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From international deployments to an Iowa community college: experiences of veterans who have made the transition

Seth David Gilbert
Iowa State University

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From international deployments to an Iowa community college:

Experiences of veterans who have made the transition

by

Seth David Gilbert

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:
Larry H. Ebbers, Major Professor
Sharon Drake
Carol Heaverlo
Marisa Rivera
Carl Smith

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2015

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to:

Leila Louise Gilbert—mother and Platonic version of herself. Thank you for your unconditional love and uninterrupted patience. Our interstitial dialogue has sustained me when nothing else could have.

David Hugh Gilbert—father and original thinker. Thank you for so eloquently and understandably articulating the efficacy of an integrated life. I cherish your memory with constancy.

George Thomas Nasers—championship caliber dad and unimpeachable ethical ballast. Thank you for providing the artfully nuanced perspective that only you could have. Your zest for, and success at, living honorably constantly re-educates me with respect to the timeless value of ceaselessly recalibrating an invigorating moral compass.

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All third density warrior-poets, however situated historically, who have ascended to the understanding that our essence, ultimately, unites us.
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Each of you, in your own very special way, has been there for me when I have needed you the most. I am unable to satisfactorily articulate the depth of my appreciation for your individual and collective patience, purposefulness, and professionalism. My unequivocal, optimistic expectation is that I will have the privilege to do unto others as each of you have done unto me.

Six extraordinary postdeployment veterans of the armed forces of the United States of America have now voluntarily served our nation selflessly—on at least two occasions. Initially, each raised his or her right hand and promised to protect the rest of us, perhaps at great—or even ultimate—personal peril. Subsequently, each of the six also invested the time, energy, and patience necessary to explain to me not only how they went about accomplishing that task, but also how they each then went on to successfully transition to life as a student at a community college in Iowa. No expression of gratitude could adequately express how thankful I am that each of the six performed this “additional duty” as graciously as they did.

If there has ever been a time when I have hoped to accurately convey a message . . . it is now.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of veterans who have made the transition from international deployments to an Iowa community college. The essence of these experiences was solicited by asking the question: How do veterans who have made the transition from international deployments to an Iowa community college describe their experiences? Constructionism provided the epistemological foundation for this study. An interpretivist perspective was used to analyze data collected via face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and document evaluation. Van Gennep’s liminality theory provided a theoretical lens through which to interpret that analysis. This interpretation revealed six themes, namely: (a) from civilian to warfighter—calibration and detachment, (b) from civilian to warfighter—ambiguity and metamorphoses, (c) from civilian to warfighter—consummation and reflection, (d) from warfighter to student—calibration and detachment, (e) from warfighter to student—ambiguity and metamorphoses, and (f) from warfighter to student—consummation and reflection. Study findings revealed that each participant had navigated simultaneous liminal stages prior to, during, and after his or her transition from an international deployment to an Iowa community college. Study conclusions include policy and practice implications for a broad spectrum of Iowa community college stakeholders. Recommendations for future research include conducting additional investigations of under-researched subsets of transitioning veteran cohorts.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background

The U.S. government has relied upon a wide variety of stakeholders to assist postdeployment veterans with their collective transition from international deployments to college campuses for over half a century (Abrams, 1989). As proxies, representatives from each branch of the U.S. military, institutions of higher learning, and lending organizations have all successfully co-lobbied for decades in favor of legislation designed to facilitate the transitions of postdeployment veterans from conflict to the classroom (Stanley, 2003). As a consequence, since the end of World War II, postdeployment veterans have taken advantage of the availability of a sequence of well intentioned and publically popular benefit programs designed to compensate them, financially, for their military service (Clark, 1998).

Each of these programs had as its genesis a legislative act, including, in the order in which each was instituted, the: Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (original “GI Bill”; (Olson, 1973), Veteran’s Readjustment Act (‘Korea GI Bill’; Olson, 1974), the Veterans’ Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966 (‘Vietnam GI Bill’; Olson, 1974), 1985 Montgomery GI Bill (‘MGIB’; Howell, 2012), and “Post 9/11 GI Bill” (Howell, 2012).

In large measure, these benefit programs shared three features. First, each was promulgated based upon findings, conclusions, and recommendations that resulted from study and analysis of predominantly quantitatively styled research conducted upon large cohorts of postdeployment veterans who returned home to attend college in the United States between 1940 and 1950 (Rumann, 2010). Second, each program was designed primarily to do little to help postdeployment veterans other than pay for college (Bound & Turner, 2002).
Third, none of these programs took into account the particular, contemporary spectrum of challenges faced by postdeployment veterans who wish to attend one of the nation’s many community colleges (Wheeler, 2012). This quantitative focus upon such a narrow aspect of the lives of postdeployment veterans, perhaps appropriate decades ago, is no longer adequate and must be supplemented if not supplanted by rigorous, qualitatively oriented studies as soon as possible for the following reasons.

The number of postdeployment veterans who are choosing to enroll in American colleges and universities continues to increase rapidly every year (Sander, 2012). Government data reveal that approximately 400,000 veterans were considered “education program beneficiaries” in 2000, whereas close to 950,000 veterans met the same criteria in 2012 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2014, Table 2), the most recent year for which such data has been published. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs also reported that, as of March 20, 2013, “the VA has paid more than $23.6 billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to more than 860,000 veterans, service members and dependents since mid-2009 . . . [and that] over the next five years, the student veteran demographic will nearly double” (Reynolds, 2013, para. 5, 7). Furthermore, Michael Dakduk, a well-informed private citizen and Marine Corps veteran who completed Iraq and Afghanistan tours, earned a B.A. in public policy and administration from the University of Nevada–Las Vegas, founded the Student Veterans of America (SVA), and now serves as its executive director has speculated that during the next half decade, “around one million troops will be transitioning into civilian life . . . with the help of the Post-9/11 GI Bill
... [and that, axiomatically] the number of student veterans on college campuses will surely increase” (Reynolds, 2013, para. 1, 8).

In a similar fashion, the number of postdeployment veterans who are choosing to begin pursuing a degree at one of Iowa’s 15 community colleges each academic term continues to grow rapidly as well, although tracking these veterans’ decisions to do so is difficult because no authoritative accounting of their activities is routinely published. As recently as the spring of 2015, Iowa’s postdeployment veterans—whose counterparts in other states are routinely categorized in reference materials as comprising a “student demographic,” or even a “subpopulation”—had still not been recognized by Iowa officials who would otherwise have had the authority to do so between the covers of their report entitled “The Annual Condition of Iowa’s Community Colleges 2014: Tables” (T. Beasley, personal communication, February 4, 2015).

Individual Iowa community colleges do, however, report this information to the Iowa Department of Education, which makes it available upon request. Unpublished Iowa Department of Education program reports reflect that the national trend described above is occurring simultaneously in Iowa—most notably at Kirkwood Community College and Des Moines Area Community College—and also indicate that the total number of beneficiaries receiving veterans benefits increased from 3,717 individuals in fiscal year 2000 to 20,809 individuals in fiscal year 2013 (T. Beasley, personal communication, February 4, 2015). This trend is projected to continue, if not accelerate, due to the coincidentally high value of community college programs and services for postdeployment veterans (Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011) and the rapidly increasing number of postdeployment veterans who are
returning from overseas conflicts eager to commence or continue the pursuit of a college

degree.

Across the nation, well-intentioned individuals along with private and public
organizations have taken notice of this development and have created or refined a wide
variety of programs that have assisted postdeployment veterans with their transitions to
academic environments. Although Michael Dakduk’s name is perhaps the most widely
recognized, as it is considered synonymous with the over 650 chapters of the SVA, other
individuals, such as Jason Thigpen, have made significant personal contributions to
successful postdeployment veteran transitions as well.

Thigpen, who founded and now presides over the Student Veterans Advocacy Group,
accurately assessed the burgeoning nationwide success of much broader attempts to assist the
widest variety of postdeployment veterans possible when he suggested that “veterans are
what diversity represents. Vets are African-American, Caucasian, Hispanic, and Asian; they
are men and women, and members are LGBT. So, if we do the right thing for student vets,
we’re doing the right thing for diversity” (Reynolds, 2013, para. 15). Both mainstream and
marginalized postdeployment veterans have been receiving increasing amounts of attention
and assistance from a variety of benefactors.

This is possible because successful grassroots movements such as those begun by
Dakduk and Thigpen have provided a strong foundation upon which additional private and
public organizations have based their efforts to assist postdeployment veterans with their
transitions to lives focused upon achievement in the classroom. For example, as of 2013, the
Pat Tillman Foundation, which is an
advocacy organization working for the benefit of the veteran community . . . named for the NFL player who lost his life on duty in the U.S. Army in Afghanistan . . . has awarded 230 scholarships to help with tuition, housing, and books, totaling $3.2 million, to 71 institutions in 34 states. (Reynolds, 2013, para. 57)

Private and public 4-year colleges and universities, along with technical and community colleges, also continue to make improvements to the manner in which postdeployment veterans are welcomed onto campuses and convinced to stay. Although many of these efforts began as *ad hoc* solutions to a growing need, the majority that remain or are commencing have morphed into myriad combinations of resources and services resulting in what have become known as “military friendly campuses” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Although each military-friendly campus is unique, best practices that they tend to share include: charging veterans equitable tuition, creating a physical space dedicated for use by veterans, offering veteran-focused orientation programs, sponsoring a student veterans organization of some type, and employing individuals dedicated to meeting the particular academic, psychological, social, and physical needs of postdeployment veterans (Rumann et al., 2011). A representative sample of these types of widely recognized successful efforts or programs found at military friendly campuses around the United States includes the:

- National Yellow Ribbon Program (Waldman, 2013),
- Beyond the Yellow Ribbon and All The Way Home programs in Minnesota (Hannan, 2010, para. 1, 2),
- Ivy Tech Community College Mission Graduation program (Whikehart, 2010),
- Western Michigan University System of Care (Moon & Schma, 2011),
• University of Arizona Veteran’s Center (Francis & Kraus, 2012),
• Auburn University chapter of the Student Veterans Association (Reynolds, 2013), and
• Operation College Promise (Sander, 2012).

Nationwide, efforts to assist postdeployment veterans’ transition to the college campus of their choice have increased exponentially over the course of the last decade in terms of quantity, and they continue to be regularly improved with respect to quality (Cook & Kim, 2009). Thankfully, these improvements include addressing of the needs of both female (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Giffey, 2012) and disabled postdeployment veterans (DiRamio & Spires, 2009), who are unambiguously appearing in greater numbers on campuses around the country and finally receiving at least a portion of the attention and respect they have earned.

However, successful existing programs are typically the result of a series of prescient decisions, improved over a protracted period of time via trial and error, and assessed incrementally by stakeholders with ties to schools that were involved in initial attempts to accommodate the needs of the first wave of post-9/11 returning postdeployment veterans (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). In the aggregate, these institutions have had a lot of practice accommodating the educational needs of postdeployment veterans. Notwithstanding, as successful as some of the efforts described above may have been, they are still relatively limited in scope and often are restricted to large schools with significant resources. Furthermore, even when the best practices that distinguish these institutions’ efforts have filtered into the day-to-day operations of one or more of Iowa’s community
colleges, the rationale for their existence and parameters has not been explicitly linked to qualitative research focused upon the particular needs of postdeployment veterans at Iowa’s community colleges.

Statement of the Problem

The inception, development, adoption, and execution of the policies, practices, and research agendas at Iowa’s community colleges that will be necessary to meet the predictable increase in demand for both programming and services that transitioning postdeployment veterans are expected to place upon these institutions is imperiled due to a lack of accessible, utilizable, and relevant naturalistic descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) chronicling the experiences of their predecessors. This preventable circumstance will continue to frustrate postdeployment veterans as well as their advocates and associates until the essence of their experiences is understood well enough to consistently predict, circumvent, and/or resolve the challenges associated with transitions that are unique to this underserved student subpopulation at Iowa’s community colleges.

Unfortunately, the research that is available to potentially inform this improvement process is severely limited (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann, 2010). Only a handful of scholarly, qualitative studies have examined specific, individual, postdeployment veteran transitions, and each of these studies either reported on the experiences of postdeployment veterans at large, land grant universities (Bauman, 2009a, 2009b; Livingston, 2009; Livingston et al., 2011; Livingston, Havice, Scott, & Cawthon, 2012; Rumann, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2007, 2009; Rumann et al., 2011), contextualized the research using a theoretical framework based upon Schlossberg’s (1984) generic model for adult transitions
(Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Wheeler, 2012), or was conducted by one or more individuals who had never served on active duty in the military (Persky, 2010; Persky & Oliver, 2010). Each of these three distinguishing features potentially undermines the utility of the literature presently available to those interested in applying it at a community college in Iowa.

Past research in this area is quite rigorous, but it would be even more useful if it were supplemented as described below. The reason for this has nothing to do with researcher intent or ability, both of which are universally high with respect to scholarly efforts to study and write about this topic to date. Rather, these studies are less relevant than they would otherwise be for Iowa community college decision makers either because of the research site that was selected, the theoretical framework that was invoked to situate the study, or the fact that not one of the researchers involved in authoring these studies had ever personally served on active duty in the military.

Research on postdeployment veterans who attend land grant universities cannot provide an accurate description of the experiences the same postdeployment veterans would have had at an Iowa community college, because each land grant university has a Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) chapter (Neiberg, 2000), whereas none of the Iowa community colleges do. This is relevant because the existence of an ROTC chapter on a college campus provides a military presence presumably capable of providing all manners of necessary guidance and support to former, active, reserve, inactive, and potential service members, whether they are visiting campus for the day or remaining long enough to complete a degree.
Studies based upon Schlossberg’s (1984) 4S (self, situation, strategies, & support) theory of adult transition are of substantial historical and canonical value. In essence, they provide a solid foundation upon which to build and with which to contrast and distinguish future studies regarding postdeployment veterans who elect to transition to life as a student. Indeed, the vast majority of researchers who have investigated this student subpopulation have used the 4S theory, which describes individuals transitioning in, through, and out of (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989) all manners of situations to circumscribe their methodologies, questions, findings, and conclusions regarding the use of these four well-known coping mechanisms by transitioning postdeployment veterans.

As applied to date, Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory has consistently been used to describe how individuals move in a linear fashion through one transition at a time—alone. However, this theory has not been used in a fashion that explicitly acknowledges that individuals are multidimensional beings moving in myriad directions through multiple transitions simultaneously, usually as part of one or more groups. Nor has it been used to analyze transitions navigated by groups, countries, or entire cultures, each of which has been influenced by postdeployment veteran transitions back to American colleges and universities. This is relevant because decision makers ought to have at their disposal the most comprehensive information possible. Fortunately, Arnold Van Gennep’s (1960) liminality theory, first put forth in 1909 and subsequently embellished by Victor Turner (1969), can be used to account for such complexity and is described in the literature review set out in chapter 2.
Although research situated via reference to human capital theory (Persky, 2010) is easily distinguished from that invoking Schlossberg’s (1984) work, Persky, like all the other scholars whose work is discussed in this study, never served on active duty in the military herself. As a consequence, not one of the findings, conclusions, or recommendations referenced in this study has been conducted by an individual who has worn the uniform on active duty and been subjected to the joys, risks, and rewards associated with doing so. For this reason, not one of the studies introduced above, and described in greater detail in chapter 2, can demonstrate an equal or greater sensitivity to the nuances of life in uniform than a study that was designed, conducted, and reported by a fellow, active duty veteran who would, presumably, recognize service-centric nuances and subtleties in participant responses to interview questions and further investigate each according to the precepts associated with high caliber, trustworthy qualitative analysis (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002).

The shortcomings in the current literature, and the suboptimized decision making that might result from relying upon it, may be ameliorated. However, a particular type of research would be required to accomplish this. Specifically, studies focused on postdeployment veterans must be conducted in a qualitative manner; informed by a theoretical framework other than or in addition to Schlossberg’s (1984) adult transition model, such as by Van Gennep’s (1960) liminality theory; designed with the express intent of discovering the essence of what life is like for postdeployment veterans who are transitioning to an Iowa community college in particular; and authored by an investigator who has served
on active duty in the United States armed forces. This study was designed with these four suggestions in mind.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of veterans who have made the transition from international deployments to an Iowa community college.

**Research Question**

The following research question guided the study: How do veterans who have made the transition from international deployments to an Iowa community college describe their experiences?

**Significance of the Study**

This study generated findings, conclusions, and suggestions that could be significant insofar as they might inform both individuals and institutions about previously unarticulated aspects of postdeployment veteran transitions to college campuses in general and Iowa community colleges in particular. Potential individual beneficiaries may be organized into three groups. The first includes those who are contemplating making a commitment to living a life in uniform, such as high school or college students, unemployed adults, or members of the workforce who are contemplating joining the military, along with these individuals’ family members and care and service providers such as coaches, mentors, and counselors. The second group includes individuals who are already serving in the U.S. military. The final group includes postdeployment veterans themselves.
The first group comprises individuals who could benefit tremendously from the availability of up-to-date, authentic, first-person descriptions of what others have experienced when transitioning from international deployments to one of Iowa’s community colleges. Potential recruits who familiarize themselves with this study would be much more informed about the range and potential severity of issues they might eventually confront then they would have otherwise been, including dealing with relational, educational, emotional, financial, and psychosociological challenges. As a result, potential recruits who read this study’s report would be much better informed and positioned to make decisions about whether or not they wish to join the military and why, based at least in part upon having an enhanced understanding of the experiences that others have had after obligating themselves to uniformed service. This type of nuanced understanding would be particularly relevant for individuals who are contemplating one or more courses of action based upon educational benefit packages that recruiters are describing to them.

The second group is comprised of individuals that are already members of the U.S. armed forces, who, upon familiarizing themselves with the content of this study, would acquire an additional objective measure with which to benchmark their own experiences. This knowledge could be put to use in the process of decision making regarding educational endeavors. Members of this group might, for example, decide to pursue a certificate program or degree they otherwise might not have or may decide to modify or supplement their present thinking and/or behavior, as either or both relate to an educational goal they are already pursuing that would render their attainment of it either more likely or expedient.
The third group, consisting of postdeployment veterans, will continue to comprise an increasing percentage of students enrolled at Iowa’s community colleges for the foreseeable future. Each member of this student cohort will have potential interests or concerns that are both predictable and readily distinguishable from other students, including confronting and dealing with: postdeployment psychological, sociological, and/or physical injuries; the bureaucratic structure of the military community/establishment; the warrior ethos; civilian responses to misapprehended behaviors, activities, mannerisms, and colloquialisms; and the balancing of demands made by colleagues in the workplace and by classmates and family members. Information gleaned from this study could potentially assist these veterans on an individual or group basis in ways that are admittedly impossible to predict with unerring accuracy but which might include, for example, identifying particular campuses to visit, types of courses or programs in which to enroll, support groups to seek out, or veterans’ programs for which volunteer.

In addition to the three types of individuals described above, this study may also provide worthwhile information to organizations. Such potential institutional beneficiaries of this study include the various branches of the U.S. military as well as community colleges themselves.

Each branch of the military has a vested interest in understanding the motivations, needs, and expectations of a significant spectrum of individuals, ranging from potential recruits and their family member and advocates to service members who have discontinued military service either without or after retiring. Decision makers within the armed forces establishment would be in a better position to proactively address the needs and expectations
of an increasingly widening range of potential warfighters if they were to familiarize themselves with the findings, conclusions, and recommendations that appear at the end of this study’s report. The military, of course, is not the only type of complex organization that could potentially benefit from this study. Iowa community college policies, practices, and research agendas may be favorably influenced by this study as well.

Policies at Iowa’s community colleges could be rationally changed or modified in light of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations generated by this study, because decision makers at these schools will have at their disposal additional up-to-date information describing the needs and desires of the new and rapidly growing student demographic or subpopulation comprised of postdeployment veterans. The accounts shared by this study’s currently underserved participants include direct, specific references to institutional policies that do work—as well as those that do not. Policymakers could not ask for higher caliber feedback regarding the written rules and regulations they rely upon to guide thinking and behavior at their respective institutions.

Practices at Iowa’s community colleges will need to change to keep up with changing policies at Iowa’s community colleges as they relate to postdeployment veterans, regardless of the institutional impetus for implementing them. Across the state, postdeployment veterans in the aggregate are understood to have paid a substantial price in time, talent, and treasure (both mind and body) on behalf of taxpayers and fellow students and, for this reason, make a predictably appreciated, even if not yet well understood, student demographic. Given enrollment trends, Iowa’s community college are well positioned to continue to meet the needs of postdeployment veterans, and the final chapter of this dissertation is replete with
suggestions aimed at improving the campus-going experience of this unique subset of students.

Finally, research agendas at Iowa’s community colleges also may be influenced by this study. At this point, still very little has been written about postdeployment veterans in general and next to nothing about those attending a community college in Iowa. This group of students is rapidly growing and is projected to increase in size and draw substantially more research-related attention in the future. Other researchers will need to account for this study for their own research to be complete and may elect to draw more or less substantially upon the findings, conclusions, and recommendations appearing in this study in order to distinguish future studies that focus on similarly situated but distinguishable groups of postdeployment veterans. Although the particulars are impossible to predict with complete certainty, it is reasonable to conclude that this study could have a significant impact upon each of the components of community college operations described above.

**Research Design of the Study**

This study was based upon a constructivist epistemology, which posits that there “is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it” and that “truth, or meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). In addition, an interpretivist theoretical framework, which is “overwhelmingly oriented towards an uncritical exploration of cultural meaning” (Crotty, 1998, p. 60), was utilized to encourage individual postdeployment veteran voices to emerge in an unencumbered, though mediated, fashion. Finally, a phenomenological approach, which encouraged individual student veterans to be identified, “bracketed, analyzed, and compared” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7)
was utilized based upon the assumption that there is an “essential, invariant structure (or essence)” (Creswell, 2013) to the shared experiences of postdeployment veterans that is identifiable and that may appropriately order researcher findings and conclusions. Liminality theory, as originally advanced by Van Gennep (1960) and developed by Turner (1969), was used to provide a theoretical lens through which to view that phenomenological approach when answering the question: How do postdeployment veterans who have made the transition to community college describe their experiences?

**Definitions of Key Words and Military Acronyms**

*ACC*: Awesome Community College (pseudonym for study research site).

