her somewhat sarcastically or tongue-in-cheek if she had seen anybody with limbs missing. As a medic, Tanya had indeed. Nearly all of the participants recounted interactions like Tanya's when they explained feeling uncomfortable or different among their civilian friends. However, through time and with continued interactions, this discomfort seemed to subside for some of the participants. Frank and Matt, for example, made it clear that they were close to their civilian friends, but just in a different way than they did with their military friends. Matt used the example of his high school friend who was not in the military, and who could not necessarily relate to his experiences in the military, but with whom he felt comfortable sharing things on a personal level. Still, participants concluded that their civilian friends had a difficult time relating to their military experience—which, at times, decreased the level of support they could feel. These awkward interactions with civilian friends seem to be a relatively common experience with returning student veterans in general (see for example, DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press).

Trust also played a role in how participants regarded their pre-deployment friends—based on participants’ perceptions of how supportive their civilian friends had been while they were deployed. For example, Jeff and Josh shared that they felt less trusting of friends who had not maintained contact or shown support for them while they were overseas. Consequently, they questioned whether or not they could trust that person to be there for them now that they were back or if they were to be deployed again. However, in the case of longer term relationships, a level of trust had already been established that carried through the deployment, as Frank and Matt experienced. Still, they described their relationships with their civilian friends in different terms than relationships with their military peers.

Generally speaking, participants did not experience negative interactions with civilians—which for some of them was a concern, since they were aware of the negative ways in which Vietnam War veterans were treated upon their return (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Horan, 1990a) and because of the negative ways that war and combat events can be portrayed by the media. There also seemed to be an issue of trust or lack of trust at the core of many of the participants’ interactions with others, especially civilians, based on the sense of trust, or distrust, which had been instilled in them as a result of their military training or experiences. Many of the participants found it difficult to trust people in the civilian world to the same degree they could in the military environment, because war zones as a rule force servicemembers to trust their military peers with their lives. Because this type of visceral, high-stakes relationship is not typically the case in the civilian world, civilians were at a disadvantage since they do not experience being deployed overseas in a war zone. Mistrust was also conditioned through military training

in the military, where some participants reported they were trained to be suspicious of anyone who was not in the military. This mistrust also carried over into their civilian lives and affected their interactions with civilians after their return. Consequently, mistrust potentially reduced the level of social support participants experienced. This reduction may in turn have affected their transition experiences overall because they felt less sure of who they could rely upon for support or unsure of how people might view their military service. Trust can play a key role in relationships, which affect the level of social support people feel as they negotiate through a transition (Goodman et al., 2006).

Aside from individuals, a servicemember's interaction with organizations and communities are important factors to consider in determining the nature of support they receive. Goodman et al. (2006) identified "institutions and/or communities of which the people are a part" (p. 75) as one type of support a person in transition might receive. The military—as noted earlier—served this purpose for participants, in that interactions with other servicemembers yielded supportive relationships. Returning to college also offered participants a community that can provide sources of support by way of relationships. Returning to college environments presented participants with people who were positive and supportive of their studies such as the VACO at both study sites as well as some instructors. This experience has not always been the case for contemporary student veterans (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008). This support was particularly the case for participants who had working relationships with instructors prior to their deployments, or with instructors who had some type of connection to the military themselves (e.g., family members in the military). For other participants, instructors showed their support by including military issues in the curriculum, being open to late

enrollment, and/or adjusting a course's focus to include military topics and related issues. Finally, participants seemed genuinely to appreciate when, during class, instructors asked them about their experiences. However, that sentiment may not be shared by all servicemembers, including those individuals who do not wish to identify as a veteran or share their military experiences in a public venue. In addition, participants reacted negatively to being asked to speak for *all* veterans as do individuals of various ethnic origins when asked to speak for all people of their ethnicity—a common and marginalizing mistake many people make (see, for example, Davis et al. [2004], who examined the marginalizing practice of individual African American students being asked to speak for all African Americans). Therefore, it is important to be aware that some student veterans may not be comfortable talking about their military experiences in group *or* individual situations.

The VACOs at both research sites were identified by all the participants as being positive and a primary source of support. VACOs were also described by some participants as serving a liaison role between them and the Veterans Affairs Department, especially with respect to getting any necessary paperwork filed so that student veterans could receive their educational benefits in a timely manner. The VACO at both research sites served a very important role administratively helping participants re-enroll in college and receive GI Bill benefits: However, their support was not limited to strictly administrative tasks. In addition, participants described supportive relationships with the VACO at their college in ways that went beyond filing paperwork. The VACOs in this study were described as people who would go above and beyond their typical duties to help support veterans with their transitions following a military deployment. For

example, Tanya and Jeff noted that they felt comfortable going to the VACO at their colleges for just about anything (even non-military matters) while Matt explained how the VACO at his college would talk to him in the parking lot even after college offices had closed. These relationships, along with feeling connected with these particular individuals, served as the impetus for feeling supported.