*AIT*: Advanced individual training.

*Branch*: distinguishable component of the U.S. military, including the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard.

*The Crucible*: the final training a recruit faces; it serves as the metamorphosis of a recruit into a Marine (Schading, 2007, p. 103).

*Deployment*: leaving the normally assigned duty area, usually as a unit, to serve temporarily in another area (Schading, 2007, p. 226).

*Howitzer*: a cannon which combines characteristics of guns and mortars. It delivers projectiles with medium velocities, using medium-to-high trajectories (Schading, 2007, p. 320).

*Humvee*: high-mobility-multipurpose wheeled vehicle (HMMVW); successor to the jeep and used heavily in the Gulf Wars (Schading, 2007, p. 307).

*IED*: improvised explosive device.
**JAG Corps:** Judge Advocate General Corps.

**MEPS:** military entrance processing station.

**Military occupational specialty (MOS):** Military occupation or job such as scout, cook, driver, medic, paralegal, etc.

**Noncommissioned officer:** a member of the second level of the command structure—often called NCOs—who provides direct tactical leadership in combat units, technical skills, and direction in support commands (Schading, 2007, p. 6).

**Postdeployment veteran:** For purposes of this study, a veteran is defined as “postdeployment” if, on a prior occasion, he or she left his or her normally assigned duty area to serve temporarily in another area.

**PTSD:** Post-traumatic stress disorder.

**PX:** Post exchange.

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

(Creswell, 2009, p. 4)
Quantitative research: A means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. The variables, in turn, can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures. . . those who engage in this form of inquiry have assumptions about testing theories deductively, building in protection against bias, controlling for alternative explanations, and being able to generalize and replicate the findings. (Creswell, 2009, p. 4)

SVA: Student Veterans Association

TBI: Traumatic brain injury

VACO: Veterans Affairs Certifying Official

Warfighter: a contemporary term used to describe a member of the U.S. armed forces regardless of service branch or MOS.

Summary

This study provides a description of the experiences veterans who have transitioned from international deployments to an Iowa community college. For purposes of this study, a veteran is defined as postdeployment if, on a prior occasion, “he or she left his or her normally assigned duty area to serve temporarily in another area” (Schading, 2007, p. 226).

Chapter 1 introduces this study. A brief background and a statement of the problem are provided to contextualize the purpose of the study, the research question upon which it is focused, and the theoretical framework that was applied to it. This chapter also includes a robust description of the individuals and groups for whom it might prove to be of
significance and an overview of the research design that was employed. An alphabetized list containing definitions of key words and military acronyms concludes the chapter.

Chapter 2 comprises a three-part literature review. Initially, scholarly writings about postdeployment veteran transition experiences are synthesized and summarized. The review then provides a brief summary of the literature that explains why community colleges are appropriate institutions at which to study postdeployment veteran transition experiences. Finally, the review concludes with a description of why and how liminality theory was used as a theoretical lens to help situate the study.

Chapter 3 provides an explanation the design of this study. This discussion includes an analysis of the epistemology, theoretical perspective, theoretical lens, methodology, and methods used, including those that facilitated data collection and data analysis. The concluding portion of this chapter contains a list of this study’s delimitations.

Chapter 4 catalogs this study’s findings. It comprises a collection of participant profiles, a summary of study participants, an explanation of how liminality theory informed this study’s theme construction, and a detailed description of the six themes that were revealed after examining the transition experience of each participant.

Chapter 5 is the final chapter. It comprises of a series of conclusions, an explanation of limitations, a review of ethical considerations, an analysis of implications for policy and practice, recommendations for future research, and a reflexivity statement.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review consists of three parts. The first third of this review provides a summary of scholarly writings that describe the experiences of postdeployment veterans who have made the transition from combat and/or combat support missions to day-to-day lives as students at American colleges and universities. The purpose of this section of the review is to demonstrate that there is still a paucity of literature regarding postdeployment veteran transitions to Iowa community colleges and that a study of this student subpopulation is therefore warranted. The middle third of this review comprises a brief synthesis of the literature that explains why community colleges in particular are attractive to postdeployment veterans as well as why these institutions are appropriate research sites at which to study individual postdeployment veteran transitions from combat and/or combat support missions to the classroom. The final third of this review provides a description of liminality theory as popularized by Van Gennep (1960) and further refined by Turner (1969). The purpose of the final section of the review is to introduce, and then demonstrate through the use of an example, how this theory provided an appropriate framework through which to solicit as well as interpret the themes and findings of this study.

Scholarly Writings

Postdeployment veterans have been making the transition from battlefields and war zone deployments to civil American society since the birth of the nation (Abrams, 1989). During this time, despite the sometimes severe criticism of its efforts to do so (Eckstein, 2009), the U.S. government has relied upon evolving combinations of stakeholders to collaborate in the research, design, administration, and evaluation of programs that
compensate postdeployment veterans financially for their military service. As interested and invested parties, representatives from each branch of the U.S. military, the entire spectrum of institutions of higher learning, and lending organizations large and small alike, have successfully co-lobbied for decades in favor of programs designed to facilitate postdeployment veteran transitions from conflict to convivial society (Stanley, 2003). As a consequence, each generation of postdeployment veterans has had the opportunity to take advantage of the availability of a sequence of well intentioned, if not always well received or thoroughly understood, benefit programs (Greenberg, 1997).

One of the most significant common denominators of these programs is that each has had a legislative act as its genesis as well as its funding source, including the:

• 1818 Revolutionary War Pension Act, which legislated that veterans receive pensions for their service (Resch, 1988);
• Homestead Act of 1862, which made land available to veterans via favorable residency requirements (Resch, 1988);
• Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862, which mandated that every educational institution that was to be financed under the act through income from the sale of federal land(s) must offer military training as part of its curriculum (Abrams, 1989);
• 1916 National Defense Act, which created the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC; Neiberg, 2000; Sewell & Stuit, 1954);
• Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly referred to as the original GI Bill (Olson, 1973);
• Veterans’ Readjustment Act, frequently referred to as the Korean GI Bill (Olson, 1974);

• Veterans’ Readjustment Act of 1966, often referred to the Vietnam GI Bill (Olson, 1974);

• 1985 Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB), which extended postsecondary educational benefits to National Guard soldiers and reservists (Howell, 2012); and

• Post 9/11 GI Bill, which was authorized on August 1, 2009, offered enhanced educational benefit options to veterans (Howell, 2009), and remained in effect as of the conclusion of the data analysis phase of this study.

Each of these legislative acts was promulgated during or immediately after one of six distinguishable conflict eras. Toward the end of or shortly after each of these eras, postdeployment veterans applied for and received financial support to help facilitate their transition to peacetime pursuits. As a consequence, the body of literature focused on describing postdeployment veteran transitions reflects scholarly interest in service members from each of six eras that, in aggregate, has resulted in studies concerning two groups of postdeployment veterans: one comprising postdeployment veterans who transitioned from hostilities that have long since ceased and the other consisting of postdeployment veterans who continue to transition from recent deployments in support of military campaigns that were either recently completed or ongoing as of the end of the data collection phase of this study.

The first group of studies describes the experiences of postdeployment veterans who transitioned from combat or combat support roles to peacetime endeavors prior to World War
I; after World War I as well as after World War II; or after serving in Korea, Vietnam or one of the first wave of conflicts in the Middle East, beginning with Operation Desert Storm. The second group of studies focuses on postdeployment veterans who either did or who continue to transition back to civilian life after serving in combat or combat support roles in one or more military operations that began subsequent to September 11, 2001, including Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Noble Eagle. Researchers writing about postdeployment veteran transition experiences peculiar to one of the six distinguishable eras listed above reflect a collective interest that began with pre World War I era post deployment veteran transitions and has continued to evolve with the passage of time.

**Pre World War I Era Postdeployment Veteran Transitions**

Pre World War I era postdeployment veteran transitions include the experiences of service members ranging from those who had served in the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War (Resch, 1999) to those who served in either the Union Army or Confederate Army during the American Civil War (Dean, 2001). Postdeployment veteran transitions during this period all occurred prior to the creation of a federalized ROTC (Abrams, 1989) or National Guard (Newland, 1989) structure, the eventual influence of conscription (Levi, 1969), or a once culture-wide but presently subsiding interest among service-eligible males to be numbered among America’s citizen-soldiers (Mettler, 2005; Newland, 1989). As a result, only a negligible number of postdeployment veterans during this era chose to transition to American colleges and universities, although the opportunity to do so was available (Hacker, 1993).
Instead, as a cohort, this group of postdeployment veterans decided to take advantage of the financial benefits for which their military service had rendered them eligible under the provisions of the 1818 Revolutionary War Pension Act or the Homestead Act of 1862. Each of these pieces of legislation recognized the then rapidly solidifying public opinion that affirmed the shared belief that postdeployment veterans ought to be rewarded for the sacrifices they were assumed to have made on behalf of the rapidly growing nation. As a consequence, this group of postdeployment veterans enjoyed enhanced access to generous land grants and opportunities to make a living as a federal employee, previously unavailable pensions, and the receipt of medical care provided it was necessary to ameliorate a service-related disability (Dean, 2001). Such generous benefits assisted many postdeployment veterans, but this trend did not continue indefinitely. The next generation of postdeployment veterans, which comprised World War I era service members, shared a very different experience than that of their predecessors. These experiences compelled many World War I era postdeployment veterans to contemplate whether the government they confronted when they returned home from war in the European theatre might not pose a greater threat to their collective future than that of the combatants over which they had recently triumphed.

**World War I Era Postdeployment Veteran Transitions**

Whereas postdeployment veteran transitions from the pre World War I era drew little public attention, those that occurred next completely fixated the citizenry and served to permanently alter the course of governmental veteran benefit program creation and administration (Greenberg, 1997). Ironically, although the United States was able to very efficiently mobilize 4.3 million service members to successfully fight in World War I
(Schading, 2007), government policies, decision-making, and exceedingly hostile treatment of postdeployment veterans created great confusion and resentment relatively soon after this fighting force returned from Europe.

In the Depression-wrought summer of 1932, approximately 15,000 postdeployment veterans were protesting what they believed to be the unreasonable unwillingness of the federal government to allow them to redeem “bonus certificates” prematurely when they were attacked next to the nation’s capitol complex by groups of soldiers commanded by General MacArthur and Majors Eisenhower and Patton (Greenberg, 1997). Protesting postdeployment veterans, approximately 25% of whom were disabled, were harassed, shot at, and forcibly evicted from makeshift shelters they had erected along with their families in shantytowns that, once abandoned, were burned to the ground (Greenberg, 1997). The public was shocked and outraged when these three erstwhile respected officers carried out orders that resulted in the verifiable deaths of at least two postdeployment veterans. Many Americans believed that the manner in which this catastrophe unfolded betrayed President Hoover’s significant lack of appreciation of, and respect for, former service members and demanded that more be done to aid them (Humes, 2006).

Notwithstanding, the tragedy did provide adequate enough warning of public sentiment and expectations to subsequent presidents and legislators that they took action that resulted in the creation of a continuous series of benefit programs, each of which would be in place to welcome home subsequent generations of postdeployment veterans when they transitioned back to the United States from combat missions overseas. As a result of these new programs—the first of which became known as the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of
1944—World War II era postdeployment veteran transitions began to galvanize the rapidly solidifying relationship between the U.S. military and America’s institutions of higher learning (Abrams, 1989; La Barre, 1985; MacLean, 2005; Neiberg, 2000).

**World War II Era Postdeployment Veteran Transitions**

World War II era postdeployment veteran transition experiences were influenced by a modest but expanding collection of practice-oriented research (Cronbach, 1944; Hilliard, 1943; Klein, 1945). Scholars during this period published studies with the express purpose of assisting a wide variety of readers/stakeholders prepare to integrate a potentially overwhelming number of postdeployment veterans onto college campuses (Ritchie, 1945). This approach was taken to prepare for an entire cohort of returning postdeployment veterans, including those who had volunteered for their recent duties as well as those who had been drafted into service (Bound & Turner, 2002; Mettler, 2005).

Higher education administrators, who at the time were responsible for determining the optimum manner in which to prepare to accommodate the needs and desires of an unprecedented number of enrolling postdeployment veterans, faced a ubiquitous challenge. These school leaders were concerned that a projected massive influx of returning postdeployment veterans might overwhelm their ability to orchestrate the provision of high quality educational programs and services (Allen, 1946; Flynt, 1945; McDonagh, 1947; Shaw, 1947). Many of these decision makers had also lived through the Great Depression and had witnessed the social chaos that ensued when returning World War I postdeployment veterans were maligned and mistreated by the Hoover administration roughly two decades before. They believed that successfully integrating returning service members into American
society in general, via their campus experiences in particular, was a dual-pronged challenge that could be better surmounted if they were as informed as possible about the characteristics, competencies, and concerns of this rapidly growing student population (Clark, 1998).

In hindsight, this was a wise course of action to pursue, even if it left room for improvement, as was revealed by answers provided to questions researchers posed to transitioning postdeployment veterans face to face as well as via surveys (Aaronson, 1949). Records from the autumn of 1947, for instance, indicate that approximately 70% of males enrolled in postsecondary educational institutions were World War II postdeployment veterans (Nam, 1964) and accurately predicted the urgent need for educational institutions to prepare to meet particular needs common to postdeployment veterans (Kraines, 1945). Such needs, of course, made it obvious that individual members of this group of students shared certain characteristics. Some of these characteristics made it easier to educate this student population, whereas others increased exponentially the difficulty of doing so.

Desirable characteristics displayed by postdeployment veterans of this era included enhanced levels of maturity compared to classmates who had not served in the military (Washton, 1945), a wealth of clear and oftentimes well understood and articulated goals (Kinzer, 1946) and confidence instilled as a result of specific preparations they had made in anticipation of life as a college student (Carpenter & Glick, 1946; Hillway, 1945; McGrath, 1945; Young, 1946).

This group of postdeployment veterans also manifested physical and psychological abnormalities seldom experienced or displayed by their nonveteran peers. Combat had taken a severe toll on a significant percentage of these postdeployment veterans, leaving a large
number with physical disabilities (Brown, 1945) including missing limbs or digits, compromised senses of hearing and/or smell, and suboptimally functioning organs. Mental or emotional handicaps also were prevalent (Menninger, 1945) and often required prolonged attention from counselors and affiliated caregivers (Ritchie, 1945; Toven, 1945; Williamson, 1944).

Competencies and capabilities that these postdeployment veterans possessed and displayed also influenced their transition experiences. Among these, researchers measured academic performance more often than anything else and discovered that, contrary to pessimistic predictions, postdeployment veterans more often than not outperformed their nonveteran counterparts scholastically (Garmezy & Crose, 1948; Hadley, 1945; Hansen & Paterson, 1949, Kinzer, 1946, Love & Hutchinson, 1946; Thompson & Pressey, 1948). Interestingly, many World War II postdeployment veterans who had attended college prior to the outbreak of hostilities and continued their studies after returning from active duty overseas performed even better in the classroom subsequent to their return (Hansen & Paterson, 1949; Thompson & Pressey, 1948).

**Korean War Era Postdeployment Veteran Transitions**

Korean War era postdeployment veterans took advantage of educational benefits as well but in smaller numbers than their World War II predecessors (Olson, 1973). Because there were fewer postdeployment veterans returning from this conflict than from World War II, there was much less alarm among higher education administrators responsible for integrating them onto American college and university campuses and a commensurate flagging of interest in this group of postdeployment veterans among researchers. Fewer
postdeployment veterans eligible for a benefits package that was less generous (Olson, 1974) and more restrictive (Stanley, 2003) than the original GI Bill, combined with the availability of military service deferment requests (Stanley, 2003), resulted in a manageable number of postdeployment veterans returning to college and did little to garner the attention of researchers. The higher degree of researcher interest in postdeployment veterans of World War II, which diminished substantially with respect to postdeployment veterans of the Korean War, returned while and after postdeployment veterans returned to higher education institutions following the next conflict but remained focused upon uncomfortable topics for both service members and civilians.

**Vietnam War Era Postdeployment Veteran Transitions**

Vietnam War era postdeployment veterans returned to a nation divided over the appropriateness of the conflict and attempted to utilize a benefits package that was even less generous and more restrictive than the one offered to postdeployment veterans who had returned from combat in the Korean War (Olson, 1974). Most scholars who wrote about postdeployment veterans returning from the war in Vietnam focused on the psychological adjustments these service members were making (Hendin & Hass, 1991) or the fact that as a group they were competing favorably with their predecessors in terms of academic achievement (Joanning, 1975). Up to this point, scholars were typically studying postdeployment veterans in large groups and not yet choosing to focus upon individual transition experiences of postdeployment veterans who were returning to American colleges and universities. This began to change, however, when postdeployment veterans started to
return from recent conflicts in the Middle East and seek out opportunities to use the educational benefits to which their service had entitled them.

**Middle East War Era Postdeployment Veteran Transitions**

A small number of scholars recently have shifted their collective foci, or units of analysis, from the large groups of postdeployment veterans upon which their predecessors concentrated their predominantly quantitatively styled investigations during and after World War II and the wars in Korea and Vietnam to the lives and transition experiences of individual postdeployment veterans returning from recent conflicts in the Middle East. Each of the following qualitative writings is a doctoral dissertation, journal chapter, scholarly article, or conference presentation. All of the research summarized below has made a significant contribution to the body of literature that describes contemporary postdeployment veteran transitions to academic environments but remains severely limited (DiRamio et al., 2008; La Barre, 1985).

DiRamio et al. (2008) and Ackerman et al. (2009) were the first researchers to focus on the transition experiences of individual postdeployment veterans, concentrating on 25 soldiers (nine of whom were re-enrollees) who had returned from combat and/or combat support roles in Iraq and Afghanistan. DiRamio et al. selected study participants from multiple campuses and used Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006) to situate their research, along with grounded theory principles (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to organize their findings, conclusions, and recommendations. In two studies, the researchers determined that returning postdeployment veterans were a “special needs population” (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 12; DiRamio et al., 2008, p. 97) and
provided many practical suggestions designed to facilitate the transition of this population to college campuses.

DiRamio et al. (2008) identified 16 themes, each of which could be categorized as a subtheme, related to either health, relationships, finances, or academic preparedness (p. 80–91) and determined that the “most consistent message from the participants was that they hoped faculty members would acknowledge their veteran status and attempt to understand them as a student population” (p. 89). In a predictive manner, DiRamio et al. also accurately determined what the next seven years of research efforts would yield in the aggregate by concluding that this study demonstrated the “need for a comprehensive and holistic system for assisting veterans” (p. 92).

Using the same body of research, Ackerman et al. (2009) extended this analysis and found that “themes emerged relating to joining the military, deployment, serving in a war zone, and moving from combat into the classroom” (p. 5). Ackerman et al. concluded by suggesting the following five principles that must be understood and then used to guide future policies, practices, and research agendas:

- Deployments represent disruptive, life-altering transitions;
- Students who are deployed benefit when their campus maintains a connection with them;
- Veterans who enroll as students experience difficulties;
- Campuses are encouraged to meet the challenges of becoming veteran friendly by putting in place personnel, policies, resources, and programs that reflect sensitivity to and understanding of the needs of veterans; and
• There is an urgent need to share best practices, to exchange ideas, and to conduct research that will provide campuses with the information needed to promote the academic achievement of veterans who are students (pp. 12–13).

This research directly informed a subsequent journal chapter, published relatively soon thereafter, in which DiRamo and Spires (2009) began with an examination of transition experiences of disabled veterans in general before placing a particular focus upon those who suffered with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This writing was narrowly focused and designed to “inform the reader about students who are disabled veterans [and explain] one initiative to support the success of those who are severely injured” (DiRamio & Spires, 2009, p. 81), an initiative known as “Severely Injured Military Veterans: Fulfilling Their Dream” (DiRamio & Spires, 2009, p. 83). Shortly thereafter, these three pioneering, qualitative writings regarding postdeployment veteran transition experiences provided the literary foundation upon which a pair of researchers completed doctoral dissertations focused upon the lived experiences of transitioning postdeployment veterans.

Bauman (2009a) studied 24 postdeployment veterans who had stopped out of college and used grounded theory (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as the theoretical framework to structure his analysis. He determined that “findings revealed a three-phased undergraduate military mobilization process” and, specifically, that:

• Phase 1 involved the time leading up to one’s mobilization during which participants struggled to balance their student identity with their military identity;
• Phase 2 encompassed the time immediately before mobilization to the time immediately before returning home, toward the conclusion of one’s deployment; and
• Phase 3 involved the return and transition back to home, school, and civilian life. (p. iii)

Bauman (2009a) concluded by offering practical suggestions for college administrators, faculty, and support personnel, admonishing these educators to:

• “Take more notice of [their] student veteran population”;
• “Connect with all military personnel, whether deployed or not, in an effort to build meaningful relationships”;
• “Consider identifying individuals willing to serve as a ‘student veteran mentor’”;
• “Be ready to offer a full range of personal, academic and transitional support to the veteran upon his or her return home”; and
• “Consider starting a student veterans group.” (Bauman, 2009a, p. iv)

Shortly after Bauman completed his study, he published a synopsis (Bauman, 2009b) that reiterated his conclusions and recommendations that was distributed to higher education stakeholders nationwide via a prestigious professional journal.

The tone, findings, conclusions, and recommendations found in Bauman’s work were soon echoed in a similar dissertation completed by Livingston (2009) who, using Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory as a theoretical framework and grounded theory (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as an organizing methodology, researched 15 re-enrolling student veterans along with two members of the administrative staff at a large
southern land grant university. This study produced slightly more narrowly focused findings than did Bauman’s (2009a). In particular, Livingston found that:

- Student veterans were more mature and academically focused because of their military experiences;
- Student veterans were less likely to seek academic support and more inclined to pursue social support in the form of associating with fellow veterans with who they felt more comfortable;
- Support was not a key factor in student veterans’ navigation of re-enrollment and student veterans tended to downplay or hide their veteran status from campus community members; and
- Financial considerations and social implications were the most pronounced challenges student veterans faced after returning to college. (p. iii)

In conclusion, Livingston reminded readers that “higher education professionals are tasked with identifying and supporting various student populations and subcultures [though they may] have to work indirectly through existing support structures [via efforts] directed at the group . . . not . . . the individual level” (p. 187).

Like Bauman, Livingston published a redacted version of his dissertation—but on two occasions, as opposed to one. Each time, he supplemented his initial research and worked with others to tweak his presentation of it. In the first instance, he based a scholarly writing upon his dissertation research but fortified it by placing an emphasis on the difficulty associated with ascertaining veteran identities (Livingston et al., 2011). In the second, he again combined his efforts with those of additional researchers and revealed how
postdeployment veterans often camouflage themselves in an effort to blend into academic surroundings (Livingston et al., 2012).

Two additional qualitative doctoral dissertations, each informed by the findings, conclusions, and recommendations found in the studies described above, were finalized in 2010. In the first of these, Persky (2010) completed a qualitative case study (Creswell, 2009) using a pair of theoretical frameworks to structure her research of five groups of participants. The theoretical frameworks used were the human capital theory of education (Salamon, 1991) and Rendón’s (1994) theory of validation. Using a unique combination of both theories, Persky designed a study that would “identify the needs of veterans who are community college students and . . . examine community college programs and services essential to meeting their needs” (p. v). She determined that five major themes relating to the veterans’ perspectives of their needs at the case institution emerged from the data: (a) credit streamlining; (b) Streamlining of programs and services; (c) faculty, advisor, and counselor training; (d) difficulties encountered by veterans; and (e) factors that constitute a veteran friendly campus. (p. v)

Persky concluded by offering “six recommendations for improving veterans’ credit transfer” (p. 140), “thirteen recommendations for improving the streamlining of programs and services for the veteran population” (p. 140), “five recommendations . . . for improving . . . faculty advisor and counselor training” (p. 142), “two recommendations [to] address the difficulties veterans encounter” (p. 142), and “three recommendations . . . for promoting the campus as being veteran friendly” (p. 141).
In a fashion similar to Bauman (2009a) and Livingston (2009), Persky (2010) collaborated with her dissertation advisor and published an article within a year, reiterating her findings, conclusions, and recommendations. She concluded it by reminding readers that, as more research is focused on the education of veterans, and as colleges respond to veterans in unique and compelling ways, gateways for promising practices and expanding opportunities will open. Veterans’ voices should be heard sympathetically and compassionately as community colleges develop programming to address the underlying needs of this unique and deserving population of students. (Persky & Oliver, 2010, p. 119)

This conclusion is similar to but distinguishable from that reached by Rumann (2010).

Informed by his earlier research (Rumann & Hamrick, 2007, 2009) as well as his relatively simultaneous scholarship (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), Rumann (2010) completed a phenomenological (Crotty, 1998) dissertation that was designed to “explore the nature of the transition experiences of [six] student war veterans who had [re-]enrolled in a community college following a military deployment” (p. ix). Utilizing Schlossberg’s (1984) theory of transition (Goodman et al., 2006) as a theoretical framework and a three interview series (Seidman, 2006) to collect his data, Rumann (2010) found that “four themes [that] characterized participants’ transition experiences” could be summarized as: “(a) negotiating the transition, (b) interactions and connections with others, (c) increased maturity and changes in perspective, and (d) re-situating and negotiating identities” (p. ix). Rumann (2010) concluded by suggesting that community colleges ought to:
• “Be proactive in their efforts to interact with, and support, student veterans on their campuses” (p. 178);

• Ensure that “these efforts should . . . include interaction with administrators and conscientious creation and implementation of policies and programs concerning student veterans” (p. 178);

• “Consider involving family members in programs and campus activities to help ease student veterans’ transitions” (p. 178);

• Ensure that “opportunities . . . be available for [veterans] to become involved in campus activities and leadership positions, as well as to serve as role models for other students” (p. 179);

• “Offer benefits for student veterans” (p. 180);

• “Offer campus-wide programs for all faculty, staff, and students to increase the awareness of student veterans’ needs as they return to college” (p. 180); and

• “Discuss and implement ways in which to show their support and appreciation for student veterans” (p. 180).

Like many of the scholars described above, Rumann continued to develop the research he had conducted to complete his dissertation, and the following year he coauthored a cogent piece of writing informed by it. This effort resulted in a journal chapter that addressed the needs of marginalized students and that was designed to “identify ways in which community colleges are well positioned to support student veterans, discuss the need for heightened awareness concerning student veterans’ experiences, and make recommendations to assist staff, faculty, and administrators to better serve student veterans at
their institutions” (Rumann et al., 2011, p. 51). Rumann et al. (2011) acknowledged that many community colleges were, in fact, improving the programming and services they were making available to postdeployment veterans but cautioned that “if student veterans continue to encounter institutional bureaucracy and the lack of concerted effort on the part of all [emphasis in original] community college faculty and staff to help ease their transitions, they will feel as though they do not matter” (Rumann et al., 2011, p. 56). Rumann et al. concluded by offering the following suggestions:

- Campus-wide training should be conducted for faculty, staff, and students to raise awareness of issues student veterans might face in college should be initiated;
- Proactive efforts should include creating ways for student veterans to connect and interact with other veterans on campus; and
- Student veterans themselves should be consulted to help identify what needs to be done to effectively support student veterans on community college campuses. (pp. 56–57)

Unlike Rumann et al. (2011), the next researcher to address postdeployment veteran transition experiences chose to shift the focus of the still slowly developing literature in the field away from re-enrolling students. When referring to this research the following year, Wheeler (2012) asserted that “the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the transition process experienced by veterans leaving military service and attending community college for the first time” (p. 775) and that she intended to use Schlossberg’s (1984) theory of adult transitions as the study’s guiding framework. Wheeler completed a case study (Merriam, 2002) with nine participants, from which “three themes emerged regarding how
veterans manage this transaction: academic experiences, personal relationships and connections, and benefit bureaucracy” (Wheeler, 2012, p. 775). Her interpretation of these themes, combined with her particular findings, helped Wheeler generate a list of implications for practice that logically extended the work of her direct predecessors. Specifically, Wheeler recommended that:

• A veterans’ service office should be established on community college campuses to address these needs;

• Community colleges should offer programs to help veterans develop skills that would aid in their acclimation to civilian life and facilitate their transition to college;

• Institutions should have a mechanism by which veteran students can find each other, develop and participate in activities, and support each other—a veterans’ club would help provide these connections;

• An orientation specifically for veterans should be developed to help this special population acclimate to college life;

• Training for faculty and staff who work with the veteran population in various offices on campus and in the classroom could also address many of the concerns veterans expressed in the research;

• Talking to faculty about the problems veterans have working in groups with their peers could allow faculty members to work more efficiently with their veteran students;
- Community colleges should reach out to this population both by encouraging their participation in on-campus programs and by drawing on their leadership and discipline; and

- Institutions should find ways to demonstrate that they value veterans in collective ways (pp. 790–791).

When Wheeler (2012) shifted her focus to postdeployment veterans enrolling at a community college for the first time, that focus remained on individual students. Three years later, Griffin and Gilbert (2015) shifted the focus back upon those responsible for providing them with an education. Using a combination of the constant comparative method popularized by grounded theory practitioners (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and “Schlosberg’s transition theory . . . to frame qualitative analysis of narratives from veterans, administrators, and student affairs professionals,” this research team examined “whether and how institutions can influence veterans’ transitions to higher education . . . [while] . . . emphasizing the institutional factors that can both inhibit and facilitate the process” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015, p. 71).

To collect data, this interview team used semi-structured protocols to conduct “52 individual and group interviews, as well as 7 focus groups . . . with 28 student veterans . . . across seven institutions [including] three Research Universities . . . two Doctoral/Research Universities, and two Associates Institutions” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 77). Ultimately, “three findings emerged from the data [that explained] how institutions aimed to facilitate student veterans’ transitions”: 
• First, veterans and institutional agents described the importance of offices, services, and professionals that meet and understand student veterans’ unique issues and concerns (personnel and services);

• Second, the need for specific campus policies and procedures related to administering veterans’ information, benefits, and services were highlighted (institutional structures); and

• Finally, there was discussion regarding the importance of veteran student representation in the student body, veteran-specific groups and services, and the quality of relationships student veterans have with peers and personnel on campus (social and cultural support). (p. 80).

Griffin and Gilbert (2015) adopted a much less prescriptive position than did their predecessors when it came to making recommendations. Initially, they conceded that “there is no one, right answer for facilitating the transitions of student veterans” (p. 94) and subsequently closed their study by reminding readers that simply “understanding students’ contextual needs at the individual and group level . . . can provide guidance to institutions about the types of initiatives that could provide the greatest return on investment” (p. 94).

As the wide variety of scholarly writing summarized above demonstrates, “students’ contextual needs” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015, p. 94) may be ascertained, evaluated, and addressed in any number of creative and constructive ways. Moreover, because one of the chief goals of qualitative research is accomplished when “readers themselves determine the extent to which findings from a study can be applied to their context” (Merriam, 2002), each of the writings described above has succeeded insofar as it has informed readers about the
transition experiences of postdeployment veterans. By painstaking design, none of the literature described above was written with the expectation that it would be generalizable or literally transferable. Instead, it was written to help interested stakeholders learn how they might best assist postdeployment veterans transition to the college of their choice.

These successful, scholarly, qualitative writings are representative of a limited number of forays into a research trend that is less than a decade in the making, and they exemplify the profound shift that has occurred since 2008 with respect to the literature that describes postdeployment veteran transitions. Since that year, studies focusing on these types of transitions have evolved from predominantly quantitatively styled examinations of large groups of postdeployment student veterans whose transitions bridged the World War II and Vietnam War eras to solicitations of first-person accounts of individual service members who have transitioned from battlefields (or supporting those on them) in the Middle East to community colleges back in the United States.

The most recent literature synthesized above contains scores of references to postdeployment veteran transitions to community colleges in particular. The next section of this literature review explains why so many postdeployment veterans transition to community colleges as well as the reasons community colleges are appropriate research sites at which to examine this phenomenon.

**Community Colleges as Research Sites**

Community colleges are appropriate research sites at which to study postdeployment veteran transitions for two main reasons. The first is the high likelihood that postdeployment veterans will enroll at a community college in the first place (Cook & Kim, 2009; Persky &
Oliver, 2010), thereby facilitating potential access to a sufficient number of study participants. The second reason this particular combination of research site and participant is appropriate is because of the tremendous benefits that might accrue to multiple stakeholders if postdeployment veteran transition experiences are authentically and rigorously documented, effectively publicized, and better understood by administrators, policymakers, and transitioning postdeployment veterans themselves (Persky, 2010; Rumann, 2010; Rumann et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012).

Traditionally, community colleges have provided easier, less hassle-ridden access to postdeployment veterans than have larger public and private schools (Jenkins, 2006) as well as the widest possible spectrum of opportunities in which to participate. These offerings have included transfer, vocational, developmental and continuing education as well as community service-type courses (Bragg, 2001). In addition, community colleges also have provided enhanced access for postdeployment veterans with risk factors such as having dependents and lacking a high school diploma (Coley, 2000), although there are indications that the availability of additional funding resulting from the post-9-11 GI Bill will result in increased competition from proprietary institutions as well as 4-year schools (Pulley, 2008).

Postdeployment veterans historically have been attracted to these opportunities, not just because of the variety of programs community colleges have offered, but also because these schools have typically been located near military installations, thereby saving postdeployment veterans time and money with respect to commuting (Field, Hebel, & Smallwood, 2008). In addition, when commuting has not been a literal (as a result of certain types of injuries, for example) or desirable option, the availability of online offerings through
community colleges for a fraction of the cost a postdeployment veteran would have paid for a conventional face-to-face or hybrid course has also proved tremendously attractive (Halligan, 2007).

Currently, many community colleges are taking additional, often unprecedented, measures to address the particular needs of postdeployment veterans by doing things such as:

- Offering them additional financial aid,
- Entering into articulation agreements that make it easier for them to transfer credits,
- Making space available that is dedicated to their occupancy and use,
- Offering specialized courses that facilitate the transition from deployment to classroom,
- Offering orientation programs tailored to their needs,
- Creating student veterans organization on campus, and
- Collaborating with Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges to accept transfer credit(s) (Rumann et al., 2011, pp. 52–54).

For each of these reasons, it is likely that transitioning postdeployment veterans will continue to patronize community colleges in increasing numbers. Because they will be immediately accessible to researchers at these institutions, and because lessons learned from their experiences are also likely to assist interested stakeholders in making wise decisions, it is altogether appropriate that postdeployment veterans who have transitioned to Iowa’s community colleges be sought out and their experiences be ethically researched and reported.
Liminality Theory

The scholarship of German-born French folklorist and cultural anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (1960), as resuscitated and subsequently developed by Turner (1969), provides a theoretical lens or framework that is sophisticated enough to account for the complexities associated with these various experiences. Taken together, this body of literature provides a framework for understanding adult life transitions based upon a concept referred to as “liminality.” The word “liminality” is derived from the Latin word “limen” and is best understood to translate as “threshold” (Liminality, n.d.). Van Gennep coined the term “liminality” when he needed a word to describe the second, or middle portion, of a three-stage process he believed accounted for the universal path that all individuals and groups traverse when transitioning from one state of being or existence to another (Van Gennep, 1960).

Van Gennep’s (1960) threefold construction assumed that individuals and groups begin with “preliminal” rites, or “rites of separation,” each of which “involves a metaphorical death as the initiand is forced to leave something behind by breaking with previous practices and routines” (Szakolczai, 2009, p. 51) before moving to a second, or liminal stage. Van Gennep believed that this second stage was distinguished by “transition rites,” which involved the creation of a tabula rasa (blank slate) which was accomplished by the removal of previously taken-for-granted forms and limits” (Szakolczai, 2009, p. 148) and finally superseded by a third stage. Van Gennep referred to this third or final stage as one comprised of “postliminal” rites, or “rites of incorporation,” and believed it was during this
stage that “the initiand is reincorporated into society with a new identity as a ‘new’ being” (Szakolczai, 2009, p. 148).

A multitude of scholars have summarized and paraphrased Van Gennep’s (1960) work and applied it to numerous fields of inquiry. Hockey (2002), for example, contended that

Van Gennep identified a tripartite structure comprising rites of separation, threshold rites, and rites of aggregation [that] describe (1) passage out of a previous phase or social status; (2) an ambiguous time and space betwixt and between fixed positions; and (3) re-entry into a new social position or period [and reminded readers that] depending upon the occasion, one of the three parts would tend to be accentuated and the other two downplayed. (p. 212)

In addition, Malksoo (2012) postulated,

The concept of liminality favors a broad interpretation, lending itself easily to disciplinary contexts outside of the original framework of cultural anthropology. Developed by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner by exploring the rites of passage, liminality points to in-between situations and conditions where established structures are dislocated, hierarchies reversed, and traditional settings of authority possibly endangered. The liminal state is a central phase in all social and cultural transitions as it marks the passage of the subject through “a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state’. It is thus a realm of great ambiguity, since the “liminal entities are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and
ceremonial.” Yet, as a threshold situation, liminality is also a vital moment of creativity, a potential platform for renewing the societal make-up. (p. 481)

In the last decade alone, Van Gennep’s (1960) liminality theory has provided a theoretical framework for a wide range of studies including, but not limited to, those focused upon: consciousness (Apter, 2008), domestic relations (Rumelili, 2012), international studies (Malksoo, 2012; Neumann, 2012), literature (Flannery, 2008), religious education (Agra Junker, 2013), statecraft (Stoicescu, 2012), and [the] travelogue (McCotter, 2008). These scholars listed owe a special debt of gratitude to Victor Turner, whose attention was captured by Van Gennep’s (1960) expositions regarding his middle, or liminal, stage. Liminality theory, as supplemented by Turner (1969) via the addition of the concept of “antistucture” (confrontative activities; p. x) to the model, allows investigators to indulge in a wide spectrum of options. Specifically, liminality theory allows a researcher who accurately wields it to account for any type or quantity of individual, group, cultural, and/or societal transition(s) that occur(s) in a moment (instantaneously) during a recognizable period of time (day, week, month, year, etc.) or over a protracted period of time (era or epoch) (Turner, 1969).

Thus, liminality theory is well suited to frame qualitative inquiries into veteran transitions because, in addition to being venerated historically, it continues to be respected within multiple social science traditions and is simultaneously static and elastic. It is static insofar as it provides recognizable categories (preliminal, liminal, postliminal) into which researchers may organize concepts, individuals, locations, and events (rites). Liminality
theory also is elastic because it allows researchers to investigate an unlimited combination of each of these four variables as they relate to postdeployment veteran transitions.

An explanation of how liminality theory was used to help understand the contemporary postdeployment veteran transition experiences described in this study begins with identifying and summarizing the generic, long-term, macroscopic, shared transition each study participant completed. Specifically, each participant moved from civilian life to basic training or boot camp, then to an international deployment, and finally, to the United States and life as a student at an Iowa community college.

Prior to basic training, each of these eventual postdeployment veterans would have been considered a civilian. Each trainee would have been allowed to transition from civilian to warfighter (soldier, sailor, Marine, etc.) status only after successfully completing basic training or boot camp and assuming a role within the military establishment. At some point during this transition—which would have been literally different for every enlistee—each would have participated in a preliminal “rite of separation”—the type of event that Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) suggested precedes the liminal stage of any transition. This passage would have likely occurred just after the participant physically left his or her home but while still en route to his or her basic training location. Most service members recall raising their right hand at their MEPS (military entrance processing station), swearing an oath, and immediately surmising correctly that they were then committed to military service for the length of time he or she had agreed to in his or her enlistment contract. At that point, the enlistee was no longer a civilian but also certainly not a veteran. In fact, each
would have found him or herself “betwixt and between” (neither “here” nor “there”) (Turner, 1969, p. 107).

During this period, which is liminal in nature, the former civilian who was now navigating basic training prior to his or her first deployment would have experienced some type of partial personal destruction followed by a corresponding type of personal construction. These would have been examples of the types of transition rites that Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) frequently described and deconstructed. Each participant would have experienced a kind of personal destruction insofar as his or her old self was intentionally dismantled to one degree or another. Long-term relationships might have lapsed or stagnated, and prohibitions against killing another human being were likely lifted and demystified if not denigrated. At some point, conventional garrison behaviors exhibited on American soil that reinforced and rationalized the hierarchical nature of professional relationships associated with life in uniform were less strictly observed and enforced. After all, priorities understandably changed when the air in the theater was filled with ordinance ranging from bullets to shrapnel fragments or possible chemical agents.

The soon-to-be veteran also continued to construct a new and likely improved sense of self. Confidence grew as this individual learned and practiced the little tricks and routines that kept one alive before, during, and after combat and/or combat support operations. A perceived lack of media or political support back in the United States might have been reinterpreted and described away as ignorance of a situation in which actual lives were being saved or improved, as opposed to evidence that service members had been duped into fighting on behalf of another, perhaps less noble or worthy, person or group. Relationships
that were maintained via frequent heartfelt contact and indicators of love and affection, such as cards, letters, e-mails, and care packages, rendered transparent the difficult-to-articulate but very real friendships that would continue to provide authentic support in the weeks and months ahead. All of these aspects of life transpiring simultaneously in that middle (liminal) stage were preparing the soon-to-be veteran for his or her transition into a third (postliminal) stage.

During this final stage of his or her transition, the soon-to-be-acknowledged postdeployment veteran was reincorporated into society via rites of incorporation and was acknowledged to be a changed being. Having survived an international deployment and having learned valuable lessons, “postdeployment veteran” status was finally granted by peers and a grateful nation to this service member, and the justifiably raised expectations that fellow service members had for this postdeployment veteran likely resulted in an enhanced attitude regarding duty-related behaviors. Certain predeployment behaviors were no longer acceptable, whereas others became even more valued and cherished. For example, failing a personal fitness test would now likely be considered completely unacceptable given the value stamina was shown to have had during hostilities. Likewise, the respect indicated by a simple, crisp salute now likely carried with it the sense that the gesture had been earned.

The analysis above is an example of how liminality theory was used to organize an inquiry into and frame an explanation of postdeployment veteran transitions. In this instance, the three stages of the transition (preliminal, liminal, postliminal) were identified and analyzed in terms of the rites (separation, transition, incorporation) that, performed in sequence, comprised the transition. The same type of analysis could have been used to
understand a smaller or subtransition as well. For example, liminality theory could have been used to describe the relatively shorter transition experiences of moving from an enlistee’s home to the MEPS, from basic training to a landing zone in the desert, or from the beginning to the end of a welcome home parade.

Because liminality theory provides structure at the same time that it accommodates investigator latitude, it was used in this study to situate investigator questions as well as a theoretical lens through which to analyze participant responses. This process is described further in chapter 3.

Summary

This literature review contains a synthesis and summary of the literature regarding postdeployment veteran transition experiences, an explanation of why community colleges are appropriate institutions at which to study them, and an example of how liminality theory was used to understand them. The following chapter explains in greater detail the methodology and research design used for this study. Specific information is provided regarding the researcher’s role, the research site, selection of study participants, data collection, data analysis, and study delimitations.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of postdeployment veterans who have made the transition to an Iowa community college. Structuring an investigation that would accomplish that purpose compelled me to begin by contemplating the nature of reality (ontology), how reality is known (epistemology), the role of values (axiology) in research, and the approach to inquiry (methodology) that ought to be used in this study (Creswell, 2013). This thought process helped me to sharpen my focus toward my study participants and what they did or did not have in common as well as to determine what influence these characteristics would have upon my investigation.

All the study participants ($N = 6$) were postdeployment veterans who had transitioned to an Iowa community college. This pair of shared characteristics obligated me to make decisions related to ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology that resulted in five implications, each of which guided my thinking, decision making, and behavior throughout the course of this study. As Creswell (2013) presciently suggested might happen, I committed to be sure to:

- Report different perspectives as themes develop[ed] in [my] findings;
- Rely on quotes as evidence from [my] participants;
- Collaborate, spend time in the field with my participants, and becom[e] an “insider”;
- Discuss values that shape[d my] narrative and include [my] own interpretation in conjunction with interpretations of participants; and
• Work with particulars (details) before generalizations, describe in detail the context of the study, and continually revise questions from experiences in the field. (p. 21)

I decided to take a qualitative approach to this study. As a result, I selected the following epistemology, theoretical perspective, theoretical lens, methodology, and combination of methods as the means through which I would solicit, understand, organize, and report upon the experiences of postdeployment veterans who had transitioned to an Iowa community college.