The feeling of support among the participants was enhanced further for those participants who attended Killdeer Community College. The institution created a community within a community for student veterans by establishing a student veterans' lounge. Not only did participants feel they were appreciated, they also felt supported by having a place to meet and interact with other veterans as they re-enrolled in college. This is an example of the type of community or institutional support that Goodman et al. (2006) described as potentially impacting an individual's transition process positively. As Tanya noted, the lounge gave her a place to discuss military issues and situations that she did not feel comfortable disclosing in the classroom. The veterans lounge, then, provided an important type of support by creating an environment in which sharing could take place between people who were experiencing similar transitions (Goodman et al., 2006). This is similar to the potentially supportive environment provided by veterans clubs and organizations at institutions of higher education (Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Previous studies have found that some veterans would welcome more opportunities to be involved in veteran-specific communities on college campuses (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press). Additionally, a recent report noted that providing more opportunities for student veterans to connect with their peers was an area in which higher education could improve (Cook & Kim, 2009). Killdeer

Community College's veterans lounge is a clear example of how staff and administrators can demonstrate institutional support for student veterans and make them feel valued, as opposed to the alienating environment in which Vietnam veterans tried to transition (Horan, 1990a).

Colleges and college personnel, then, provided important sources of support to participants helping to ease their transition. The participants' college peers, however, did not necessarily match that level of support. Participants' interactions with their college peers seemed to range from strained to amiable. For example, outside of the connections Josh felt with his culinary program peers, and Toby's interactions with a group of engineering students—most of whom were veterans themselves—participants did not describe their college peers as sources of support. Other participants shared the feeling that many fellow students were ambivalent toward their veteran status and did not seem to care about their military service. On the other hand, some participants acknowledged that other students were interested in their military experiences once they realized the participant was a veteran. Still, a number of the participants did not feel like they were establishing meaningful relationships with many of their college peers. For many of the participants, this disconnection seemed to be at least partly due to feeling like they simply had little in common with other college students on campus, and that their supportive friendships occurred outside the college environment.

Again, trust seemed to be an important differentiating element in the types of relationships participants formed in their college environments. Participants did not explicitly describe trust as a factor in their relationships, but they described feeling supported by the college faculty and staff who displayed a genuine interest in their well-

being, and on whom they could comfortably rely or depend. The college staff (i.e., VACOs and some instructors) who participants described as specifically being supportive were individuals who themselves had some type of close tie to the military. Other college students sometimes expressed curiosity—as opposed to genuine interest—in participants’ military experiences. For the most part, participants did not describe those interactions in the same way they described interactions with certain instructors and the VACOs. Overall, participants’ descriptions of their relationships with other college students were amiable, but they seemed to lack a sense of genuine or sincere concern, and such relationships were not integral to participants’ successful transitions.

In summary, support and support systems came in many different forms but were related primarily to the relationships participants had with other people. However, institutional support (e.g., veterans lounge) was also a factor in helping to ease the participants’ transitions returning to college. This is further evidence to support the notion that each of the 4 S categories overlaps with others to influence the transition experience. In addition, internal changes in each participant’s sense of self had an impact on how he or she viewed relationships. All of the participants experienced internal changes: the participants’ deployment experiences were at least partly credited with changes in perspectives which, in many ways, made participants feel different from many of their college student peers. For example, participants expressed feeling frustration at times with the way in which people, particularly civilian college students, would argue and/or worry about things that really did not matter.

Self

As participants negotiated their transitions and became aware of changes in the interactions and relationships with other people in their lives, they also reported internal changes. According to Goodman et al. (2006), personal aspects serve as resources (e.g., psychological resources) that people in general, and participants in this specific transition, access as they manage their transitions. Goodman et al. go on to describe these types of characteristics as being “relevant for individuals as they cope with change” (p. 65). The participants in this study identified a number of personal factors that affected their transitions such as heightened feelings of maturity, changes in perspectives, increased awareness of and appreciation for cultural differences, and being in the process of negotiating what their veteran status will mean in terms of personal identity.