**Epistemology**

Epistemology “is the study of the nature of knowledge and justification” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 87). As such, it is “concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate” (Maynard, 1994, p. 10). From the range of epistemologies available, including objectivism (Bourdieu, 1990), subjectivism (Bunge, 1996), and constructivism (Potter, 1996), I decided to use constructionism (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42–65) as my epistemological foundation. Constructionism, which presupposes that “there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it, [and that] truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8), was appropriate to use because it allowed me to account for how study participants had demonstrated over the course of their post deployment transitions to an Iowa community college that “meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (Crotty, 1998, p. 9).
Theoretical Perspective

Using a constructivist epistemology compelled me to choose, out of the handful that were available, a particular type of theoretical perspective to organize this study. A theoretical perspective is “the philosophical stance that lies behind a methodology” (Crotty, 1998, p. 66). Of the theoretical perspectives that were available, including positivism (Hollis, 1994); interpretivism (Giddens, 1993); and the hermeneutical traditions of critical inquiry, feminism, and postmodernism (Prasad, 2005), the use of an interpretivist perspective was the most appropriate to select for two reasons. First, “interpretivism is overwhelmingly oriented towards an uncritical exploration of cultural meaning” (Crotty, 1998, p. 60) and, second, it was the only approach of the four in which the “emphasis is on understanding how individuals construct and interpret social reality” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 38). Using this approach allowed me to focus exclusively on participant perspectives, which participants rendered in their own authentic voices, in a mediated fashion. My decision to adopt an interpretivist perspective also enabled me to make a logical decision about the theoretical lens (Creswell, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2010) I wanted to use, which proved to be a major departure from the direction previously taken by the majority of investigators in this field.

Theoretical Lens

A theoretical lens is best thought of as an organizing tool that allows researchers to further narrow and refine a study’s focus after a theoretical perspective has been decided upon. A theoretical lens may be used to provide a very specific, auxiliary perspective from
which to construct the questions that are asked of study participants. A theoretical lens may be based on any theory an investigator may wish to use.

As catalogued in the literature review in chapter 2, the vast majority of researchers who have focused their investigations on postdeployment veteran transitions have used Schlossberg’s (1984) theory of adult transition (Goodman et al., 2006) as a theoretical lens. Doing so has informed the questions they have asked as well as influenced and helped organize the findings, discussions, and conclusions sections of their written reports.

I decided to use liminality theory, as popularized by Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969), as a theoretical lens not simply to provide some much needed variety to the literature in the field; rather, I used liminality theory because of the structure and flexibility it provided. Taken together, all of the decisions described above served to structure and organize my study, but they also placed limits upon the methodology I could employ.

**Methodology**

A methodology is “the strategy, plan of action, process, or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). I adopted a phenomenological approach for this study that, by definition, was based upon “the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience” (Patton, 1990, p. 70). My goals were to describe both the “invariant structure” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82) found in the transition experiences of postdeployment veterans at an Iowa community college as well how my study participants had demonstrated that, in fact, “complex meanings are built out of simple units of direct experience” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). As a consequence, I took particular notice when Merriam (2002) counseled readers that
because phenomenology as a school of philosophical thought underpins all qualitative research, some assume that all qualitative research is phenomenological, and certainly in one sense it is. However, even though the phenomenological notions of experience and understanding run through all qualitative research, one could also engage in a phenomenological study using its own “tools” or inquiry techniques that differentiate it from other types of qualitative inquiry. (p. 7)

My understanding of these phenomenological tools was further galvanized and refined by Moustakas (1994), who confirmed the perspective espoused by Merriam (2002) when he reminded readers that one adopting a phenomenological approach engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgements regarding the phenomenon being investigated (known as the *epoché* process) in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies—to be completely open, receptive, and naive in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated. (p. 22)

and that an in comparison with other methodologies, an additional major distinction is the emphasis on intuition, imagination, and universal structures in obtaining a picture of the dynamics that underlay the experience, account for, and provide an understanding of how it is that particular perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and sensual awarenesses are evoked in consciousness with reference to a specific experience such as jealousy, anger, or joy. (p. 22)
Adopting a phenomenological approach to study how postdeployment veterans described their transitions to an Iowa community college required me to acknowledge, understand, and prepare for my role as researcher; select a research site as well as study participants; and adopt and practice a particular collection of methods that would allow for the optimal collection and analysis of data.

**Researcher’s Role**

The process of completing this study proved to me that Merriam (2002) was correct when she observed that a defining “characteristic of all forms of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis” (p. 5). I was not only the primary instrument for data collection and analysis with respect to this study; I was the sole researcher as well. I drafted all of the interview questions study participants answered. It was solely my observations of study participants in natural settings, such as SVA meetings, and my review of documents, such as meeting minutes of those gatherings, that allowed me alone to triangulate (Creswell, 2013; Esterberg, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002) the collection of data for this study. I was the only one who, using techniques synthesized and popularized by Moustakas (1994), analyzed all interview transcripts looking for themes that would eventually inform the findings I determined authentically summarized the experiences that study participants described during their interviews.

One of the most important things I did to prepare myself to assume the responsibilities of a researcher was to make myself as aware as possible of personal biases, beliefs, and opinions that could potentially influence the manner in which I conducted this
To do this, I used a self-reflection approach known as *epoché* (bracketing) in which a "researcher sets aside, as far as is humanly possible, all preconceived experiences to best understand the experiences of participants in the study" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). As a consequence, I determined that I needed to account for how my positionality, or worldview, derived from my experiences as a law school graduate with ABD status as a graduate student, former sergeant in the U.S. Army JAG Corps (legal branch of the Army), director-level community college employee at the research site, and coadvisor of the SVA at the research site might possibly influence my role as researcher for this study. I did not do this with the expectation that such preparation would allow me to entirely circumvent the potential influence my personal thinking and behavioral characteristics might have on this study. Rather, I did this to prepare myself to remain as aware of these proclivities as possible, so I would be able to recognize those instances in which any one, or combination of them, might have been on the verge, or in the process, of influencing my thinking and behaviors.

Graduating from law school and completing the coursework phase of my graduate work had prepared me to conduct research. Neither could have, nor did, completely prepare me temperamentally for a project of this scope and duration. As a novice social science investigator, I had read numerous well-written studies that had been subjected to peer review and editorial analysis before they finally appeared in the extraordinarily polished form in which each had been published. In fact, I had made it a point to routinely read as much well-written material as possible. My intentions were to learn by osmosis as well as to archive examples of composition I would eventually use as models for my own writing. I recognized in time, however, that a potential drawback to using this approach lay in the possibility that,
as a perfectionist, I ran the risk of naively and continuously comparing the quality of my work product with that of studies I had been assigned to read by my graduate faculty. By bracketing my experiences as a law student and graduate student, I was able to remain aware of what was happening in those instances when I began to lapse into such counterproductive behavior. As a result, I was able to take pre-emptive action and, ultimately, invest an appropriate ratio of time thinking about and constructing—as well as editing—the five chapters that comprise this dissertation.

As a former sergeant (E-5) in the U.S. Army, I accurately predicted most of the issues, topics, and concerns of study participants that would surface while I conducted this research as well as the unarticulated meaning behind the oftentimes veiled references they would invoke to accomplish this. So, although I learned a few surprising things while conducting this study, I was absolutely certain as early as during my own transition out of the military approximately a decade ago that this too-seldom-addressed topic desperately deserved more attention and warranted additional investigation. In fact, the dispositive reason I chose to research this important topic was because, even though former active duty service members have been described in the qualitative literature in this field, they have written no portion of it. I knew I had a perspective that would inform a warranted study unlike any I had read or heard about, and I will always conceive of having completed this dissertation as one meaningful way of thanking all prior, current, and future veterans for their selfless service to our nation.

However, although I am a veteran, I myself was never deployed. I served as a noncommissioned officer in the continental United States as well as in Southeast Asia, but I
never participated in combat or a combat support mission. As a consequence, I knew I would find myself in a type of limbo when it came to interviewing postdeployment veterans who did share this experience. I would have partial, but not complete, insider status. Of the few reasons I chose to use liminality theory as the theoretical lens for this study, the personally relevant one amounted to knowing that I would design, enter, conduct, and complete this study all the while remaining between two states of being—the exact type of circumstance Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) had developed liminality theory to analyze!

Ironically, like the participants in all of their studies, I, myself, was and would remain betwixt and between (neither here, nor there). I was a veteran, but all of my participants were veterans who had also been deployed. Fortunately, to a person, each postdeployment veteran I interviewed focused exclusively upon what we had in common as opposed to how our time in uniform was distinguishable. On no occasion did a study participant remind me that I had never been deployed. In fact, transcript analysis revealed that in a multitude of instances, participants consistently addressed me as though I, in fact, had been deployed. By bracketing my experiences as a former sergeant (E-5) in the U.S. Army, I was able to prepare to interact authentically with study participants, to each of whom I divulged the fact that I had never been deployed, as well as intentionally make inquiries and observations using both an insider (subjective) and outsider (objective) perspective simultaneously.

As a director-level community college employee at the research site, I was very familiar with the proverbial “community college mission” as I designed and conducted this study. As a result, I correctly predicted the type of factors (access, cost, commute time, etc.) study participants had weighed and balanced when deciding to attend classes at the research
site as well as the types of tradeoffs (location, lack of student housing options, no organized athletics, etc.) they had considered when deciding to pursue an education where they had. I was also acquainted with the open access model used at schools like the research site and was cognizant of the range of opportunities available to each study participant. In fact, as a grant director, I was responsible for funding a number of them. I also personally knew (or knew of) all of the individuals and policies about which study participants made comments during interviews as well as in more naturalistic settings such as SVA meetings. Before, during, and at the conclusion of interviews, I explicitly and routinely reminded study participants that I was listening to them as a researcher and not as a community college employee. This was a convention each participant accepted, adopted at face value, and honored by providing honest and forthright responses to every question I asked. At no time did a participant attempt to avoid, dismiss, or evade answering an interview question. If fact, I was moved by the depth, range, and thoughtfulness of the answers that each participant shared with me. During interludes such as these, I repeatedly assured study participants that I would be using pseudonyms in place of their actual names and that “anything you say in this room . . . stays in this room.”

By bracketing my experiences as a director-level community college employee at the research site, I was able to intentionally listen to study participants as a researcher and focus on participants’ descriptions of their lived experiences, as opposed to someone who might be implicated by association by an apparently derogatory interview question response or throwaway comment that might be interpreted as denigrating my employer. The time I invested getting to know study participants on an individual basis (up to one and a half years
in some instances) helped me establish an authentic, robust, mutual trust, and respect with each of them. The extraordinarily candid responses I received to my inquiries proved these sentiments were mutual and indicated an earnestness that I reflected when translating interview question responses into themes, findings, and conclusions.

This eventual, comfortable familiarity was not simply a result of being an employee of the school that was the site of my research, however. Approximately a year before beginning the data collection phase of this project, I helped organize a SVA at my research site and had regularly attended that organization’s meetings. During this period of time, I routinely discussed my research with organization members and solicited study participants from the group at large via oral presentations organized by the use of the recruiting script (see Appendix A). When a SVA member indicated an interest in learning more about what would be involved in assisting me with my research, I would meet one on one with him or her and explain the written recruitment message (see Appendix B). Of course, I also explained the implied consent form (see Appendix C) to each participant and cosigned one with each participant before commencing the interview process.

Prior to beginning my data collection, I gave serious thought to how my membership in the SVA might influence my research and vice versa. I decided that I would assiduously monitor my decisions with respect to the quantum of involvement I would have with individual organization members. I also explicitly and proactively guarded against doing or saying anything that could have been construed as showing favoritism toward the subgroup of SVA members that comprised my study participants.
I am pleased to have made this decision when I did. The most difficult aspect of the data collection phase of my study was balancing my need to gather information from SVA members with my strong desire to do as much as I possibly could to assist them vis-à-vis my role as one of their organization’s coadvisors, which I had agreed to become halfway through the data collection phase of this study. At times, my strongly held community college-mission-related imperative of doing anything legal and ethically appropriate for a student had to wait until I could take action that would not have been interpreted as nepotistic. I never made my assistance to a SVA member contingent upon that person being a study participant, and I elected to not discuss my research in front of the assembled SVA membership after beginning my data collection phase. By bracketing my experiences as a coadvisor to the SVA at the research site before I made a series of decisions acting in that capacity, I avoided showing favoritism or appearing to trade study participation for information, advice, or favors that I would have been able to dispense in my role as a coadvisor to the SVA.

All of the bracketing I did while planning and executing this study was extremely helpful. It allowed me to organize my thinking, make important decisions on a consistent basis, and avoid a series of mistakes I might have made without the awareness that engaging in *epoché* generated. I also made a series of important decisions regarding the research site at which I situated my research. An explanation of these determinations appears in the next section.

**Research Site**

I situated my research at one of two main campuses that, in combination with 10 auxiliary locations, comprise a small community college in Iowa. Awesome Community
College (pseudonym ACC) is located in a rural area and enrolls approximately 4,000 (unduplicated count) students annually. ACC offers a variety of credit, noncredit, face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses in certificate and degree programs that are focused on areas of study as diverse as: agriculture and animal science; auto tech, mechanics, and transportation; business, communications, and marketing; education, human and public services; health sciences; information technology; liberal arts; and STEM, manufacturing, and construction. ACC is located adjacent to a very small community and does not offer on-campus student housing or field athletic teams. However, ACC is affordable, easy to access, and known for its friendly and relaxed atmosphere. Each year, approximately 100 veterans are enrolled at ACC.

For the reasons listed in chapter 1 (mission, access, affordability, flexibility, innovation), I chose to focus my research on postdeployment veterans who had transitioned from international deployments to a community college in Iowa. I chose to conduct my research at ACC in particular because of the formal and physical access it provided as well as the range of postdeployment veterans from which I believed I would be able to select study participants.

Formal access to study participants was relatively easy to secure. Initially, I sought and received approval to conduct my research from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my graduate studies institution. The document that describes this approval as well as the circumstances under which it would have been revoked may be found in Appendix D. Next, I worked with the only “gatekeeper” (Esterberg, 2002, pp. 66–67) necessary to obtain permission to conduct research at ACC; which is documented in Appendix E. The
administrator (provost) who granted me permission to conduct research at ACC was very enthusiastic about my topic, tremendously supportive of my research proposal, and gracious enough to offer me future assistance at whatever point I believed it would become necessary.

By the time I sought permission to conduct this study from the ACC provost, I already had been involved with the SVA for many months. For this reason, I was already familiar with enough postdeployment veterans on campus that (unlike most researchers working in this area) I did not need to approach the ACC Veterans Affairs Certifying Official (VACO) for assistance in identifying potential study participants. Instead, I used techniques referred to as purposeful (or purposive; Esterberg, 2002, p. 93) sampling and snowball sampling to identify my study participants. I applied purposeful sampling techniques during before, during, and after SVA meetings and eventually moved on to using snowball sampling techniques on an individual, one-on-one basis with potential study participants.

Patton (1989) suggested that purposeful sampling includes varieties known as “typical case,” “extreme or deviant case,” “critical case,” “sensitive case,” “convenience,” and “maximum variation” (p. 52). The use of convenience sampling, which “saves time, money, and effort” (Creswell, 2013, p. 158) provided me with the first three participants I interviewed. The use of snowball sampling, which “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich” (Creswell, 2013, p. 158) provided me the final three. In the latter three instances, I asked participants to recommend other postdeployment veterans they believed would be appropriate participants based upon the experience they were having assisting me with my research.
I selected all six participants based upon an initial conversation with each participant that strongly suggested that she or he would provide relevant, informative, detail-rich descriptions. I used these criteria because I was interested in learning about the meaning each had ascribed to his or her post deployment transition to an Iowa community college. I scheduled a series of three interviews with each participant, and this turned out to be more than adequate. At about the time I finished the 18th interview, transcript analysis revealed that I had reached the point of data saturation (Seidman, 2006), as I noticed the same themes occurring repeatedly. I was able to make this determination by using the guideline suggested by Merriam (2002), which required me to ascertain “whether enough data in the form of quotes from interviews, episodes from field observations, or documentary evidence are presented to support adequately and convincingly the study’s findings” (p. 15).

In addition to personal access to individual postdeployment veterans, physical access to the campus from which I selected study participants was also relatively easy to secure. ACC was located less than 20 miles from my home, and I was able to travel to it as often as necessary to conduct interviews and attend SVA meetings. As a result, I conducted the majority of interviews in a private conference room in the library on campus. On five occasions, I conducted interviews in a private boardroom at a campus satellite location as a practical, time- and cost-saving convenience for participants who indicated they would appreciate such an arrangement. One participant indicted that he would prefer to be interviewed at home; this was a request which I was more than happy to honor.

The third reason I chose to conduct my research at ACC was because of the access it provided me to as wide a variety of study participants as was practical given the demographic
composition of the area of the state in which I conducted my research. I wanted to solicit descriptions of transition experiences from postdeployment veterans who had served in as many different branches of the military as possible as well as from both men and women and from individuals with as many different racial and/or ethnic backgrounds as possible. I was increasingly less successful regarding each type of attempt. I was able to find study participants from four different branches of the military, specifically from the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. I was also able to recruit members of each gender: five men and one woman. I was less successful finding study participants with a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds for my study, as all of them self-identified as Caucasian.

**Study Participants**

The six postdeployment veterans I interviewed, whose profiles may be found in chapter 4, were all very unique, selfless, and courageous individuals. Each had been internationally deployed after September 11, 2001. Each participant had also returned to the United States and either had attended or was attending the same (one of 15) community college in Iowa. None of the participants had attended college prior to being deployed.

I constantly reiterated during participant interviews that I was committed to protecting participant identities and that I would be referring to participants and the locations they described by pseudonyms to protect their privacy as well as the privacy of their families, friends, and associates. To reinforce my point, I offered each participant the opportunity to choose the name by which they would be referred when this study was written up and possibly published. To a person, each participant suggested that I could refer to him or her however I wanted to. For that reason, I took the liberty of selecting the following six,
Table 1

**Participant Profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Final rank</th>
<th>College focus</th>
<th>Military occupational specialty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>E4</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Cannon crew member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Marines</td>
<td>E5</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Military working dog handler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>E4</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Truck driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>E6</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Disaster preparedness coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Marines</td>
<td>E4</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Aviation life support systems marine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Navy, Air Force, Army</td>
<td>E5</td>
<td>English and Secondary Education</td>
<td>Signal support specialist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

arbitrary, common names by which I will refer to this study’s participants: Matt, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Mary. Basic information about each participant that was current as of each participant’s final interview is provided in Table 1.

**Methods**

Preparing for the data collection process required me to select a practical combination of techniques, oftentimes referred to generically as “methods,” that would allow me to gather the data I required. Methods are the “techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3).

As a consequence of my decision to conduct a phenomenological investigation, I required a set of techniques and procedures that would allow me to analyze my data inductively. I intended to “gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively deriving postulates or hypotheses to be tested (as in positivist research) . . . [which could manifest as] themes, categories, typologies, [and] concepts [that I could
eventually arrange into a] a richly descriptive end product” (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). To create such an end product, or dissertation, I planned to predominantly use “words and pictures rather than numbers to convey what I had learned . . . about the context . . . participants . . . [and] activities of interest . . . in the form of quotes from documents, field notes, and participant interviews (Merriam, 2002, p. 5).

To structure my data collection and analysis, I remained mindful that in qualitative research, data analysis is *simultaneous* [emphasis in original] with data collection. That is, one begins analyzing data with the first interview, the first observation, the first document accessed in the study. Simultaneous data collection and analysis allows the researcher to make adjustments along the way, even to the point of redirecting data collection, and to “test” emerging concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data. (Merriam, 2002, p. 14)

Based upon this rationale, I alternated between collecting and analyzing data as frequently as was necessary while conducting interviews, engaging in observations, and analyzing documents. Practically speaking, I transitioned between data collection and analysis rapidly for the reasons Merriam (2002) championed. However, I have separated them conceptually below for the purpose of describing them.

**Data Collection**

Merriam (2002) suggested that meaningful “data can be collected [and] managed [via] interviews, observations, and documents” (p. 20). I used interviews as my primary method of data collection. But, I used all three techniques (triangulation) as one way to demonstrate that I had employed rigorous data collection procedures and thereby enhanced
the trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002) of this study so as to make it more “noteworthy” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 299) and relevant for audiences.

**Interviews.** In the qualitative research community, interview types “range from highly structured, where specific questions and the order in which they are asked are determined ahead of time, to unstructured, where one has topic areas to explore but neither the questions nor the order are predetermined” (Merriam, 2002, p. 12). The interviews I conducted fell in between these extremes and were considered semistructured or in-depth interviews, which allowed my participants “to express their opinions and ideas in their own words” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 89). This technique proved very effective for two reasons. First, it allowed my participants to explain in their own words, using subjective language, the experiences they associated with their transition periods. Second, it proved flexible enough to facilitate the solicitation of the member checks (described below) that allowed me to confirm I clearly understood both the letter as well as the spirit of the spoken and unspoken messages I believed I received from study participants.

In order to solicit these messages, I employed the “three-interview series” Seidman (2006, p. 16) recommended for use with study participants. This technique compelled me to organize my entire line of inquiry before speaking with participants (Esterberg, 2002). To do this, I placed all individual questions into one of three general categories, each of which corresponded to one of three interviews. The first interview “focused on life history,” the second on the “details of experience,” and the third on participant “reflection on the meaning” (Seidman, 2006, p. 17–18), each of them ascribed to the experiences the participants described to me.
I began each three-interview series by explaining the rationale for and proper use of the informed consent document (see Appendix C) to each participant. My objective during these initial conversations was to secure a signature from each participant that confirmed she or he understood the purpose of the study as well as the procedures she or he could expect as we completed all three interviews. I structured these conversations so that each participant understood all aspects of the study including: potential risks associated with participation in the study, the types of benefits participants might receive in exchange for participating in the study, the costs and compensation associated with participating in the study, the rights each participant had, the techniques I would use to ensure confidentiality, and the process and contact information participants could use to address questions or concerns about the study to someone other than myself. Each participant signed an informed consent document and received a photocopy of it for his or her records.