Maturity was a common and important point for the participants. They described feeling a heightened maturity on at least some level, and being unlike the “typical college student.” Typically, participants felt older and more mature than most of their college student peers, and some felt like they had grown up quickly because of their deployment. Along with heightened maturity, participants noted feeling more focused on, and motivated toward, their career goals, academic success and degree attainment—a perspective that is consistent with previous research (DiRamio et al., 2008; Kinzer, 1946; Rumann & Hamrick, in press; Toven, 1945). This increased focus and motivation was attributed at least in part to their deployment experiences. For many of the participants, this meant focusing strongly on long-term goals, which may not have been the case before they were deployed. For example, following his deployment, Jeff wanted to make sure he was prepared to take care of his family if the need arose. Others, like Toby, were

determined (and hopeful) to complete their degrees before another deployment disrupted their academic pursuits. Or, as Tanya noted, her deployment had a direct and definitive influence on her career path decision, which resulted in her feeling more focused and motivated in college.

This increased motivation and focus on academics generally translated into many participants reporting higher grades than when they were enrolled in college before their deployment, a fact also found to be true for veterans of other wars (Hansen & Paterson, 1949; Joanning, 1975; Love & Hutchinson, 1946; Thompson & Pressey, 1948). For example, Toby earned significantly higher grades after he returned from Afghanistan, and performed well enough to be placed on the Dean's List, which had never happened to him in his pre-deployment academic experience.

Along with a change in perspective, many of the participants shared an increased awareness of, and appreciation for, cultural differences after having interacted with individuals of different cultures during their deployment. This finding is consistent with two previous studies that investigated transition experiences of student veterans (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press). This change in attitude seemed to be particularly strong for those participants who had more direct and sustained contact with different cultures (for example, Jeff and Josh in Iraq, and Toby in Egypt), but all participants noted being at least somewhat influenced by their experiences with local people. They felt an increased level of openness after they returned home, and less patience for the closed-minded attitudes of others.

These changes impacted the ways in which participants approached and experienced situations and relationships which, as has been discussed earlier in this

chapter, impacted how they managed their transitions. In other words, these personal changes served as personal resources that affected the participants' transition experiences overall and could be viewed as assets *and* liabilities depending on the circumstances. For example, participants' increased maturity helped them feel more focused on and motivated toward their academic pursuits; however, it also left them feeling alienated from their non-military college student peers in a number of instances.

In addition to recognizing these changes, participants also began to realize the ways in which their newly acquired status as student veterans affected them, particularly as they interacted with their environment and the people around them. Goodman et al. (2006) noted that questions about identity can play key roles in how people approach transitions. This question was evident for the participants as they negotiated their identities and asked themselves "Who am I again?" On the one hand, participants did not necessarily want to be seen by others as being connected to the military, while on the other, they were proud of their service and their veteran identity. Consequently, participants experienced some dissonance while trying to understand how their veteran identity fit into their overall identity make-up, especially depending on the situation and/or the people with whom they interacted at the time.

At the time of data collection, participants seemed to be engaged in an ongoing process of discovering and negotiating how being a veteran changed the way people viewed them and how they viewed themselves. However, nearly all of the participants felt that being a veteran was something that made them unique: they had an identity and they had experiences that not many people share. Rumann and Hamrick (in press) also noted this process of re-identification among student veterans who had re-enrolled at a

public, four-year university. They described the process in terms of Abes et al.'s (2007) multiple identities model and the way in which student veterans made meaning of their identity after they had returned from a deployment. This model is also helpful here as it helps explain a person's identity development in terms of multiple identities, context, and meaning making.

Participants in this study were involved in the process of identity development, and were actively "filtering" outside influences (Abes et al., 2007). They were still trying to figure out what their veteran status/identity meant to them while they negotiated the influences of outside factors (e.g., people's perceptions of veterans and the war). This process was not just about finding balance: participants also felt like they were different from who they were before they left and, consequently, they were actively engaged in understanding what that change meant to them. Matt described this process as "gradually changing back", while other participants saw it as a function of how each individual's circumstances impacted the roles they performed. Social roles tend to comprise how a person defines her or his identity (Deaux, 1993). In this case, those roles are defined by society and the military, but the participants would not necessarily define it according to those terms. While they were aware of the influences that different environments or contexts had on their perspectives, they ironically thought of their identity as being separate or static, rather than being a holistic experience or the result of a fluid process (Abes et al., 2007). At the time of this study's data collection, most of the participants seemed still to be struggling with integrating their veteran social identity into their overall makeup. They saw their different identities as being separate from each other, rather than

integrated. However, in some cases, participants were beginning to see more often how their veteran status was salient to their personal identity.

Overall, participants' changes in self influenced the ways in which they experienced and interacted in various situations. Both understanding of self and situations overlapped and influenced participants' transition experiences. This was also the case with regard to relationships and support as participants negotiated their transitions. For example, participants' sense of self affected how they felt about the college environment (the situation) and about their relationships with their college peers (support). Participants' changes in perspectives, including their sense of heightened maturity, helped to ease some aspects of their transition back to college and their civilian lives, and motivated them to re-enroll in college following their deployments.

Strategies

Participants used a number of different strategies to help ease their transition as they returned to civilian life: engaging in activities, pursuing education, taking small or interim steps, being proactive, and sharing experiences. Their re-enrollment in college necessitated that they adopt additional behaviors to help them manage academic life.

For most of the participants, extracurricular activities helped to relieve stress and provide outlets when they felt anxious about being back in the United States. Such activities ranged widely among the participants, and included physical exercise as well as hobbies. Tanya, Jeff, Toby and Matt exercised either to clear their minds or to maintain the physical health regimens they began in the military. Extracurricular activities also took the form of hobbies: Matt enjoyed motorcycle riding and wine making, Jeff took relaxation baths and kept a journal, and Josh shopped.

Returning to college was itself a strategy, because nearly all of the participants felt compelled to finish what they had started before they had been deployed. In fact, a number of participants seemed more resolved than ever to attain their degrees, and they were determined not to let their deployment interruptions stop them from completing their degrees. Re-enrolling in college, then, took the form of direct action—which is a way of coping with a transition and changing the situation (Goodman et al., 2006). For example, Tanya used her college attendance to help her stay busy, a behavior she deemed important as she transitioned back to the civilian world and college. She felt that staying busy helped keep her mind off things related to the deployment and kept her from getting into a rut, which had happened when she returned from basic and advanced training. Tanya recognized that this strategy—staying busy—might not work for everyone, but it worked for her. Tanya’s desire to stay busy contrasted with some of the other participants, who chose to take personal time before they returned to college. In fact, Matt indicated that during the time he waited for classes to start, he had quickly returned to his former job. In hindsight, however, he wished he had not. Consequently, he advocated a different strategy than staying busy, and even advised other student veterans to take some downtime when they first returned from their deployments, rather than jump back into school or work too quickly. This recommendation was also shared by other participants.

Participants felt they had to be proactive in the strategies they employed to help themselves negotiate their transitions back into the civilian world. This was also the case as they re-enrolled in college, since they felt they had to find out how to access benefits and resources with little assistance from others (e.g., military personnel). First, and

typically during the military debriefing process, most participants felt either ill-informed, or simply much more preoccupied with getting home than with how to coordinate paper work. Most participants, however, seemed to know that one thing they must do was contact the VACO if they wanted to receive their educational benefits. Still, the relative lack of information from the military and the necessity to be proactive were challenges for some of the participants, especially when they “had to dig” for what their military service entitled them to receive.

In addition, the VACOs at both colleges shared with me that they often felt overwhelmed because they were the only primary contact person for all the student veterans on their campuses. Consequently, this administrative bottleneck made it difficult for them to both keep up with the administrative aspects of their work and reach out to the veterans at their college. Matt’s story about having to talk to the VACO in the parking lot is a good example of the lengths to which VACOs worked to be flexible, and speaks to the degrees to which both Matt and his VACO had to work for Matt to get the information he needed and meet his eligibility requirements. Information seeking itself is one way of coping with a transition (Goodman et al, 2006), and the limited availability of VACOs—as the only people solely charged with helping student veterans—made the process of information seeking more cumbersome and challenging than might ordinarily be the case.

Participants shared a number of strategies—in addition to contacting their VACO—they incorporated to help with their transition of returning to college. Some of the participants had actually planned to keep up with their academics while deployed, either by taking courses overseas or by reviewing various textbooks while they were

deployed. However, while well intentioned, participants were not able to follow through with these plans, primarily because they came to understand that their military schedules would not permit it. Consequently, many of the participants felt upon their return that they were out of practice with thinking in academic ways (i.e., critical thinking) and recognized that the transition back to school would be challenging. Therefore, some of the participants took steps to help them re-engage both with college course material and critical thinking. Frank, for example, enrolled in what he thought were courses with less intense coursework when he first returned; Toby planned to audit some classes in order to become reacquainted with the material before actually re-enrolling.

These strategies proved to be fruitful for the participants. Frank's and Toby's experiences again are illustrative. Frank credited a transfer student transition class he took at the four-year institution where he was enrolled as being very beneficial in helping him readjust to college. This class helped Frank with his study skills and time management practices. The importance of such courses dates back at least to World War II, where student veterans credited a study skills course with helping them overcome challenges with coming back to college (Hadley, 1945). For Toby's part, he sought out a group of students with whom he could study, and who he knew were serious about their coursework. At the time of our last interview, he had identified and worked successfully with such a group, many of whom were also in the military.

Participants, therefore, engaged in a wide range of activities to help manage their transitions, and proactively structured their situations by focusing on who they sought out for support, the goals they chose to pursue, and the strategies they would pursue to help them reach their goals. They also looked to internal changes in themselves as motivation

to pursue a college degree. This again points to the overlapping nature of the 4 S's throughout the transition process and the ways in which participants' assets and liabilities impacted the successful negotiation of a transition (Goodman et al., 2006).