The first interview (31 scripted questions) with each participant was designed to solicit a “focused life history” (Seidman, 2006, p. 17). The questions I asked during this interview were constructed and organized to help participants relax and begin to describe themselves to me. In particular, I asked each participant to describe his or her:

- Basic demographic characteristics and military status as of the date of the interview,
- Decision to join the military,
- Family members and friends who had served in the military,
- Experiences leading up to and at basic training,
- Experiences once he or she had completed basic training and moved on to his or her permanent duty station(s), and
• Deployment(s).

During the second interview (24 scripted questions) with each participant, designed to focus on the “details of experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 18), each participant recalled a wide range of decisions she or he had made. The questions I asked during this interview were structured to ascertain how participants had:

• Decided to attend college,
• Fared at ACC up to that point,
• Prepared to attend college,
• Changed during their transition to ACC,
• Been supported during their transition to ACC,
• Supported other postdeployment veterans who were transitioning to ACC, and
• Reconciled military and campus cultures.

The third interview (18 scripted questions) with each participant was designed to provide each participant with an opportunity for “reflection on the meaning” (Seidman, 2006, p. 18) he or she ascribed to his or her transition experiences. During this final interview, I asked each participant a line of questions designed to understand:

• How ACC had helped or hindered his or her transition process,
• How other transitioning veterans had helped or hindered his or her transition process,
• How he or she understood the experiences of other transitioning veterans,
• How he or she would summarize his or her transition experience so far, and
• The plans he or she had made for the future.
A list of the interview questions I asked may be found in Appendix F. I used two of the predominant and distinguishing features of liminality theory to inform the design of the questions I asked participants. As a result, many of the interview questions I asked were framed either by concepts associated with rites of transition (especially rites of passage) (Turner, 1969), such as basic training, war, etc., or the liminal construct of finding one’s self betwixt and between (Turner, 1969) two or more life stages or identity phases (insider/outsider status).

I conducted the entire sequence of interviews between May 10, 2013 and December 12, 2014. On average, each individual interview lasted approximately 1 hour. I digitally recorded each interview and took notes during each interview to help guide the process and serve as a backup in case any recordings became corrupted. I had each interview recording transcribed as soon as possible after the interview had concluded and e-mailed written transcripts of each interview to participants for review prior to subsequent interviews.

The purpose of each of these reviews was twofold. First, these reviews provided participants an opportunity to look for errors or provide supplemental responses to questions they had wanted more time to think about. I honored every request, of the few I received, to correct or supplement a response a participant had given at an earlier time. Second, these reviews helped to keep participants conscious of previously shared responses, which in turn helped participants prepare for and participate in unstructured, postinterview dialogues, during which we discussed themes, organizing principles, or big-picture type issues they believed were developing in the responses they were sharing to interview questions. Taken together, these activities proved to be an effective way to conduct member checks, which
Merriam (2002) described as “taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if they were plausible” (p. 31).

**Observations.** In addition to conducting interviews, observing participants was another valuable and efficient technique I used to gather data about them (Esterberg, 2002). After securing permission to do so, I supplemented the data I gathered during interviews with study participants by observing them during SVA meetings. Although I had the choice of remaining a complete observer, I was a relatively active participant during these meetings; and, because I used “observation . . . in conjunction with interviewing, the term fieldwork or field study” (Merriam, 2002, p. 13) applied to my activities. I was able to unobtrusively take notes during these meetings, as participants had witnessed me doing that since assisting with the formation of the organization the year before. I was also able to ask clarifying questions because that was also expected of me in my roles over the course of time (quasi advisor and then coadvisor).

This fieldwork consistently confirmed conclusions I continued to draw about participants while and after interviewing them. During SVA meetings, participants demonstrated an awareness of and sensitivity toward the numerous challenges other postdeployment veterans were facing along with a willingness to help them overcome academic, social, legal, physical, and financial obstacles. During the 18 months I conducted interviews, I witnessed participants assisting one another during SVA meetings regarding a diverse range of personal concerns. A nonexhaustive list of the types of issues they very successfully addressed on behalf of one another included: birth of children, death of parents, preparation for examinations and presentations, isolation from classmates, paying bills,
commuting to and from campus, disciplining children, dieting, exercising, interviewing for employment, planning holidays and vacations, assigning and completing domestic/household tasks, maintaining vehicles, and navigating the financial aid process.

**Documents.** I was not able to attend every SVA meeting that was held. However, even when I was not able to personally participate in them, I was able to monitor what happened during them. I did this by analyzing meeting minutes that were generated while these gatherings took place, especially, though not exclusively, in my absence. My decision to “study human behavior unobtrusively . . . through written texts” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 121) proved to be an effective way to collect additional information regarding the social dynamics that continued to evolve within the organization and to which participants frequently referred when describing their transition experiences. This additional data served to supplement the information I was able to glean from interviews and while making observations and helped confirm that I was accurately interpreting the messages my participants were sharing with me. The more data I collected by analyzing documents, the more appreciative I became of the chief virtues of this method, which Merriam (2002) accurately summarized when she wrote,

The strength of documents as a data source lies in the fact that they already exist in the situation; they do not intrude upon or alter the setting in ways that the presence of an investigator might. Nor are they dependent upon the whims of human beings whose cooperation is essential for collecting data through interviews and observations. (p. 13)
Face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and document analysis each proved to be effective data collection tools. With the data I had collected at my disposal, I continued the process of data analysis, which I had actually begun toward the beginning of the data collection phase of my study.

**Data Analysis**

I started analyzing data on a superficial level as soon as I began collecting it. At that time, I also began the habit of recording memos and other study-related notations in an electronically formatted research notebook as well as in a paper journal (Esterberg, 2002). In addition, I adopted the practice of keeping a constantly updated draft e-mail saved on my laptop. I added ideas, concerns, and questions to this message periodically and, when I believed doing so would prove helpful, would send it to my advisor for the purpose of keeping in contact with him and receiving real-time guidance. Over the course of time, I devoted an increasingly greater proportion of my time to data analysis in particular. After I completed the data collection phase of my study, I focused my efforts exclusively upon data analysis and the reporting of it.

Upon shifting my focus, I realized I needed to adopt, consistently utilize, and constantly refine a system that would allow me to thoroughly and accurately analyze my data. To accomplish this, I first engaged in *epoché* (bracketing), as described earlier. In fact, I often paused throughout the course of conducting this study to bracket my worldview and biases. Then, as often as proved necessary, I used the three-step process Moustakas (1994) succinctly summarized when he suggested investigators should sequentially engage in “phenomenological reduction,” “horizontalization,” and “imaginative variation” (p. 90–101):
Phenomenological reduction is the process of continually returning to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself. . . . Horizontalization is the process of laying out all the data and treating the data as having equal weight; that is, all aspects of data have equal value at the initial data analysis stage. . . . Imaginative variation involves examining the data from divergent perspectives and varying frames of reference. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96)

In the early stages of my data analysis, I engaged in the type of phenomenological reduction Moustakas (1994) suggested. I repeatedly read all interview transcripts straight through to familiarize myself with the literal content of each one. I then reread each transcript until I was familiar with the subtleties and nuances of the participants’ descriptions of their post deployment transition experiences prior to and after enrolling at ACC—to the degree that these idiosyncrasies were revealed in the transcribed text. I supplemented this understanding with what I had learned via participant observation and document analysis, making notes of my synthesized, evolving understanding of the transition experiences study participants had described. I added these notes to the research notebook I used throughout the course of the study; which I also used to record self-directed suggestions related to what I needed to do to resolve questions and to organize and express ideas and insights. I recorded entries relating to how I felt about this study in my journal.

When I believed that I understood both the literal and figurative meaning(s) of the words and phrases in the transcripts, I engaged in horizontalization. I did this by physically “laying out all the data [I had collected] and treating the data as having equal weight [at this] initial data analysis stage” (Merriam, 2002, p. 94). Next, I looked for words, phrases, or
combinations thereof that appeared repeatedly. I then clustered these data into themes and removed repetitious statements (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96). Using this technique repeatedly, I interwove people, conscious experience, and phenomenon, and in the process of “explicating the phenomenon, recognizing and describing qualities . . . granting every perception equal value . . . [and] linking nonrepetitive constituents of experience thematically . . . derived a full description” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96).

Finally, using this full description, I engaged in imaginative variation by “examining the data from divergent perspectives and varying frames of reference [and then constructed] a synthesis of textual and structural descriptions (the what and how) of the phenomenon being studied” (Merriam, 2002, p. 94). These textual and structural descriptions—the what and how of postdeployment veteran transitions to ACC—informed the findings reported in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Qualitative researchers use terms of art such as “good,” “high quality,” and “trusted” to describe valuable research that makes a contribution to the “knowledge base of a field and to practice” (Merriam, 2002, p. 18). The findings generated by this study are good and of high quality and may be trusted, because I researched and reported them in accordance with a pair of standards that were functionally equivalent but semantically distinguishable. I utilized the traditional (conventional) practices and nomenclature used by the qualitative research community to ensure internal validity, reliability, and external validity (Merriam, 2002) as well as the more naturalist (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) approach espoused by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that resulted in what they
described as “trustworthiness” (p. 301). These approaches make use of different terms to describe essentially the same activities and objectives.

**Internal validity.** “Internal validity asks the question, How congruent are one’s findings with reality?” (Merriam, 2002, p. 25). With respect to qualitative research, the answer to this question depends upon whether particular strategies were taken to ensure that the study actually reports upon the phenomenon it purports to. These particular strategies include: triangulation; member checks; peer review; reflexivity; adequate engagement in data collection; maximum variation; maintenance of an audit trail; and the provision of rich, thick descriptions (Merriam, 2002).

Triangulation may be described as “using multiple investigators, sources of data, or data collection methods to confirm emerging findings” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). Although I was the sole researcher for this study, I used multiple sources of data as well as multiple data collection methods to confirm emerging findings. I interviewed six postdeployment veterans for the purpose of collecting a variety of perspectives. This allowed me to collect information from postdeployment veterans who had served in four different branches of the U.S. military as well as representatives of both genders. In addition to conducting interviews, I collected data via participant observation before, during, and after months of SVA meetings and by analyzing written documents such as meeting minutes taken at SVA meetings I was not able to attend in person.

Member checks are completed by “taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if they were plausible” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). I conducted member checks two different ways. First, I e-mailed complete interview
transcripts to participants subsequent to each of their interviews and asked them to make any corrections (typographical, grammatical, spelling) or additions (conceptual, explanatory) they believed were necessary or which would more accurately reflect the responses they wanted me to account for in my findings. Second, I followed up with participants between and after interviews and asked them to comment on any themes or organizing principles they believed were developing in their responses to interview questions. Doing both of these things helped me to ensure that I had recorded participants’ perspectives accurately, and it also gave the participants an opportunity to clarify anything they might have said or tried to infer that may have escaped my notice.

Peer review provides researchers with an opportunity to engage in “discussions with colleagues regarding the process of study, the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). I asked a fellow graduate student to help me with this aspect of my study. He was familiar with the dissertation writing process, in addition to the focus of my research, as a result of attending many of the same research- and methodology-focused classes I had during the coursework phase of our degree program. He reviewed this study from the perspective of someone who understood my research purpose and goals as well as the precepts associated with high quality qualitative research. I remain very appreciative of his practical suggestions, and I am convinced that each of those I followed up on improved this study.

Reflexivity is defined as retrospective, “critical self-reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). Focusing upon this aspect of
my investigation helped me to understand the process I experienced while completing this study as well as when I begin to prepare to conduct future research. In keeping with the established practice in my graduate program, I have included my reflexivity statement in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

Adequate engagement in data collection may be demonstrated by investing “adequate time . . . collecting data such that data become ‘saturated’ [and] may involve seeking discrepant or negative cases” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). I collected data over the course of 18 months while conducting this study. This prolonged engagement during the data collection phase alone provided numerous opportunities to become familiar with study participants and build mutual trust and respect. In some instances, I had known participants up to a year in advance of the data collection phase of this study, because we had worked together to start the SVA at ACC. In other instances, in my capacity as the eventual coadvisor to the SVA, I continued to interact with study participants even after their interviews were completed. These multiple instances of prolonged engagement provided me numerous opportunities to supplement what I had learned during participant interviews with extensive periods of participant observation and document analysis.

As a consequence, my data became saturated. I was able to make this determination when novel “concepts, themes, and categories” (Merriam, 2002, p 14.) stopped emerging. Study participants provided additional evidence of data saturation during casual, stream-of-consciousness type conversations as well. This occurred, for example, when participants themselves began mentioning outside of, and subsequent to interviews, themes that had initially manifested exclusively during interviews. Eventually, I began to conceptualize of
these unsolicited remarks and observations as instances of voluntary or self-induced member checks.

In chapter 4, I describe discrepant or negative (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) cases. These were circumstances in which explanations of experiences described by a minority of study participants conflicted with the accounts of experiences detailed by a majority of their coparticipants.

Maximum variation is achieved by investigators “purposefully seeking variation or diversity in sample selection to allow for a greater range of application of the findings by consumers of the research” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). To achieve maximum variation, I recruited participants with as wide a range of characteristics as possible in terms of the branch of service in which they had enlisted (no officers were interviewed), gender, and race/ethnicity. I included participants from four branches of the military. In particular, I recruited participants who had served in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. I also recruited participants from both genders, eventually interviewing five men and one woman. The area of the country (rural Iowa) from which I selected participants made it difficult to recruit racial/ethnic minorities as all study participants self-identified as Caucasian.

Audit trails are “maintained to provide a detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out [a] study” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). The majority of the audit trail I maintained now appears in an organized and redacted form as chapters 3 and 5 of this study. During the course of completing this study, I maintained a single, organic, electronic outline comprising all the topics, procedures, questions, and responses that I
wanted to include in this study. Throughout the course of this study, I drafted occasional research-related journal entries that I memorialized in a comprehensive, personal journal. Using these two techniques allowed me to track all of the tangential thoughts, potential organizing ideas and strategies, questions, and self-directed suggestions that occurred to me during the time it took me to complete this study. The advantage to using this technique is that I constantly had access to an up-to-the-minute outline that contained all relevant study-related content I was contemplating using.

Rich, thick descriptions are the result of researchers “providing enough description to contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situation matches the research context, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). To ensure I fashioned rich, thick descriptions, I focused on participant quotations and captured as much variety and detail as possible from accounts rendered by study participants. Although transferability was not the primary focus of this qualitative study, I wanted to give this study’s audience enough information so that they would be able to “determine the extent to which findings from [this] study can be applied to their context” (Merriam, 2002, p. 29). Creating accounts of postdeployment veteran transition experiences that might be applicable beyond my study was a more accurate way of describing what I intended to accomplish by the rich, thick descriptions I included in this dissertation.

**Reliability and external validity.** Although an analysis of a study’s internal validity allows evaluators to determine if a study actually measures what its authors claim it does, a determination of a study’s “reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be
replicated” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27) and is thus linked to its external validity. However, given the variability in human behaviors, attitudes, emotions, and decision-making processes, “replication of a qualitative study will not yield the same results” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27) no matter what design is used. For this reason, the primary focus when evaluating qualitative research is not whether it can be duplicated but “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 288).

This type of consistency has typically been demonstrated using many of the techniques described above. However, there is a related set of similar but semantically distinguishable variables that Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested ought to be evaluated to determine whether a study is “trustworthy” (p. 289–331), which I also considered when I designed and conducted this study. Specifically, “the . . . terms ‘credibility,’ ‘transferability,’ ‘dependability,’ and ‘confirmability’ are, then, the naturalist’s equivalents for the conventional terms ‘internal validity,’ ‘external validity,’ ‘reliability,’ and ‘objectivity’” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300).

**Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined trustworthiness as “that quality of an investigation (and its findings) that made it noteworthy to audiences” and specifically declared,

Credibility (parallel to internal validity) addressed the issue of the inquirer providing assurances of the fit between the respondents’ views of their life ways and the inquirer’s reconstruction and representation of the same.

Transferability (parallel to external validity) dealt with the issue of generalization in terms of case-to-case transfer. It concerned the inquirer’s the
responsibility for providing readers with sufficient information on the case studied such that readers could establish the degree of similarity between the case studied and the case to which findings might be transferred.

Dependability (parallel to reliability) focused on the process of the inquiry and the inquirer’s responsibility for ensuring that the process was logical, traceable, and documented.

Confirmability (parallel to objectivity) was concerned with establishing the fact that the data and interpretations of an inquiry were not merely figments of the inquirer’s imagination. It called for linking assertions, findings, interpretations, and so on to the data themselves in readily discernable ways. (Schwandt, 2007, p. 299)

The strategies I used in this study to demonstrate internal validity, reliability, external validity, and objectivity served the same purpose with respect to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Specifically, I demonstrated internal validity as well as the corresponding concept of credibility using triangulation, member checks, peer review, reflexivity, and adequate engagement in data collection.

Reliability and the corresponding concept of transferability “are problematic in the social sciences simply because human behavior is never static, nor is what many experience necessarily more reliable than what one person experiences” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27). However, because I used the strategies listed immediately above and also maintained an audit trail, readers of this study have been positioned to determine whether this study’s findings might be applicable to their circumstances even if they are not literally transferable.
Similarly, evaluating a study’s external validity and the corresponding concept of dependability allows researchers to determine if a study is generalizable to some extent, but “because qualitative research draws from different assumptions about reality, generalizability needs to be thought of differently” (Merriam, 2002, p. 28). As a consequence, a variety of social scientists have offered practical, alternative ways to conceptualize generalizability. These approaches have included the use of working hypotheses (Cronbach, 1975), context bound extrapolations (Patton, 1990), concrete, rather than abstract, universals (Erickson, 1986), generalized abstractions (Eisner, 1991), and case-to-case transfer (Walker, 1980), all as cited by Merriam (2002). Readers of this study have been positioned to use each of these techniques to determine whether this study’s finding may be applicable to their circumstances because I used a substantial number of rich, thick descriptions to contextualize participant responses to interview questions, observations I made as a participant observer at SVA meeting, and conclusions I drew after reviewing minutes taken at those gatherings.

Finally, I addressed confirmability (objectivity, in the conventional sense) in two ways. First, I linked all findings to participant quotations, participant observations, and document analysis. Every finding in this study corresponds to one or more of these components of my data collection efforts. Second, I maintained an audit trail that would allow an evaluator to trace the development of study findings and conclusions, because it rendered transparent the thought process and decision making that went into the development of each one of them. Although researchers may disagree about the terminology that ought to be used to describe the strategies and techniques they use to complete their studies, the consensus among them is that difficult decisions must be made regarding the limits a
researcher places on his or her investigations. The next section describes this study’s delimitations.

**Delimitations**

Like all investigators, I bounded (narrowed the scope of) my data collection and data analysis for this study. I limited the study to six participants. In addition, I selected participants based upon four criteria, which were related to: characterization of service obligation, location of service, location of the community college each participant had enrolled at subsequent to his or her discharge from the service, and type of coursework he or she completed at that school. Specifically, I limited participation in this study to six participants who had: enlisted; deployed subsequent to September 11, 2001; enrolled at the same campus of the same community college in Iowa; and enrolled in degree-granting programs that required the completion of mostly face-to-face (as opposed to strictly online) coursework.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of veterans who have made the transition from international deployments to an Iowa community college. The essence of these experiences was solicited by asking the question: How do veterans who have made the transition from international deployments to an Iowa community college describe their experiences? Constructionism provided the epistemological foundation for the interpretivist perspective that was used to view the answer to this question through a theoretical lens provided by Van Gennep’s (1960) liminality theory. Data were collected via face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using a three-phase process comprising phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation.

This chapter provides participant profiles, a summary of study participants, and a detailed description of themes that were revealed after examining the transitions each participant experienced. To understand the essence of the experience each participant described regarding his or her overall transition from civilian to warfighter to student, it is necessary to be familiar with how each participant came to be deployed in the first place. To provide such context, a thematic analysis of each participant’s transition from civilian to warfighter has been included. Three themes were identified with respect to each transition described below: (a) calibration and detachment, (b) ambiguity and metamorphoses, and (c) consummation and reflection. All three themes were comprised of a variety of subthemes, each of which is described in detail below.
Participant Profiles

The following six participant profiles provide a short introduction to each of the postdeployment veterans who was interviewed for this study. Each profile consists of four descriptive components (self, service, school, and situation) that serve an identical purpose in each profile. The “self” section introduces the participant and provides some basic biographical information such as a participant’s self-identified characteristics of age, race, duration of military service, and marital status. The “service” section describes the participant’s decision to join the military and whether it was informed by the shared experiences of family members and/or that participant’s circle of acquaintances. The “school” section provides a short explanation of the participant’s experience with formal education after high school and culminates with a short description of the ACC program in which the participant was, or had been, enrolled at the time of his or her first interview. The “situation” section provides a short description of which aspect(s) of life the participant was focusing on at the time of his or her last interview as well as plans he or she was making for his or her future. A summary of the quantitative data found in the each of the profiles below can be found in Table 1 (chapter 3).

John

Self. John self-identified as a 39-year-old Caucasian male who had been retired from U.S. Navy for 17 months as of the date of his first interview. A native Iowan, he resided in the same small community in which he grew up and was commuting to classes multiple days a week during the entire course of his interviews. At the time, he was single and did not mention a significant other. He consistently displayed a contagious sense of humor and was
universally well liked and respected by his peers. John was instrumental in sustaining the SVA on campus and was serving as an especially strong, visible leader of that organization in various capacities.

Service. No one on the maternal side of John’s family had served in the military; however, his father’s side served with distinction. John’s paternal grandfather was a paratrooper in World War II and completed all five combat jumps. He went on to become one of the most highly decorated veterans in the state of Iowa. Among other awards, he received multiple purple hearts and a bronze star. John’s father joined the Naval Reserve after his sister was born. John also had a couple of uncles through marriage who had served, one in the Navy and the other in the Marines.