The Transition Process

It was difficult to determine participants' status with respect to Goodman et al.'s (2006) definitions of "moving in," "moving through," or "moving out" of their transitions. For participants who had just recently returned (Jeff and Toby), it was relatively clear that they were still "moving in" while for others who had been back longer, they could be viewed as "moving through". Frank, who had been back the longest, was the only participant who may have been "moving out," but duration of time back from deployment alone is not necessarily the best or only indicator of whether or not a transition is resolved or completed. In light of a person's assets and liabilities, time alone cannot predict a person's place in the transition process (Goodman et al., 2006). Including time, movement through the process is dependent on a number of factors, not the least of which are the 4 S's (i.e., Situation, Support, Self, and Strategies) (Goodman et al., 2006). In addition, the participants may not completely "move out" of their transitions until they graduate from college, discharge from the military or both. Furthermore, as long as the participants remain in the military, there remains the possibility they will be deployed again (except for Toby, who will be non-deployable while he is in ROTC). After their service obligations are completed most, if not all of them, will then be transitioned to ready reserve status. Therefore, participants are, and for the near future will remain, in a state of uncertainty. While the possibility of their being deployed again is not likely, it could technically happen should the need arise. If

that does happen, then they would experience another series of deployment and post deployment transition processes.

Goodman et al. (2006) observed that transitions are processes and “six months, 1 year, and sometimes 2 years pass before one moves fully through a major transition” (p. 40). They further noted that “the only way to understand people in transition is to study them at several points in time” (p. 40). In some ways, this study was able to answer Goodman et al.’s concern, in that a three-interview series was used to capture participants’ experiences across approximately six to nine months of time. Goodman et al. also pointed out that the 4 S’s are factors that affect people throughout the transition process and occur simultaneously—as was the case for the participants in this study.

Limitations

This study was hampered by a number of limitations, for which clarification is necessary. First, the study’s small number of participants and their enrollment at two different sites (community colleges) constitute an important limitation: it would be unreasonable to assume that the participants’ experiences with individuals, institutions and communities at their sites would directly mirror the transition experiences of student veterans elsewhere. As such, while the findings and conclusions may help to inform the higher education community about student veterans’ transition experiences, these findings are not intended to be applied to other institutions, or even to other community colleges. The intent of the study was to provide a thick and rich description of the findings based on data gathered as a result of prolonged engagement in order to give readers information necessary to make their own decisions about how it informs them about student veterans’ transition experiences.

The recruitment of participants turned out to be more challenging than originally anticipated and was the primary reason a second research site was enlisted. However, while identification of willing participants who matched the eligibility criteria proved to be a challenge, the participants who volunteered for the study were eager to share their experiences, especially if their insights might help other student veterans in the future. The participants in this study were also motivated to return to college, and actively pursued their degree completion. As a whole, this consideration could be viewed as a limitation because the voluntary nature of participation may have excluded student veterans who were not as committed to finishing their degrees as were the current participants or had not felt comfortable discussing their post-deployment experiences.

None of the participants reported mental or physical disabilities related to their active duty. However, some participants disclosed some symptoms of PTSD (e.g., startled responses). In particular, Matt was initially diagnosed as suffering from PTSD, but his VA psychologist questioned the accuracy of the diagnosis.

Participants for the study were limited to student veterans who were enrolled in college *before* their deployments and who re-enrolled in college following their return. Finally, not all branches of the military were represented in the study, which might be viewed as a limitation. However, the eligibility criteria for this study were not limited to specific military branches, deployment sites, or duties performed while deployed.

One of the primary advantages of the study's methodology was to develop a relationship with the participants built both on trust and on a genuine interest in their experiences with re-enrolling in college. Realizing this advantage required spending substantial time with each participant, resulting in extended and deep levels of

engagement with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, due to time limitations and the challenges associated with finding participants who matched the eligibility criteria, time emerged as the third limitation to this study. Consequently, the data gathering methods, aside from the three-interview series, were limited. Observations were only used as a supplemental source of data.

Finally, my own non-veteran, non-military status also could constitute a limitation; especially since participants disclosed that they felt more comfortable talking to their military peers and other veterans. All of the participants acknowledged that they felt comfortable talking to me about their experiences and, for the most part, the focus of the interviews was on their transition of re-enrolling in college, rather than on their deployment experiences. I believe participants were open and honest with me about their experiences, but my own status as a non-servicemember may mean that they were reluctant to share certain aspects of their experiences that they would have felt more comfortable sharing had I been a fellow veteran.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting this study required close monitoring of three ethical considerations: respect for servicemembers' experiences, participant anonymity, and care for participants' well-being as a result of recounting their experiences.

Being respectful and considerate of the fact that participants were sharing their stories and volunteering their time to participate in the study was important, because they were disclosing personal information about a private and potentially sensitive time in their lives. Additionally, while it cannot be guaranteed, maintaining participants' anonymity was paramount, and the steps explained in Chapter 3 were instituted to protect

their anonymity to the fullest extent possible. Still, due to the small number of participants interviewed, and the relatively small number of student veterans who matched the eligibility criteria, maintaining anonymity was a concern because participants could be identified by information they shared during the interviews (e.g., MOS, branch in the military, and academic major). This concern was discussed directly with the participants. While all of them were assured that their anonymity would be protected to the fullest extent possible, many of the participants also said they were comfortable if other people knew they had participated in the study.

Another ethical consideration was the potentially sensitive nature of asking participants to share their stories. While the focus of the study was on their transition experiences of re-enrolling in college, participants also shared some of their deployment experiences. During the interviews, I closely monitored the participants' levels of comfort and did not perceive any uneasiness with sharing their experiences. However, due to the potentially emotional nature of the interviews, I took steps to provide support resources to the participants following the first interview. These steps included providing participants with a list of resources and an informational handout with suggestions for student veterans returning to college. In addition, during the interviews, additional resources (e.g., Student Veterans of America, and community Veteran Centers) were discussed.

Implications for Practice

This study has a number of implications for community colleges, and suggests that student affairs professionals and faculty members can help to ease the transitions of student veterans who re-enroll. Many of the findings point to the importance of

interactions with others for participants and the need for professional support, especially at the beginning of the transition process.

Community college staff, faculty, and administrators must be proactive in their efforts to interact with, and support, student veterans on their campuses. These interactions should not simply be devolved to the VACO at the college, nor to only faculty and staff who have some kind of personal military connection. These efforts should also include interaction with administrators and conscientious creation and implementation of policies and programs concerning student veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). This attentiveness is especially important, considering that the participants' interactions and relationships with others seemed to be at the core of the support that they felt while re-enrolling in college. These interactions were also a significant factor in the ease or difficulty participants felt as they transitioned back into the college environment. For example, participants appreciated simple gestures recognizing their service, and signs (e.g., creating a veterans lounge) that institutions acknowledged and appreciated the student veterans on their campuses.

Community colleges (and other institutions) should also consider involving family members in programs and campus activities to help ease student veterans' transitions. The participants in this study consistently identified their family members as primary sources of support. For this reason, family involvement with the college may ease student veterans' transitions. In addition, the inclusion of family would be a proactive step that colleges could take to support student veterans in innovative ways. Military OneSource is a free program designed to help support families and National Guard and Reserve servicemembers before, during, and after a deployment (Military

OneSource, n. d.) and could be a valuable resource for student affairs professionals working with student veterans. For example, reunions with family members can be a stressful and challenging time for servicemembers and their families and providing resources and information to help student veterans *and* their family members negotiate those potential challenges is important (Military OneSource, n. d.).

Individually and as groups, student veterans have much to offer any campus community. Opportunities should be available for them to become involved in campus activities and leadership positions, as well as to serve as role models for other students. While this study's participants wanted to be recognized for their service, they also wanted people to know that they were regular people who did not expect to be treated differently. However, based on their life experiences, student veterans could also enrich their peers' education through sharing their stories and experiences. Additionally, their increased focus and motivation, along with their heightened maturity, might serve them well in roles as mentors to other students, or to help members of the campus community better understand what it means to be a student veteran.

It is worth noting that nearly all the participants in this study acknowledged that they, for the most part, felt comfortable sharing their stories, as long as the person who was listening was genuinely interested in what they had to share. However, this willingness to share may not be the case for *all* student veterans. Some student veterans may not feel comfortable talking to other people—especially non-military people—about their experiences, or may feel as though they are being asked to speak on behalf of all veterans. While this consideration should not discourage higher education professionals from asking student veterans about their experiences and needs, it is important to be

aware of the possibility that some student veterans may not feel comfortable accepting such invitations.

In addition to student veterans offering benefits for their institutions, institutions accordingly could offer benefits for student veterans. Participants often felt overextended in their social lives, especially at the beginning of their transitions of returning to college. At these beginnings, many participants felt like they had to be proactive and persistent during the same times they were already feeling overwhelmed. This phenomenon, at least to the extent this study can illuminate it, has a number of implications for community college leaders and administrators when they consider policy decisions related to support and resources for student veterans and ways in which they can be proactive in their efforts to support student veterans on their campuses.