John described his entire family as being very supportive of his decision to join the Navy, even though his impetus for doing so resulted from a conversation with his father that can seem caustic until the words his father chose to use are contextualized. John indicated that his father was simply a very straightforward man, who explained that John had three options after high school. First, he could attend college and pay for it on his own, because his father thought such an option would be a waste of money. Second, he could get a job and move out. Third, he could join the military. As he contemplated his future, John had the benefit of discussing the option of joining the Navy with his father’s best friend, who happened to be a retired master chief recruiter. Together, they determined what the best naval job would be for John. After he successfully completed the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, he never looked back. John indicated he knew he made the correct decision, because he never really cared for school and didn’t feel responsible enough
at the time of his high school graduation to get a job and support himself without assistance. John also indicated that, initially, he intended to enlist for 4 years, as opposed to investing 20 years of his life in a Navy uniform.

Nonetheless, including his time at boot camp in Great Lakes, Illinois, he served a total of 20 years and 5 days. He joined the Navy at 18 years of age and retired when he was 38. John was enlisted the entire length of his service and retired as an E6, or Petty Officer First Class. John did a wide variety of jobs during this time, including functioning as a ship service man, a damage control man, base security, an onboard fire fighter, and a disaster preparedness coordinator.

**School.** John suggested repeatedly during his interviews that his lack of interest in formal education carried over from high school into his days in the Navy. For this reason, he gave very little thought to school while he was serving, even though the Navy did retain professors onboard the ships he sailed on. John suggested that this probably would never have changed had he not failed his final chief’s exam. At that point, he realized he would need to attend classes and decided to pursue his degree at a community college, in large measure based upon the affordability of doing so. At the time of his first interview, John had been attending classes at ACC for approximately 14 months and was enrolled in courses that would lead to a Business Specialist AA degree.

**Situation.** John was working on his first AA degree during the course of the interviews and was planning on completing a second AA in Marketing Management as soon as possible. He also indicated that he was planning to continue living in the same area after he finished the pursuit of his second degree and that he was very interested in maintaining his
involvement with the ACC SVA. John also routinely displayed an interest in giving back to ACC and went into great detail explaining how the college’s reputation had improved compared to what it had been when he was growing up nearby. On numerous occasions, he shared how happy he was with his choice to attend ACC and how much he appreciated the respect he received from others when he explained to them his involvement with the school. When pressed to imagine life a little further into the future, he conceded that he also had been considering transferring to a nearby 4-year university. In the next breath, he reiterated how thankful he was that classes at ACC were priced so reasonably. John repeatedly referenced financial considerations during his interviews and went back to this theme as we completed our last interview. He expressed tremendous relief that, if he did in fact transfer, he would be doing so with substantially less student debt than he would have been carrying had he not chosen to use his military benefits at a community college. As he concluded his final interview, John was upbeat and optimistic and had an infectious grin on his face. He was on his way to a SVA holiday fundraiser where he had volunteered to make an appearance as Santa Claus—in combat boots.

Luke

Self. Luke self-identified as a 27-year-old Caucasian male who had been a veteran of the U.S. Army National Guard for 5 years as of the date of his first interview. At the time, he was married, the proud father of both a 2-year-old and an 11-month-old, and he and his wife were expecting their third child in approximately two months. I had known Luke, a charter member of the ACC SVA, for over a year before he accepted my open invitation to participate in my study. He had served as an officer of the organization for a short while and
had actively encouraged other postdeployment veterans to join the SVA. His warm personality helped him convince other postdeployment veterans how valuable the SVA could be to them, which was a perspective he had gained based upon personal experience.

Prior to his interviews, Luke had disclosed to me that he had been diagnosed with depression as well as PTSD and that he was interested in sharing his story for cathartic reasons. He believed that sharing his story could help him to continue to successfully surmount the challenges he associated with both circumstances.

Luke explained that he had elected to join the military to help pay for college but that doing so required his parents’ permission because he was 17 years old when he made his decision. Sensing his sincerity and motivation to serve his country, they agreed to sign the required paperwork, and he entered the Recruitment Sustainment Program prior to attending basic training.

**Service.** Luke’s decision to join the U.S. Army was not the first experience his family had with the military. Both of his grandfathers had been drafted into service during the Korean War. His maternal grandfather had served in the Marines, and his paternal grandfather had served in the Army. Neither of his parents had served, however, and they both worried about his welfare given the escalation of hostilities that was occurring in both Afghanistan and Iraq at the time. His siblings also indicated how concerned they were for his safety, at least initially, but they eventually grew increasingly supportive of his decision to enlist and demonstrated this by attending his graduation from basic training. As a result of witnessing this turn of events in his life, Luke’s stepsister decided to join the Navy and recently had completed her enlistment.
Luke served a total of 6 years (17 to 23 years of age) as an enlisted soldier in the Army National Guard, with a final rank of E4, or Specialist. His military occupational specialty (MOS) was referred to as “88 Mike” or “Truck Driver,” and he indicated he enjoyed the mobility the job provided. Luke deployed once as an active duty soldier to Iraq for 10 months and drove a truck in direct support of combat operations in an active war zone.

**School.** Luke indicated that while he was deployed he contemplated the possibility of eventually attending college but was unsure of how to go about making the transition. Because he had little familiarity with higher education, he earnestly solicited the advice of friends who had experience dealing with college life and the challenges it posed. He had heard them speak highly of ACC during these conversations and decided to apply there even though there was a community college in his hometown. At the time of his first interview, he had been taking classes at ACC for 2½ years, and was anticipating graduating with an AA degree in Education.

**Situation.** When asked to summarize his life in general and his plans for the future, Luke immediately indicated that he remained focused on the near term. He explained that he was continuing to make significant strides navigating the challenges associated with depression as well as PTSD and that some classes were easier to sit through than others. He singled out his Abnormal Psychology class as one that had been difficult to participate in at times, especially when the focus had been PTSD and/or images related to the war in which he had participated. However, he also was quick to point out that he routinely obliged instructors who had tactfully provided him with meaningful opportunities to teach his peers
about what participating in the war taught him about the world and himself. In this way, Luke had continued to selflessly be of significant service to others.

**Mark**

**Self.** Mark self-identified as a 31-year-old Caucasian male who had honorably separated from the U.S. Marine Corps 5 years earlier. He was single at the time of his first interview. However, he got married during the course of my interviews with him, and he and his wife welcomed a baby daughter to their family prior to the conclusion of his third interview.

At the time of his first interview, I had known Mark for over a year and had been consistently impressed by how well he could get along with and relate to an extremely wide range of people. He had a ready, genuine smile and was a very effective communicator. Mark worked on the ACC campus, and I had numerous opportunities to observe him interact with ACC staff and peers in that capacity as well as during SVA meetings he attended while helping get the organization off to a strong start.

**Service.** Mark indicated that only a few of his relatives had served in the military. Neither of his grandfathers had served, and the long-term effects of a childhood accident had precluded his father from doing so. However, one of his uncles had been drafted into service during the Vietnam War, and he had a cousin who was serving in the National Guard. It was not a surprise, then, that Mark’s father reacted to his decision to become a Marine with questions about whether it was the best course of action for him to pursue. His uncle also had something to say about his decision. However, he was less concerned about Mark’s
decision to join the military per se than he was with the fact that Mark had chosen to become a Marine rather than join the Navy—because the Navy had beds.

Mark served a total of 8 years and 2 months (19 to 27 years of age) as an enlisted Marine and left the service as an E5. During that time, he worked in two different MOSs. The first was referred to as “58-11,” or “Military Police,” and the second was called “58-12,” or “Military Working Dog Handler.” He deployed to Iraq on two separate occasions. Initially, he was deployed for all of 2005 and then subsequently for the later part of 2007 up through June of 2008. He hurt his back both times he was on active federal duty and missed a third deployment that would have placed him in Afghanistan. Mark spoke enthusiastically of his deployments and shared that he had been especially pleased to have operated with both Army Special Forces and Navy Seal personnel. He concluded by drawing a sharp distinction between his tours. He suggested that, based upon the firefights in which he had been involved, he would definitely classify his first deployment as a combat tour. However, he conceded that because things had “quieted down” by the time he deployed the second time, he did not necessarily consider that a combat tour.

**School.** While he was deployed, Mark considered attending college via different online programs but was never able to secure the consistent access to the Internet that was required to complete his coursework. This lack of connection to nonmilitary organizations and sources of information also impeded his decision to enroll in college once he was discharged from the Marines. Mark often repeated how his lack of understanding of how the entire “college process” worked slowed his progress for a while, but it actually became a relevant factor in his decision to attend ACC. Because he was uncertain of how to go about
applying to and succeeding in college, he wanted to begin by taking things slow and attending classes at a school he felt was affordable and that would place him in a position to eventually transfer to a 4-year university. Mark was confident that he made the right series of decisions about ACC and was pleased with the progress he had made at ACC as of the time of his interviews. He was actively pursuing an AA degree and focusing on the field of communications but was also interested in investigating a trade such as construction.

**Situation.** During his final interview, Mark reflected upon his circumstances and confirmed that, in addition to short-term and mid-range plans, he also had long-term goals. His short-term plans were centered on his family. He had recently been married and was looking forward to investing time with both his wife and new daughter. His mid-range plans included finishing his AA degree, which he knew would be a challenge given his domestic schedule and responsibilities. However, he was committed to completing his coursework because he knew doing so would provide a solid foundation upon which he could build long-term success. Mark concluded by confirming my suspicion that he was interested in working in a field such as communications—perhaps as a teacher or a public speaking instructor.

**Mary**

**Self.** Mary self-identified as a 30-year-old Caucasian female who had been medically retired from the U.S. Army for approximately 11 month as of the date of her first interview. She described her decision to enlist as a momentary thought that just popped into her head that she did not consciously remember having contemplated on a prior occasion.

I had known Mary for over a year prior to her first interview because she was instrumental in launching the ACC SVA. She was very well liked by her peers and provided
strong and consistent leadership to them as one of the SVA’s founding members and early officers. During her series of interviews, I often contemplated how I had watched her assist other students on numerous occasions with their academic work, especially in the TRIO office, and how much they appreciated and respected her for doing so. During the time I worked with Mary in her capacity as an SVA officer, she was finishing her degree at ACC and in the process of preparing to transfer to a nearby 4-year university.

**Service.** Mary might have decided to join the military in what seemed like a flash, but by the time she did so her family had already made a substantial contribution to the U.S. Army. One of her grandfathers, her father, and an uncle all had served in the U.S. Army and were very supportive of her decision to enlist. With one significant exception, however, Mary’s friends were completely against her decision.

These friends were mostly high school classmates with whom Mary would spend very little time after her classes with them ended. She graduated from high school early, and 3 days later she was headed to Great Lakes, Illinois for Navy basic training, which she described as “horrifying” given the climate, her naturally reserved disposition, and her strong preference for avoiding confrontation.

Mary was the only study participant who had served in more than one branch of the military. She initially served in the Navy for a period of 6 years: 4 years on active duty followed by 2 years in the inactive reserve. She then served in the Air Force for 5 months before learning that, due to a change in Air Force policy, she would need to serve an additional 18 months before she was allowed to go on active duty. This news directly conflicted with the promise she understood the Air Force had made to her that would allow
her to go on active duty after only 6 months due to her prior service in the Navy. As a consequence of that experience, she decided to transition to the Army, where she served for approximately 5 years.

Mary served in an enlisted capacity for approximately 12 years (18 to 29 years of age) in three different branches of the military and worked in a different MOS each time. Specifically, she worked as a cryptologist in the Navy, an administrator in the Air Force, and a signal support specialist in the Army. Mary was medically retired as an E5.

During the 5 years she served in the Army, Mary deployed as an active duty soldier to Iraq twice. Her first deployment lasted 4 months, and her second lasted 12 months. Both rotations were considered combat deployments.

**School.** Mary considered attending college while she was deployed but quickly realized that she would need to enroll in an online program if she wanted to begin her studies before returning to the United States. This proved impractical because she was not able to secure consistent Internet access from her location(s). As a consequence, Mary waited until she returned from her second deployment to get started on her degree. However, once she was stateside she wasted no time getting started. She explained that, of the schools she was considering attending, ACC not only appeared to be the easiest to gain admittance to, it also was a college with which she was somewhat familiar because she had applied there on a previous occasion. She transferred into ACC with 12 credits and began taking classes shortly after her retirement from the Army. Mary decided to major in both English and Secondary Education and was in the process of completing her degree during the course of her interviews.
**Situation.** Mary always appeared committed to helping others, so it came as no surprise when she decided to focus on teaching as a career goal. During her final interview, she explained that she was pursuing a dual major as well as a dual minor at the 4-year school to which she had transferred after graduating from ACC. She lit up when she shared her plan to head straight into teaching and her hope that she could begin teaching at a high school right away so she could focus on students who would be learning more advanced English skills. In the next breath, she confided that starting out in a middle school where she could teach science or history seemed like it would be really fun, too. A broad smile settled across her face, and I knew that she knew she had identified her calling. She concluded by momentarily lamenting about how long it was taking to get to her goal and then, quickly brightening, she exclaimed, “I can’t wait for it! It is going to be awesome! I can’t wait to teach!”

**Matt**

**Self.** During his first interview, Matt self-identified as a 30-year-old Caucasian male who had been honorably discharged from the U.S. Army 7½ years earlier. He was residing in close proximity to where he had been raised and was an instructor at ACC. In that capacity, he also provided hands-on leadership and guidance to those participating in the SVA and counted many of its members as either current or former students.

In addition to staying very busy while he was on campus, Matt was also a happily married father; busy raising four children with a supportive wife he adored and of whom he was especially appreciative. During the course of his interviews, Matt was also in the process of finishing an advanced degree. For this reason, he was familiar with many of the
challenges I was facing in regard to completing this study, such as obtaining IRB approval prior to conducting research, scheduling and conducting interviews, and the necessity of constantly editing one’s written work. He had published a well-received book based upon his experiences in combat and proved to be a particularly thoughtful, articulate, and candid study participant. Among other attributes, he also possessed a terrific sense of humor.

**Service.** Matt explained that joining the military had been a goal of his while growing up, due in large measure to his family’s rich military heritage. His father had served in the National Guard during the Vietnam War, and a couple of his uncles had served in the Korean War. In addition, he had a great uncle who had played cards with General MacArthur in World War II, and his maternal great-grandfather had fought in the Civil War—marching at one point through the South (including Georgia) with General Sherman.

Matt had always wanted to join the Marine Corps, but upon inquiring about the possibility of attending Airborne training, learned that the Army was the only branch of the service that could guarantee him such an opportunity. Prior to taking advantage of the opportunity, and the monetary signing bonus the Army had promised to attach to his contract indicating his willingness to do so, Matt also had to navigate his family’s perception of the wisdom of his decision to go on active duty. He explained that he invited a National Guard recruiter to his home and that his mother initially was opposed to the visit and her son’s pending decision, given the experiences she remembered having with the military during the Vietnam War. Despite a cordial conversation, Matt realized he would need to act on his own behalf from that point forward. On his 18th birthday, he called himself in to school “sick”
and traveled to his recruiting station to enlist. Matt’s mom eventually spoke to him about his decision—after the passage of 3 very quiet weeks around the family dinner table.

Matt described his mom as continuing to come around and as being proud of the decision he made, whereas his father continued to remain overtly proud, as always, of the investment of time he made serving his country. This support was of terrific value to Matt, who had graciously and eloquently spoken in numerous public venues about the influence of depression and PTSD on his emotional and psychological health after he returned from his second overseas deployment. The grace and cathartic humor with which Matt has approached this topic have helped him explain the experience of contemporary combat to deeply and emotionally moved and appreciative audiences and has provided many postdeployment veterans with a genuine, authentic measure of hope and optimism.

Matt served in the Army for 4 years (18–22 years of age) in an enlisted capacity and was honorably discharged as an E4, or sergeant. His MOS the entire time was referred to as “13 Bravo,” or “Cannon Crew Member.” In that capacity, Matt deployed twice to Iraq. His first deployment lasted 6 months, and the second was 4 months in duration.

**School.** While shaking his head, Matt confided that the thought of attending college never crossed his mind while he was deployed. Shortly after returning to the United States, however, he was broke and doing construction work when a buddy of his called him and suggested that they ought to go to school together using the GI Bill benefits they each had accrued while serving. For this reason, Matt admitted that he went back to school for financially motivated reasons. He was broke and unable to pay his bills, but he realized he was entitled to money that was just waiting for him to access it. He also suggested that,
initially, he did not care what he studied. So, giving little thought to the outcome he hoped to achieve, he began by taking business-related classes—which proved to be a disaster. Over the course of time, however, he was drawn to writing and worked with a particularly supportive faculty member who encouraged him to capture his thoughts on paper and to continue to process and refine them there.

This interest in composition ultimately resulted in Matt completing his AA degree at ACC a few years before transitioning to the role of instructor there. I had witnessed Matt interacting with both veteran and nonveteran students, and he was universally respected and sought out by those in each group. Other study participants frequently referenced him during interviews and, without exception, indicated he was one of the better liked and sought after faculty members at ACC.

**Situation.** During his last interview, Matt reflected on his life’s circumstances and shared an inviting, authentic, lingering smile. He suggested that he was committed to settling into a full-time teaching position at ACC because he was certain that doing so would give him an opportunity to grow professionally in a meaningful way as well as to continue to support other veterans. He spoke of an organic, 5-year plan he had for the SVA as well about percolating ideas he had been contemplating for a second book. Matt was at home at ACC, and it showed. He wound down his last interview by confirming that he would eventually like to retire from ACC, given what the school had done for him and the high esteem in which he held the institution. He concluded that conversation by suggesting that, based on how much ACC meant to him, he was unsure if he would ever leave on his own accord.
Paul

**Self.** Paul self-identified as a 29-year-old Caucasian male who had been discharged from the Marine Corps approximately 21 months before his first interview. He was married with an adolescent stepson and counted the proactive, consistent, and effective support of his wife as providing one of the most important foundations in his life. He was quick to credit her with keeping him disciplined and organized, and he spoke at length about the time they had invested together making lists, sharing in decision making, and planning for their shared future. Unlike most study participants, Paul did not grow up in Iowa. Rather, he lived in Arizona as a youngster and moved to Michigan when he was around 6 years old. He also lived in North Carolina for a short time after his enlistment ended, so transitioning to ACC required him to relocate his residence from the East Coast to the Midwest at approximately the same time he was beginning classes at an Iowa community college.

**Service.** Paul’s decision to join the Marines was informed by conversations he had enjoyed with his father, who had had followed in own father’s example by serving in the Navy. Paul never met his maternal grandfather, but indicated that to the best of his knowledge he had served in the Army. These conversations helped Paul decide to begin working with a recruiter as early as his junior year in high school, and he believed as recently as his series of interviews that he had been privileged to work with a high caliber, ethical recruiter. He suggested that all of the promises his recruiter made to him were honored, as were all the stipulations he had agreed to in his contract.

Paul’s soundly researched decision to join the Marines created a strong foundation to build upon and resulted in a 9-year (18 to 27 years of age) enlistment. At the end of this
time, he was ranked as an E4, or corporal. Paul’s MOS designation was “6048—Aviation Life Supporting Systems Marine” throughout the course of his enlistment. Among other things, extremely important duty assignments had him inspecting, repairing, and packing parachutes. He was routinely challenged in this job by the age of the equipment with which he was required to work, which in many cases had been in service since the 1950s (during the Prowler Program). The most disconcerting aspect of the job that Paul shared was the fact that he and his team considered themselves to be in the lifesaving business and, there they were, receiving shipments of brand new parachutes that were still in their original wrappers—but whose duty life had expired! Despite the challenges he routinely overcame working in tandem with teammates, Paul performed these duties during a pair of 6–7 month, active duty tours in Iraq that he indicated would not be considered combat deployments.

School. After his second tour of duty ended, Paul began classes at ACC and described his decision to do so as based mostly on convenience and accessibility. He worked every day at the same time, dropped his stepson off at school on a routine basis, and wanted to attend a college that was close enough to allow him to continue doing both of these things. At the time of his interviews, Paul was in his first semester at ACC. He had originally enrolled in the ACC Mechanical Technical program, but after deciding that it was not a good fit, transferred into the Associate of Science degree program. He was excited about his program and already was looking forward to eventually transferring to a 4-year institution to study mechanical engineering.

Situation. Paul was an extremely focused individual and was able to immediately explain his future goals when I inquired about them during his final interview. He began by
referencing his family and confirming that he and his wife were researching the purchase of a home, which they hoped to be able to move into in the near future. Next, he shared his calculation of the exact amount of time he believed he would need to complete his degree at ACC, thereby positioning him to transfer to a 4-year school.

Paul also was extremely practical. He indicated that he expected to face some challenges accomplishing everything he had set out to but that, one way or another, he would find a way to accomplish his objectives. He concluded by suggesting that he would likely need to invest some time physically apart from his family to accomplish his goals but that he was confident his wife and stepson would continue to support him while he did so.

**Participant Summary**

The six participants interviewed for this study all self-identified as Caucasian and ranged in age from 27 to 39 years. Each had fulfilled the contractual obligations to his or her respective branches of the military, which ranged from single enlistments all the way up to a 20-year career. One had served in the Navy; two had served in the Marines; two had served in the Army; and one had served in the Army, Navy, and Air Force.

All six had family members who had served prior to their choice to do so. For the most part, each of the six participants received relatively strong support from friends and family members who had served on a prior occasion. Matt’s mother and Mark’s father were initially reluctant to support their respective son’s decision to enlist, based in large measure upon experiences each remembered from the Vietnam War. With a single exception, Mary recalled receiving very little support for her decision to enlist from her high school acquaintances.
All six had served in the enlisted ranks, and none of them indicated they had ever considered becoming an officer. Rather, all had focused exclusively upon the MOS they had been trained to perform and reported having been relatively happy with their chosen duties. Without exception, however, all six had also been quick to point out suboptimal aspects of their jobs as well. These drawbacks ranged from aggravating circumstances to life-threatening episodes. Four of the six participants described combat deployments comprised of various degrees of ebbing and flowing danger and risk. Matt, for example, described a combat tour that required him to complete 36-hour duty shifts followed by 12-hour periods of rest and recuperation, during which he was on constant alert even while eating meals with Blackwater operatives.