Community colleges could offer campus-wide programs for all faculty, staff and students to increase the awareness of student veterans' needs as they return to college. Colleges might even consider asking student veterans to be part of the awareness raising process and encourage interactions of student veterans with students, faculty and staff. Student veterans could be asked to share their stories about their experiences returning to college and the civilian world, rather than focusing on their military experiences while deployed. For example, student veteran panel discussions could be organized to raise awareness of the student veterans at the college and to address stereotypes people might hold about the military and about student veterans.

Furthermore, colleges could discuss and implement ways in which to show their support and appreciation for student veterans. They could create opportunities for faculty, staff and students to meet and interact with student veterans, and recognize their

service in ways other than Veterans' Day activities. Expressing this appreciation does not have to entail establishing a veterans' lounge, for which some colleges may not have the resources. Rather, support can be shown in many different ways, such as by incorporating military issues into the curriculum, offering scholarships for student veterans, or offering to help student veterans establish a student veterans group. In addition, colleges could implement a survey (e.g., needs assessment) of student veterans to (a) let them know their interests are being considered, and (b) identify student veterans' needs on their individual campuses. The report initiated by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and other educational organizations is a good example of an assessment of the types of programs and services offered by colleges and universities (see Cook & Kim, 2009).

The findings of this study could be used to help decision makers assess current student veteran-focused policies, practices and initiatives, or to develop policies geared toward supporting the student veteran population. Colleges do not necessarily need to revamp their student veteran support services, but they could evaluate their current policies and practices to help gauge where additional resources are needed—including providing additional support for the VACOs at the colleges who themselves may feel overwhelmed with their current and potentially increasing, workloads.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research opportunities investigating the lived experiences of student veterans abound. This study focused on the transition experiences of student veterans who had been enrolled in college *prior to* their deployments, and then re-enrolled in college upon their return. However, there are many other groups of student veterans who should be

considered for study, including (a) student veterans who return to college but later withdraw, (b) student veterans who choose not to re-enroll upon their return, (c) graduate student veterans, and (d) student veterans who enroll in college for the first time after active duty.

The number of student veterans with disabilities who enroll or re-enroll in college is expected to increase, making it critical for the higher education community to have a more complete understanding of the issues and concerns these students will bring with them to college (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Student veterans who have been deployed to war zones may suffer from physical disabilities such as traumatic brain injury or loss of limbs, and/or mental health issues, like PTSD. The number of women student veterans enrolled in college is also expected to increase; yet, there have been few empirical studies investigating their experiences (Baechtoldt & De Sawal, 2009). Further research focusing on student veterans who are women is critical because of the additional gender-related stressors they might face as a result of returning from their deployment and enrolling in college (Baechtoldt & De Sawal, 2009).

This study fills a noticeable void in the research of contemporary student veterans in higher education: to date, only three other studies (Bauman, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press) have investigated the transition experiences of contemporary student veterans. Also, previous research has typically focused on public, four-year institutions. Studies such as this one could be conducted at other institutional types to investigate the particular nature of student veterans' transition experiences at various types of colleges and universities. Private institutions would be ideal sites for study, for example, because they are expected to see a rise in the number of student

veterans enrolling at their institutions because of changes in the new GI Bill benefits and the Yellow Ribbon program (Eckstein, 2009; Redden, 2009), which is designed to help veterans cover the costs of attending a private or out of state college or university which may not be met by the new GI Bill provisions. Also, for-profit institutions that offer predominately online courses may be an attractive alternative for some veterans (Eckstein, 2009) and should be studied. The participants in this study noted a relatively smooth administrative, instrumental transition to school, which makes it worthwhile to consider the possibility that community colleges may be better prepared than other institutional types to support student veterans as they return to college. Community colleges may be well-suited for student veterans because they are geared toward serving non-traditional students (Rosenbaum et al., 2006), but more research is needed to further investigate this possibility.

As was the case in previous research (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, in press) in this area, Schlossberg's theory of transition proved to be a useful theoretical framework for designing this study and conceptualizing the thematic findings. This study is further evidence of the usefulness of Schlossberg's theory to help understand college students' transitions (Evans et al., 1998).

Researcher Reflexivity

Throughout the course of the study I reflected on my dispositions and actions as the researcher as well as how my own experiences could have affected my role as the researcher and the study itself. To be sure, there were times when I found myself getting caught up in my thoughts and feelings toward the current war and the stereotypes I tend to possess about the military culture as one that is conservative and inflexible. At those

times I especially had to remind myself that it was the people—the student veterans—and their stories that were of most interest to me. In fact, the reason I first became interested in this issue was because I was always so impressed when, starting about six years ago, I asked veterans about their thoughts and concerns either before or after a deployment (and sometimes both). Overwhelmingly, the response I would hear went something like this: “I have a job to do, I am going to go over there and do it, and then I will come home.” I seldom heard complaints, regrets, or requests for special recognition, and that always impressed me because if it were me in that position I am not sure I would react the same way.