After the participants shifted their collective attention to earning a degree at ACC, they demonstrated many common characteristics. Four of the six were charter members of the ACC SVA, and each of these four had played a significant role in organizing, energizing, and sustaining it. John and Paul had not been enrolled at ACC at the time the SVA was created, but both had stepped into a visible leadership role as soon as they became members. At the time of their interviews, four participants were approximately in the middle of their respective degree programs. At the same time she was completing her degree work at ACC, Mary was in the midst of successfully arranging to transfer to a local, well-respected, 4-year university. Matt, who had graduated from ACC a few years earlier, had transferred to and completed a 4-year degree at another highly venerated local university and had returned to ACC as an instructor.
During final opportunities for reflection, each participant mentioned that affordability had been a significant factor he or she had considered when deciding to attend ACC. Each also believed that ACC provided a solid education and described being proud to be associated with it. Furthermore, each participant also was looking forward to contributing to the social fabric she or he had transitioned to become a part of.

Matt had returned to ACC to teach after graduating years earlier. Mary was preparing to be a teacher herself and was successfully navigating the liminal stage of her next transition. Luke, John, Mark, and Paul were motivated to use what they were learning in the classroom to help others as soon and as often as possible. Each participant continued to demonstrate that his or her individual journey from civilian to warfighter to student had, in fact, served as an accurate indicator of a commitment to a life of service and learning.

**Liminality Theory and Theme Construction**

Liminality theory assumes that all life transitions comprise three stages and that each of these stages may be identified based upon one or more rites associated with it. The initial stage in any transition is referred to as preliminal and is comprised of at least one rite of separation. The second (middle) stage of any transition is referred to as liminal and is comprised of at least one “rite of transition.” The third stage of any transition is referred to as postliminal and is comprised of at least one rite of incorporation. Each of the six themes described in this study reveal participant thinking and/or behavior that corresponds with a particular stage and, by definition, with one or more of its corresponding rites.

The first set of three themes describes participants as they transitioned from being a civilian to achieving the status of warfighter, the contemporary term used to describe a
service member from any branch of the U.S. military regardless of MOS. These three themes are, respectively: (a) from civilian to warfighter—calibration and detachment, which corresponds with the preliminal stage as well as rites of separation; (b) from civilian to warfighter—ambiguity and metamorphoses, which corresponds with the liminal stage and rites of transition; and (c) from civilian to warfighter—consummation and reflection, which corresponds to the postliminal stage and rites of incorporation.

The second set of three themes describes participants as they moved from warfighter to student status at an Iowa community college. These three themes are, respectively: (a) from warfighter to student—calibration and detachment, which corresponds with the preliminal stage as well as rites of separation; (b) from warfighter to student—ambiguity and metamorphoses, which corresponds with the liminal stage and rites of transition; and (c) from warfighter to student—consummation and reflection, which corresponds with the postliminal stage and rites of incorporation.

Each of the above six themes is comprised of a number of subthemes, which are discussed in chapter 5.

Themes

From Civilian to Warfighter—Calibration and Detachment

**Contemplation.** Each participant had contemplated enlisting in his or her own way and had taken actions commensurate with such a process when doing so seemed most appropriate. In many instances, participants had been relatively certain of their enlistment decisions and had been able to make them—or ratify having done so at some point in the past—relatively easily. Matt explained,
I joined because it was something I wanted to do. It was always a goal of mine growing up. My family has a pretty rich military history, and I wanted to [do my part]. I always thought I wanted to be a Marine, and I went in there, and I also wanted to be Airborne. And the Marine Corps said, “We can [sign you up], but [without a] bonus.” And so I went to the Army, and they said, “We’ll get you your $7,000 bonus, and we’ll guarantee you’re Airborne.” So, I signed the line.

Paul shared that he had thought about his decision for an extended period of time and had discussed with my father multiple times [over the] years his service in the Navy. My junior year in high school I decided I wanted to get a hold of a recruiter. I contacted them and took my dad’s truck and drove out there one day. That basically began my journey in the Marine Corps.

Mark, another former Marine, described working with a recruiter for an extended period of time as well:

I would say [we worked together] about a year. I was already 18 before my senior year in high school. I went to the recruiter and talked to him, [and] he had all the packages and videotapes, so I signed the contract. How I went about it was, basically, thought about it for a while, then I talked to a Marine recruiter in [hometown] when it used to be at the [hometown] mall and just said, “Yeah, okay, I’m going to do it.” One of my older cousins wanted me to try the National Guard. I talked to the National Guard, and they didn’t have very good selling techniques, and that wasn’t really for me. And, watching “GI Joe” and old movies like “Heartbreak
Ridge,” I saw the Marine Corps in a higher light, so that is why I joined the Marine Corps.

Not all participants were old enough to join the military of their own accord, however. Luke was an example of a participant who needed to include his parents in his decision-making process. He described,

I was 17 at the time, so I had to get [my] parents’ permission. We talked about it, and [my recruiter] said, “We can either do it now, or wait 6 months until you are 18.” My parents actually signed the forms. It was probably one of the best decisions I have ever made in my life.

A parent also helped Mary accelerate the process of enlisting, but in a slightly different manner. She explained,

Before I went into the Navy, I wasn’t doing too well in high school. Before that, I honestly didn’t want to do it. I guess I got tired of my dad yelling at me for failing in school, so the thought popped into my head, and I told him, and about 2–3 days later I was at the recruiter.

**Familiarity.** After contemplating their options, all participants took decisive action at a certain point in time based upon the best information they had available. In a few instances, participants had grown up listening to a litany of stories about service, commitment, honor, and heritage. One of Matt’s grandfathers had played cards with General MacArthur, and one of his great grandfathers had marched through the South with General Sherman scores of years before that. Similarly, John’s paternal grandfather had participated in all five combat jumps in World War II and had gone on to become one of the most highly
decorated veterans in the state of Iowa. These men shared stories about their time in uniform in a way that had a strong influence upon their grandsons’ decisions to enlist.

Less direct, perhaps, but still influential, were the service-related experiences shared by other participants’ family members. Both of Luke’s grandfathers served in the military during the Korean War. Paul and Mary each had fathers who had served. Mark’s father had not served; but his uncle had and was able to provide him with some additional perspective regarding life in uniform and in which branch it was preferable to serve provided an enlistee was given a choice. As a result, all six participants had a relatively informed understanding of what life was like in the military in years past, even if their own experiences would turn out to be very different.

**Support.** For the most part, the family members and friends who contributed to this level of familiarity with the military were supportive of each participant’s decision to enlist, although this was not the case universally. In some instances, family members and friends initially sent mixed messages—and then changed their minds with the passage of time.

Paul recounted,

I had a lot of people that believed in me. My mom didn’t really know [about my intention to enlist] until the recruiter came to the house. [But], my dad knew, [and] every time a recruiter would call he would say, “Hey, the phone’s for you,” and he would chuckle.

John also received a lot of support from his family, which was comprised of many present or former service members. He shared: “I actually have a couple of uncles through
marriage who were military: Navy, Marines. My family was very, very supportive. They were very supportive in words and actions.”

Other participants received mixed messages from family and friends upon learning they had decided to enlist. Matt recounted,

Yeah, mom hated the fact that I did it. I think she is coming around to being proud of what I’ve done with it now—that I went on my own path and I’ve been successful.

Dad has always been extremely proud of me. He always has been since I was a little kid. Whatever I did—as long as I was doing something because I wanted to and not because someone was making me—and, dad is kind of my hero, too. So, whatever I can do to make dad happy. The rest of my family and my brother and sisters; they’re happy, too. But, at the same time—we’ve got a large family—everybody basically has their own lives going on but they’re all proud.

Similarly, Mark shared, “My dad wanted to know ‘why.’ He wondered if it was the best thing for me.” Mark also shared an amusing story about his uncle’s reaction, and a related experience he had in Iraq:

One thing I’ll never forget, is talking to my uncle who was in Vietnam, [about his experience at some point] during my senior year. My uncle said I should have joined the Navy because the Navy gets beds. An interesting story with that was when I was deployed in Iraq for the first time . . . I was out on a mission with some infantry guys and we were in an abandoned school and I slept on some cardboard. We didn’t have anything . . . and always said, “Pack light to the fight,” and I didn’t bring any sleeping
bag or anything with me. I ended up sleeping on a piece of cardboard, using my shirt as a blanket. I kind of thought that was funny—that my uncle [had] said that.

Luke, too, initially received a tepid response from his family members, which became decidedly supportive over the course of time. He explained,

They were worried about me because they knew we had the conflict[s] in Afghanistan and Iraq going on. But I told them that, “If I die, I’m dying for my country. I am dying for you guys.” They were just being typical family and friends—worrying—but they knew it was probably the best thing I ever did. [My siblings] were not really supportive right away. They were like, “Why do you want to do this?” They were the older ones. After a little while, they started supporting me, and they actually came down to my graduation from Basic. So they got to see what military life was kind of like, but not all of it. My stepsister, [who is] the same age as me, saw what I went through and decided to join the Navy. She is out of the Navy now. She was active duty Navy. She just saw that military life changed me, and she wanted the same thing because she didn’t know what she wanted to do with her life, either.

Mary had a similar experience, and noted that she, too, had received a mixed message form those who were closest to her. Her family was for it, and her friends were completely against it.

Wisdom. At different points during their interviews, regardless of the amount of support each had received, each participant reflected upon his or her decision to enlist. Participants universally described that decision as one that taught them important lessons about their values, American culture, and life in general. Each participant was also quick to
share examples of the wisdom they gained while attending basic training, which manifested in the form of advice they would give others who were contemplating joining the military. Matt cautioned,

I’d ask them to look inside themselves and take a good look at why they are joining and [consider] that what a recruiter is telling them may not be true: it is 99% boring and 1% “Oh, crap!” I’d tell them that you want to join, and you want to serve, because it is something that you want to do and you feel you need to—not . . . for the college money. We used to get rid of the college guys all the time: “Get out of my unit, we don’t want you here—go to the lake.” And that’s the culture. It’s a lifestyle. It’s a full-time job. But, you’ve also got to buy into it and give 100%, even when you’re off duty.

Likewise, Mark believed that it is only after answering a series of important questions that a person can know if the military lifestyle would be a good fit for him or her. He very confidently declared,

Personally I would say, “Do it!” I would say, “Choose the Marine Corps, because I have a love for the Marine Corps.” But, also [remember] that you have other opportunities. You learn professionalism a little bit better than the other services. I am not talking “smack”—I guess I don’t have a better word for it—about the other services but, being a dog handler, I’ve worked with the other services as well as the Secret Service, the Navy Seals, and the Special Forces, and one thing I’ve noticed is that the Marine Corps cares more about its professionalism. We are more [apt] to correct a person right away, rather than say nothing at all. I’d also [ask] them, “What
do [you] want to do with it?” They can go career or they can use it like I have. The best part I’ve taken is the GI Bill—to pay for school that I have no money for. It also gives you more experience than a lot of other people. People don’t have some of the experience [I do]. To break it down: to stay in school, I go to classes with a lot of people younger than I am. They are quick to put something off. If it isn’t [due until] Thursday, they’ll wait to do it until Wednesday, and I’ll do it now, and then I don’t have to worry about it. And maybe make changes later on. Being in the military will help a person learn work ethic. And, I’d say that if you want to maybe not [go on] active duty status, I would try the regular reserve. But, I’d highly encourage an active duty status to learn more about what the military is . . . and more about the world.

Luke was quick to observe the necessity of taking into account many of the practical details associated with life in uniform, the importance of learning as much as possible, and the value of remaining mindful of the sacrifice that might be required from a warfighter. He suggested,

Talk to a recruiter. Maybe you can set up a thing to come during drill and see what it is like. I didn’t know exactly what to expect until I went off to a drill weekend and thought, “Yeah, I could see myself doing this,” you know? You can set up a visit to see what it is like in the military. I know even active Army—they do a lot of stuff, and they could get you into an Army Reserve drill weekend [to] see what it is like. [Also], take your time and think about it, because it is a big decision . . . and know that [it’s] something you want to do. Do you want to risk your life for your country? There is always that chance.
**Preparation.** In many instances, the wisdom gained at basic training or boot camp was the ultimate result of a lack of planning and preparation. Although each participant suggested she or he had invested a significant amount of time thinking about basic training or boot camp, as a group participants conceded they did little to prepare themselves physically for the experience. Mary described the 11-month period of time leading up to boot camp as one that passed rapidly:

> I really didn’t have anything to prepare for. I was trying to graduate high school at the time and everything was, “You got to hurry up and get done with school.” It was a long but really short 11 months. I turned 18 around a month before I left, so everything was kind of rushed.

Likewise, when asked what he did to prepare, John suggested:

> Nothing. I played high school football. I wrestled in high school. I actually got more or less out of shape by going to boot camp, because it wasn’t farming or construction, the normal physical labor I was used to. That was my problem; I never took it that this was my job. Had I studied ahead of time, boot camp would have been a lot easier with the testing that they actually do put you through. I had those books available, but I never even picked them up. And that was the funny part with my father. He went in on the SAM program. In the late ’70s and early ’80s, the SAM program was an initiative to get people with a construction [background] into the Navy. There was no boot camp required. You were an automatic E4 and a reservist from day 1. So, my dad couldn’t tell me about boot camp or anything like that, and his best friend
wasn’t going to tell me about boot camp, because that wouldn’t have been a good selling point, possibly.

Similarly, Mark wryly smiled when asked about what he had done to prepare for Marine Corps boot camp and confided:

Well, let’s see. Like in truth . . . nothing really. When you are in [the program I was] they tell you to study the code of conduct, your general orders, [and] the Marine Corps history, but it is really broad compared to what happens when you are actually in boot camp. I didn’t do anything—but I don’t feel I should have.

Matt was well intentioned, and began an exercise program before he was injured and was forced to recuperate while remaining as active as possible. He lamented:

I started to [run], but I got run over by a car while I was running and getting in shape. That kind of put the running on hiatus while I let myself heal up. But then, I graduated high school and I shipped out in mid-July, so I had 6 weeks. And dad needed help; I was dad’s backbone on the farm. I was young—18—and strong! In those 6 weeks before I left I built him a 60 x 30 new addition onto the barn with a bunk feeder so that, when I left, all dad had to do was push a button on the silo and flip two levers—the hard work would be done.

Unlike the other participants, Luke did take steps to successfully prepare himself physically for basic training. When asked to explain what he literally had done, he shared, I started exercising a lot more. Even though I ran [beforehand], I still wasn’t quite the fastest when I went to basic training. [To begin with], my two mile run was still 20
minutes, and we did it three times. During basic training, you could see an improvement. I went from 20 minutes to 15.

**From Civilian to Warfighter—Ambiguity and Metamorphoses**

**Initiation.** The stress that participants associated with basic training or boot camp was not merely the result of their individual need to get into good physical condition quickly. In each instance, participants were navigating a new culture, a long way from the homes to which they were accustomed and without the direct support they had enjoyed prior to departing for the initial phase of their military training. Each participant was required to process a tremendous amount of information in a limited amount of time as well as begin to learn how to prepare to surmount potentially life-threatening circumstances. The initiation that basic training or boot camp provided was a rite of passage unlike anything any of them had experienced before.

Both naval recruits (John and Mary) attended boot camp at Great Lakes, Illinois.

Mary minced no words when she described the experience:

Horrifying! It was in the middle of winter. Chicago saw a lot of snow [that year], and I wasn’t expecting any of what came at me. I was really shy in high school, and having people in my face scared the daylights out of me. I am not a confrontational person. I don’t like fighting. I don’t like arguing. It was scary. I got sick halfway through, and we weren’t sure whether I was actually going to graduate. My drill instructor was in my face about it, and it was scary at that age [laughing]. It was bad.

At the complete opposite end of the experiential spectrum, John related,
Boot camp for me was great! I got there, and my eyes were opened to different racial ethnicities. I actually had two classmates who joined the Navy at the same time. They were a week ahead of me. Every Sunday we would go to church, and I would see them for a half an hour or so, and that would really help [keep] me from getting homesick. One of them got pneumonia and got held back a week and somehow landed in my company when he got held back, which was rather hilarious. Boot camp to me wasn’t very difficult. Learning and actually having to study—versus what I had done in high school—was different. I struggled with it at first, but I figured it out. The biggest memory I had at boot camp was graduation. [A friend’s] father was on the USS Forrestal when it caught fire. [The friend] showed up, and my dad and [my dad’s friend] both showed up in their dress uniforms, and we paid dearly. Both [my friend] and I [had] lied throughout our entire boot camp and said we had “no military affiliation” [laughter]. So, we got screamed at when we got back to the barracks after graduation, but it was worth it.

In a similar fashion, both participants who had enlisted in the Army (Luke and Matt) attended basic training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Although they each spoke highly of the experience, they did so for decidedly different reasons. Much like John, Matt referred to basic training as awesome! I loved it. You [had] the drill sergeant yelling at you, but it was simple. You [had] one goal. I was 18 years old, and I got to go out and do fun stuff all day long. I got to walk around and talk. I was surrounded by guys. Looking back at that time . . . it was probably horrible. The first couple of weeks were probably
unenjoyable; but once you made friends there, and you realized it was a game, and it
was a mental game, it was a walk in the park. And, it’s one of my favorite memories
of the service. If I could go back and do a 9-week basic training again, I’d be all for
it.

Luke was more circumspect when he described his experience at basic training, as the
perspective he gained while there completely caught him off guard. He offered,

It actually changed my life. It was an eye opener because I had never seen that side
of life before—like really structured life. My life was so hectic. My parents divorced
when I was a kid. My mom had another kid with another man. My dad remarried
and was on his third marriage when I went to basic. I never saw much structure in
my life until I went to basic.

Although Mark and Paul both successfully completed Marine Corps boot camp, they
did so in very different locations and recalled similar but easily distinguishable experiences.

Mark, who completed boot camp at Camp Pendleton (California), volunteered,

I remember going from [hometown] down to MEPS, the bus ride, and the crazy
medical experiments, like the duck walk, and everything. I remember leaving from
the [hometown] mall with four other people. My dad was crying. Those four other
people and I actually ended up in boot camp together, and that was pretty cool. But
the next day was the longest. After the plane ride to San Diego, the first 2 days of
boot camp were the longest of my life. I was up 24 hours straight, signing
paperwork, and doing everything, and envisioning what I’m going to do. For the first
week, you are in the transition platoon, and they teach you basic little stuff real quick,
and you get your clothes and gear, and then they send you to your platoons. You meet your drill instructors, and to sum up the whole experience . . . I can’t really say . . . [it just kind of like had a] “wow” aspect to it.

In a similar fashion, Paul, who completed boot camp at Paris Island (South Carolina), recalled,

It’s almost like a double-edged sword. You have a very strict routine, and you also have newbies coming in every other week. I lost a lot of weight. There were so many memorable moments. It feels almost like I can go back and tell you day by day. There is something about it. The one story I like to tell a lot [took place around] the last day of the Crucible—the final test to become a Marine. We marched to the chow hall [to] get a warrior’s breakfast—just our platoon—the 20 recruits in my platoon. The whole chow hall was emptied out, and it was my 19th birthday. I remember I was excited. I had told my battle buddy—we slept in the same hooch throughout the 54-hour ordeal—and I remember I [also] told the chaplain [who] was walking around [with us] during training for that 54-hour time. I am sitting in the chow hall . . . with my brother platoon, and we are all dirty and tired. I remember telling him, “Hey, today is my birthday!” And he gave me this look and it was like, “Why are you telling me this?” Birthdays aren’t anything you want to be telling anyone because of what happens. Luckily I had a birthday during [a] warrior’s breakfast, so the drill instructors weren’t all up in [my] grill. But, I remember where some other guys [who] had birthdays and it was: “Get on the quarterdeck—you’re going to get hazed!” It was quite funny.
Alternatives. Each participant was very forthright about the experience she or he had at basic training or boot camp. To a person, each participant described overcoming a series of challenges that led to physical and mental growth and the increased ability to adapt to unpredictable circumstances and successfully overcome them. When they were given the opportunity to reflect, participants responded very differently when questioned about alternative courses of action they would pursue if they were to do it all again.

Matt was initially less contrite than the other participants were. However, he concluded by tempering his response, because he was very aware that if he were to go through it all again, circumstances would be very different:

I wouldn’t change a thing. I would live my life knowing I was going to go through change and do everything I could to prepare my family for who I’d be afterwards. Because my life situation has changed . . . I now have kids at home and a wife. Now, it’s not just me that would be enlisting. They would also be serving, and they would deserve to know what I’m going to go through—what’s going to go on—and what I’m going to be like when I get out.

Unlike Matt, Mary did not have a family of her own to account for, so she focused on how she would concentrate on doing things differently for herself. She reflected primarily on the timing of her initial decision, and conceded,

Well, at this age, I think I would be a lot more prepared . . . just . . . age wise. There is a lot of mental preparation that goes into it, and I would definitely make sure I was more mentally prepared—that I had put myself in . . . situation[s] similar to what I
would be experiencing as far as possible. I wouldn’t do it that young again, that’s for sure.

Luke responded more pragmatically. He had exercised prior to attending basic training but explained that if he were to do it all over again, he would

work on my running and push-ups more. You are going to get disciplined [by doing physical activity]. Work on [the] core of your body [to prepare] instead of the things you think you are going to be doing. They work your entire core at basic. Learn to not speak your mind as much, because you are going to get disciplined if you do.

Mark offered a pragmatic response as well, but it had nothing to do with how he might prepare himself physically. Rather, he explained,

What would I do different? Well, I wouldn’t bring so much stuff. What happened was . . . I was going to stay in Des Moines the night before the plane ride. So, I brought the basics: deodorant, toothpaste, toothbrush, and a change of clothes. But, what happens is they just pack your stuff in a box and put it in a warehouse, right, so I would probably just bring a change of clothes. Other than that, I don’t really think there is anything you could change or prepare yourself for. It is too different. With the “plant analogy”: to become an oak tree, there are steps that need to be taken to become an oak tree. You don’t just [say], “Oh, I’m an oak tree.”

John offered the most cerebral response. Single-minded preparation would be the order of the day as far as he was concerned, and no detail would be left unaccounted for:

I’d actually take the time and read through the blue-jacketed manual that they have at the recruiter’s stations. I would [do] more research as far as on the actual school I
was going to sign up for and, possibly, especially now with the Internet, [get] a hold of someone in the military.