Working with the participants reminded me of the humility and resiliency I had seen in other veterans. Not once did I hear participants ask for special favors or sympathy. In fact, typically the opposite was true and participants tended to minimize their roles and service while deployed. One may think participants’ motivations for volunteering to participate in the study would be to gain attention and/or recognition, but again that was not the case. Instead participants consistently agreed to tell me their stories in hopes that it might in some way make the transition easier for future veterans.

I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to get to know each of the participants in this study. I believe I was able to form meaningful relationships with each of them, and I felt a level of connection that went beyond casual acquaintance or “researcher-participant” relationship. I think that I had a positive impact on participants by creating an opportunity for them to tell their stories while validating rather than discounting their experiences. This was an important part of the process, and, I think, critical to establishing strong relationships built on trust. More than once participants thanked me

for my interest in their experiences and for the amount of time I spent listening to their stories. I appreciated their thanks, but I also felt somewhat perplexed when considering my gratefulness for the sacrifices they had made during their deployments and transitions home. I think that being a genuine and caring listener helped make participants feel comfortable telling me their stories.

The bottom line is that, by the end of the study, the participants had much more of an impact on me than I had on them. It is difficult for me to express the appreciation and care I feel for each of the participants. I still wonder how each of them is doing, and whether they know how much they affected me during the study. I often expressed appreciation to each for being participants in the study, but I am not certain that they know how much I appreciate them as people and the effect they had on me as a person and a researcher. These six people allowed me into their lives and shared their stories with me to make the transitions of other veterans easier. They also trusted me to carry on this cause through my work, which is both a privilege and a heavy responsibility. I have done my best to fulfill their expectations, and I hope that this study is able to do that at some level.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: Student Veterans Returning to College: Understanding Their Transitions

Investigators: Corey B. Rumann; B. S. Psychology & M. S. Counselor Education

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to identify how military deployment to a war zone impacts a college student's collegiate experience once he/she returns from service. The study will focus on their transition re-enrolling in college and identify issues these students face when they return to college after being deployed. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a college student who has served in the military in a war zone and then returned to college.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for approximately nine months. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed. During the study you will be asked to meet with this principal investigator for an initial meeting and then three subsequent interviews of approximately one and a half to two hours for each interview. During these interviews you will be asked to answer various questions concerning your adjustment to college following your return from military deployment. You will also be asked to clarify any points that are unclear and to identify any discrepancies you see in the principal investigator's analysis of the data.

With your permission the interviews will be audio taped. The tapes will be erased by 12/31/09. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer or that makes you feel uncomfortable.

RISKS

While participating in this study you may experience the following risks: emotional discomfort discussing your war experience and your thoughts and feelings following your return.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there may be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by assisting institutions of higher education in identifying how they can better serve college students who have been deployed and then come to college or return to college following their deployment.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. Additionally, the principal investigator's major professor will have access to your records. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: This principal investigator and his major professor are the only people who will have access to the data for this study. If that data is not with me personally it will be secured in a locked area. Audiotapes from this study will be erased by 12/31/09. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact:

Corey Rumann, MS (Principal Investigator)
Department of Leadership and Policy Studies
N232 Lagomarcino Hall
(307) 272-3488, (515) 294-9550, or crumann@iastate.edu

Dr. Florence Hamrick (Supervising Faculty)
 Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
 N 239 Lagomarcino Hall
 (515) 294-9628

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office of Research Assurances, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

 (Participant's Signature)

 (Date)

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

 (Signature of Person Obtaining
 Informed Consent)

 (Date)

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- How long have you served or did you serve in the military?
- What motivated you to join the military?
- How long were you deployed to a war zone? Where?
- How long had you been in college before your mobilization? What was going on in your life before being deployed? What support structures did you have in place prior to being deployed (e.g. family support)?
- How long have you been back from your deployment, and how long have you been back in college?
- What made you decide to re-enroll in college after you returned?
- Please describe what the transition was like for you coming back to college after your military service in a war zone (i.e. academically, socially, relationships).
- What roles did various college offices play during your transition back to college life? What resources were available to you? On-campus or off-campus.
- How have you dealt with the transition of returning to college? What has the transition been like for you? What have been sources of support (e. g. family support)?
- Is your college experience different now than it was before your deployment? If so, in what ways? Are you different? If so, in what ways? How have you changed?
- Do you believe you are a different kind of student now than you were before being deployed? If so, in what ways?
- How has being in the military affected your education?
- What advice would you give someone who is re-enrolling in college or entering college following military service in a war zone?