**Galvanization.** Despite the amount of change each participant experienced while at boot camp or basic training, there were certain aspects of their lives that each suggested remained the same after his or her initial training was complete. Mark provided the most poignant example of this when he shared:

I’m a person [who] likes to help people, no matter what—sometimes even if I don’t get along with them. I just like to help, that’s just the type of person I was raised to be, I suppose, and the type of values I grew up [with] and [my intention] is to help people. You watch movies, and this guy is not doing so well—help [him]! I tried to help people wherever I could while in boot camp when I could. I remember one time I tried to help this guy. We were on a march. We called it a “hump,” up a hill, and this guy was falling behind. [So] I grabbed onto him to try to get him to keep going, keep going, [and] push him a little bit, and the drill instructor was like, “Don’t help him!” And, at the time, I didn’t know if it was a test—like I should help him—or not. At the time, I chose not to help him because the drill instructor said so, but it still sticks in the back of my mind—was it a test? Was I supposed to help him or not help him? But it solidified for me the fact that I want to help people. Two things they teach you in the Marine Corps are mission accomplishment and true welfare. Mission accomplishment comes first—before true welfare. Throughout that time, and later in life, I found that true welfare can [in fact] go along with mission accomplishment. For me, it didn’t take away that aspect of wanting to help people, just because a
mission has to get done. It made me stronger to think that, “Yes, I have to help people, because if I don’t, someone else will treat them horribly—and I don’t want the world to be like that.”

**Growth.** Participants were required to make decisions like this day in and day out during basic training and boot camp. Some of these decisions went unnoticed, whereas others resulted in prolonged periods of reflection and contemplation. Some even resulted in celebration. When asked about how basic training had influenced his personal growth and maturation, Luke observed,

> It opened my eyes. It made me know that I can do anything if I put my mind to it. When I first went to basic, I was nervous, saying [to myself], “I won’t be able to do this.” But, as I was getting through it, it opened my mind, [and I realized that] I can do anything as long as I put my mind to it and put in the willingness to work.

When asked, John and Mary both immediately suggested that their level of self-confidence increased as a result of their experiences at boot camp as well. Mark echoed these sentiments when he described how boot camp had influenced his thinking and behavior:

> Oh, man—well, there are so many words I could [use] to describe it. It changed me for the better to be honest. [For example], the other day I saw [a fellow postdeployment veteran]. He was on one of the computers in the Internet café on Facebook. I said to him, “You got time to do Facebook; you got time to do your homework.” To relate that to the Marine Corps it would be, “You got time to smoke and joke, then you got time to clean the deck, you got time to wash the windows,
right?” So, I guess it is a work ethic. If I have time to do something that isn’t really productive, I’ll go do something that actually is productive and then, later on, when I have time for myself, I can choose to do those other [things]. I also believe it shaped me. The way I look at things is different. It’s very hard because boot camp is just . . . it’s the way I appreciate things, right? In the Marine Corps, [boot camp is a 3-month disruption]. A person doesn’t get to go to the store or do basic, everyday things people take for granted. Some services—when they go to AIT—they get to go to the PX [and] things like that. In the Marine Corps, you don’t get to do any of that. It’s just straight “train, train, train. Okay, it’s time to go and eat, and then train, train, train.” And you eat when you can. Being able to do basic little things like watch TV, go outside, and take a breath of fresh air—I appreciate [these things] more than a regular person would.

In a similar fashion, Matt explained he had experienced a complete change in outlook and ability:

I grew up. I grew up 4 years in 16 weeks. I matured. I was still young and dumb, and the rest of that saying . . . but I grew up because they did a pretty good job of instilling in us that our job was to fight—that was our sole purpose in the military. We weren’t support; we were cannon and crewmembers. We had to provide fires downrange, on time, and on target. That was our job. And . . . for an 18-year-old [who] turned 19 in basic to have that kind of responsibility . . . I’m loading this 38 pounds of high explosive in this big steel tube and it’s going to go downrange and take somebody’s head off . . . that’s a lot of responsibility. But, that’s what basic is
for. That’s pretty much how I matured. I still tried to drink underage and everything, but I’d go home and see my peers that I’d left 6 months earlier just getting done with their first semester of college—just seeing how they walked and carried themselves—there] was a night and day difference, me compared to them.

**Contribution.** All of the participants inevitably compared themselves to civilian friends and acquaintances during initial periods of contact with those groups of people after they had returned from basic training or boot camp. In large measure, participants described how different they believed they had become as a result of their initial training. They also reflected at length upon how much effort they had expended at advanced, individualized training schools that had prepared them to eventually perform their actual job (MOS). Each participant believed that she or he had been trained to make a worthwhile, individual contribution to a much larger war effort; one that relied upon the coordination of many complex, moving parts. At one point, this type of coordination became a matter of routine for Luke, who explained that driving a truck brought rewards that were both visual and visceral:

> Being able to travel the country. Being able to go . . . and you might only be driving 8 hours [at a time], but you were seeing so much of the country, [much more than if you were] infantry—because [then] you’d be walking everywhere. You are hauling the stuff for the troops to be able to go out on the front line and fight battles that you might not be able to.

Matt (a cannon crewmember) was a great example of a soldier who was on the other end of those delivery runs and who had invested a lot of time expending the types of
ordinance that troops like Luke were transporting. When asked about his favorite part of his MOS, Matt retorted:

Probably the big guns go “boom” part. We got to be part of combat without actually being in the combat. We got to play an essential supporting role, and also [provide security] around our own perimeter. Combine that with the jumping in the Airborne aspect and it was fantastic . . . nothing better than sitting on the outboard rows of an aircraft and inside sitting on the tracks are a fully loaded Humvee and Howitzer ready to go out the back. They send the drones shooting out, and you see [additional Airborne activity], and then you realize that you are going to fly around for a couple of hours and circle around, and that [you would likely be dropped into] the wrong part of the drop zone because the pilots are idiots. That was the best part!

Mark (dog handler) shared a more strategic, future-oriented response. He reported that he had chosen his MOS because of the way the skills he developed on active duty could be easily transferred to a civilian, law enforcement job.

Paul, who had served as an aviation life supporting systems Marine, was frank and shared that what he appreciated most about his line of work was that, even though it was serious—inspecting and packing parachutes—it turned out to be:

An easy job—it really was. There [were] lots of rules and regulations regarding aviation, so the only thing was, there were multiple, different levels of inspections throughout multiple years that would skip years. Every year you would have at least one inspection, and as long as you read your publications, which we utilized to do
proper maintenance on parachutes, you could pretty much do your job with your eyes closed.

Of course, each MOS required participants to think creatively from time to time. On occasion, participants even had the opportunity to parlay a solution they had arrived at into a light moment with a high-ranking officer. John, who had served as a disaster preparedness coordinator, explained that toward the end of his career, he

oversaw training, and my biggest job down there (in Guam) was I was the purchasing guy so that, in case of an actual or manmade disaster, you had all your backup stuff. I was “FEMA.” I had a gigantic warehouse, and I had a tone of stuff in it. And my main job . . . was to go through different scenarios . . . [and ask] “How can we do this; how can we do that?” The most hilarious comment that I ever [made] was [when] we were briefing a two-star Admiral and he was like, “Well, you know [when] the last typhoon hit Guam . . . we had no electricity and they couldn’t even pump gas for 2 months.” And I’m like, “Well, Sir, there is an easy solution to that.” And he said, “What is that?” And I said, “We can get two 5,000-gallon drums. We put them up in the naval magazine and tilt them at a slight angle and fill them full of gas and they just sit there.” And he was like, “And you just thought of this magically—how?” And I was like, “’Cause I’m from Iowa, and every farmer has that on their farm because they can’t drive a tractor [into town] to get gas.” And everybody busts up laughing because some places you’re brilliant and some places you’re just normal. That’s normal where I come from!
From Civilian to Warfighter—Consummation and Reflection

Reconciliation. Despite the fun they might have had performing their duties during international deployments, or even the ease with which they might have accomplished them despite some acknowledged drudgery, each participant very clearly remembered the point in time at which he or she no longer considered him- or herself a civilian. Each had previously left relatively comfortable surroundings—compared to what he or she would experience at basic training or boot camp—and assumed a risk. Each matured in ways he or she could not have predicted. And, each described him- or herself as better off for making the decision to enlist in the military and then doing everything that had been required to succeed. Each had transitioned from being a civilian to being a warfighter.

As the participants reflected upon their individual transitions, all of them shared how their very identities had been changed between the time they had left their homes and the instant they considered themselves bona fide members of the armed forces of the United States of America. They described how they had changed significantly, based upon particular experiences they would never forget. When asked to summarize the biggest change they had undergone up to that point, each participant commented on the singular nature of basic training or boot camp and then further clarified his or her responses.

Mary had the least to say, summarizing her overall transition from civilian to warfighter by saying, “Well, I think I was a lot more open after basic. I went in being really shy, and came out a lot more confident—knowing that I could survive, I guess.” She went on to explain that being somewhat introverted actually seemed to help her adapt to the situation:
Oh, yes, all the fighting amongst the females. I would go and hide in the bathroom just to get away from everybody. If you let all that really get to you—if you are around it too much—it is going to mess you up mentally, especially if you aren’t used to it. So, I hid; I hid a lot. It worked for me. A bathroom is a very good, safe place for me. [Despite all this], I did come out of my shell a little bit. I was more willing to talk to people. But, I am still just as afraid of people as I was back then. I am kind of a secluded type when I’m at home—not too many changes around that area.

Mark also kept his response to this line of questioning relatively short, focusing his reply on the leadership-related aspects or components of his training that he believed distinguished the Marine Corps from the other services:

Well, when I went in, I was much older than a lot of the guys in my battalion, and I had had some leadership positions just as a civilian. What I had seen people do—what was in in my opinion effective or ineffective—almost got accelerated because there was more at stake. So, I would say [boot camp] reinforced the need to look out for the entire person, all the while being aware that liabilities could show up in combat that could really end things for a lot of guys. . . . Basically . . . everything [changed] for me after boot camp. Like I said with boot camp, especially [in] the Marine Corps, they teach you professionalism. It is one of the things they [were constantly] harping about . . . professionalism.

Luke earlier had shared how basic training provided him with a type of structured lifestyle he had never experienced before. Prior to basic training, life seemed ill organized to him. Basic training was completely structured and provided Luke with an opportunity to
focus on maturing in additional ways. He explained that during basic training, he learned how important it was to actually demonstrate the respect one person had for another. Luke described how he was aware of how “basic training reinforced the idea that you respect your superiors, or, your boss. If you respect them, they will have a better attitude toward you, and they will look at you differently than if you don’t respect them.”

Although Mary, Mark, and Luke all focused on very important aspects of the interpersonal changes they had undergone en route to earning warfighter status, they did not mention issues related to race or ethnicity. John and Mark, however, actually focused on this topic. John began by explaining that the social exposure he gained at boot camp had been invaluable:

I met my first Black people. Honestly, growing up on a farm in [rural township and small, rural town] Iowa, my family wasn’t one to take vacations, so I’d never been face to face with any other race than Caucasian. It actually helped me to grow and understand, and it started me down a path of learning of how to treat every human being as [just] that: a human being. Going to boot camp, nobody knew me. So I could [also] just do the things that I always wanted to do and not have to worry about repercussions or blowback because of, “Well, your aunt and uncle, or your mom and dad would never have done it that way.” Well, I’m my own human being.

Matt picked up on this theme and explored it at length. He described the epiphany he had as a result of unfettered access to people who looked and believed differently than those he had grown up around:
Going into training, I never knew a Black person in my life. I just never met them. We didn’t have them—that sounds really old fashioned or racist—but we just didn’t have any in [small town in rural Iowa]. I never got to experience any blending of cultures. I was a typical White kid, raised in a very [religious faith] town, and we were expected to go to college or go to work. And I went to basic training, and I got to meet all different kinds of creeds and colors. Never in my mind would I have expected the situation that did develop. We had a [person of color] guy and a [person of color], [religious faith] guy that just went back and forth together. You’ve never heard racism . . . until . . . and . . . it was in jest. Only the jokes that can happen when a bunch of guys are together, and I had never experienced that before, and seeing that totally erased all of my preconceived notions, and if anything, [was] probably when I became a Democrat, I could say. Just because I could see some of the breakdown of some of the conservative mantras I had been fed in a [religious faith] school and countryside, saying . . . “blank” are bad . . . and all this other stuff . . . our way is the best. I got to see that wasn’t the truth, and now I have to struggle with that, because I had that wonderful experience of the mixing of the cultures. And now, I live in that same small town, and I still see the examples of very old school thinking and habits, and attitudes still very prominent, and wish everyone could have these same experiences. I think it could solve a lot of problems [if] people could see that we are not that different.
From Warfighter to Student—Calibration and Detachment

**Education.** The transition from warfighter to student required each participant to shift his or her focus at a certain point from practical, day-to-day military affairs to a pair of endeavors many of the participants never thought they would consider again: accessing the classroom and succeeding therein. Participant responses to the question “How much did you think about the possibility of attending college while you were deployed?” indicated an extremely wide range of interest and engagement, or calibration, regarding the next transition each participant would eventually have in common.

At one extreme, Matt indicated that the thought of attending college after his deployment ended never crossed his mind. Paul suggested he had given the idea a little thought while he had been stationed in Japan on an early deployment but that he didn’t really consider the possibility of getting back into the classroom until 4 years later, when he was deployed in Iraq. Each time, Paul’s chain of command had mentioned the possibility of going back to school, but it wasn’t until he returned to the United States that he had the time to thoroughly investigate his options. John hadn’t been interested in going back to school, either, until remaining in the Navy was no longer an option. John recounted,

I think I took one class, because we used to have professors that would ride the ship. I took one class out of my seven deployments. Up until I actually knew I couldn’t stay in the Navy, I never considered college. When I hit the point where I took my final chief’s exam, I knew I hadn’t made it. I was lucky enough to have joined in August. Had I joined in September, I would have been able take one more test. [Because] I joined in August, I got results back July of 2012 that said, “You didn’t
make it.” I knew I had until August of 2013 to [remain on] active duty. So, for me that was actually a blessing in disguise, because it gave me a year plus to figure out what I wanted to do. I was getting close to the end and was like, “Well, I’m just going to go to school and take a couple more years to figure out what I want to do in the end.”

Mark replied to the same question by suggesting that a pair of obstacles prevented him from pursuing educational opportunities during his final deployment. First, he was unable to secure consistent Internet access at his duty location, and second, he did not understand the process of getting into college. Mark explained:

> When I was deployed? Maybe once or twice I thought about it. For me to attend college, you had to apply through the Internet, and I never really had a solid means of connecting to the Internet on a weekly basis. A lot of times I thought, “Just forget about it.” I never really thought about getting into college, because I didn’t know exactly what college involved. I didn’t know how to maybe just have one class, so I kind of shied away from it. So I thought, “What if I enrolled in [the] University of Phoenix and [tried] to take one or two classes online.” But, not being able to get on the Internet solidly, I just never really followed it through.

Luke and Mary each found him- and herself drawing the same conclusion that Mark had. Luke explained, “I thought about it quite a bit, but at the same time was like, ‘How do I go about this?’ I [just] wasn’t . . . sure.” Mary recounted, “I thought about it a lot, but where we were at, and what I was doing . . . it just made it really hard to be able to get online. It was a thought—I just didn’t have the availability for it at the time.”
Foundation. Each participant analyzed the possibility of going back to school from a unique and individual perspective. Likewise, they each also prepared very differently once she or he decided to pursue additional education. Matt, who had not entertained the thought of attending college until well after his final deployment ended, confided that he did nothing [intentional] to prepare for his return to the classroom. He simply showed up as a 24-year-old thinking to himself, “What the hell am I doing here?” Similarly, Mary conceded that, because she had a year and a half between her last deployment and her official discharge date, she really didn’t feel there was “anything that I could prepare for. I didn’t know during that deployment I was getting out. That didn’t come until much later.” Luke also took very few concrete steps to prepare to go back to school, explaining, “I didn’t really do much to prepare myself to be a student. I just went back out [and] bought notebooks and pencils and stuff. That is pretty much all I did to become a student.”

Objectively, Mark took a more active role preparing for his transition from warfighter to student than Matt, Mary, or Luke did, even though he described taking a low-key approach:

I guess I didn’t really prepare too much, because being an actual student in an actual academic institution was brand new and foreign to me. At the time I went back to school, it was 13 years since I actually had been in schools. In the Marine Corps, I attended classes and went to many different types of schools, but it was a different setting. It wasn’t more the academic sense, it was more that you learned the information, you [got] tested on the information, and then you’re done. Where here, you learn the information, you get tested on the information, but you also have a
thought process say, for writing papers, you have to put your own spin, your own thoughts on an idea. The first thing I did was do a placement test . . . to prepare me. [I] was like, “Oh, my God, I don’t know what I’m going to do.” You get the math and algebra that I haven’t done for years . . . and I didn’t know how to do algebra. Then, I had to write an essay, and it’d been a long time since I’d written an essay. I asked a bunch of friends I had in [my hometown] to try to teach me a little of the stuff [I needed to know], and tried to remember from 13 years ago . . . how to write an essay.

On the other hand, Paul began his preparation earlier than most participants. He sought advice from individuals with whom he was stationed and who he believed he could trust and had completed college work themselves. Paul explained,

Well, I talked to a lot of my officers in charge. I asked them their opinions, because it was definitely intimidating to me to go back to college full time. I had to write, or ask, my officer to give me a letter of recommendation through the Leadership Scholar Program. He told me that 90% of making it in college is just attending class, [sticking] to the general rules, [sitting] in front, and [being] attentive.

John, who found himself preparing for life as a student after investing 20 years in a naval uniform, reached out directly to the people he believed were in the best position to help him succeed. He began by consulting with a former classmate and then contacted younger family members who were students themselves at the time and who provided some enlightening surprises of their own. John recalled,
I actually have a high school friend who is the math—the higher-level math teacher—down in [hometown]. So, I went to him and to a lot of my younger cousins who are in college now and said, “Okay, what should I expect . . . this, this, and this?” And the way they made it sound, I almost didn’t believe it. When I was 18 years old, it was, “Oh, you’re going to spend countless hours in the library . . . studying this and this,” and I guess it was because we didn’t have the Internet. Versus now, they are like, “Yeah, I get home from school and I get on my computer and [in] a couple of hours I’m done with it.” It’s because they are not searching through a library to find a certain book.

Expiration. By the time each participant physically transitioned from his or her role as warfighter to that of student, each was thoroughly familiar with the military. Each believed that the military had influenced his or her ability to successfully gain entry into college and succeed while there. However, the six participants responded very differently when questioned about what the military had actually done to help prepare them for the step they were about to take. They all believed that, when their individual contractual commitment with the military expired, they were better prepared to succeed in their next endeavor than they would have been had they not completed their enlistments.

Upon reflection, Matt asserted that the military “gave me the skills to succeed” at college. When asked to say more, he explained,

Discipline: that was the hugest one. That I could actually . . . I knew I could sit down and focus [when] I needed to. And the discipline I learned in the service carried me through that—the self-discipline to control what I was doing—time management,
leadership within the classroom. I always stepped into a leadership role in the class, especially group work. I was never afraid to ask questions or play devil’s advocate just to keep the discussion going. Luke echoed the sentiments that Matt expressed. He especially appreciated that his military training left him feeling confident about succeeding as a student. Luke suggested,

The military probably made it so I am able to concentrate more on one task, or, if I have to multitask, [I can do that, too. It] probably just made it so that I know I can do [it]—achieve anything or do anything if I put my mind to it.

Matt and Luke were not the only participants to comment on the cognitive advantages military service had provided. Paul suggested,

I guess the mentality. Obviously you know that 90% of your time in the military is going through course after course after course. So, it was kind of like you treat [learning] as a job because in reality you are getting paid for it through the [Post] 911 GI Bill. You don’t want to waste your time, so the skill set you obtain from going through [so] many courses in the military [focuses your attention] right there.

Participants universally reiterated that military training had resulted in their enhanced ability to remain focused and disciplined. Mark smiled and referenced a commercial he had seen on television:

That’s funny. A lot of times I think about the old commercial, a Marine recruiting commercial, where the kid says, “I wasn’t prepared to go to college. I didn’t have the discipline to go to college, so I joined the Marine Corps. I joined, and now I have the discipline to go to school.” I can say that, for me, the Marine Corps gave me the
discipline to sit there and go to school rather than not attend classes. It gave me the
drive to say, “Hey, I’ve got to go to school today, I’m going to go,” rather than, “Nah,
you know what, today I can skip—it’s not going to matter to anybody.” But, it gave
me the discipline to go to school.

John also suggested that he was a better, more organized student than he would have been if
he had not served in the military prior to attending classes. He reached into a coat pocket,
produced a small tablet, and commented:

I still carry around my little green book, and I write down with my little check boxes:
“Okay, I’ve got to have this done by this day, and this by this day.” The military
made me very checklist oriented and date oriented. My organization helps me out a
lot because I am so used to doing maintenance boards that were 3 months long, and
my long-term planning is looking at three calendars together. This is due on this date,
and this is going to be due on this date. I know how to work backwards.

When asked about the military’s role in her preparation, Mary was the only
participant who focused exclusively on the financial benefits she received from the military
as a result of her service. She simply suggested, “They pay for it. The VA pays for every
single bit of it. So, I don’t have anything to worry about with that aspect. I’m going to be
graduating school with no debt.”

Optimization. Each participant appreciated all that the military had done to prepare
him or her for life as a student. However, although some participants considered the
military’s contribution to the experience relatively complete, others found it in need of
improvement. Mary is an example of the former, believing that there really wasn’t much
more the military could have done to improve the experience she had when she transitioned to life as a student. She effused,

They did everything they could. With tuition assistance while I was in, they covered costs, and they covered books. The military does a lot for people, and they really encourage people to take classes. The chain of command always encourages it. It was always welcome. And it actually helped with advancement. The more college classes that you had, the better it looked.

Luke appreciated the result he had achieved but was disappointed with the process to which he felt he had been subjected. He had concluded there was plenty of room for improvement regarding how the military dispensed financial benefits:

They probably could have helped with trying to figure out how to do the VA paperwork for the GI Bill. I was so confused with it—and you have to still fill it out. They could have told you about more programs . . . that are available to you—veteran or soldier—while going to college. They might mention it, but they don’t tell you how to apply for it.

Matt represented the other end of the transition spectrum, having had a much different experience than Mary and Luke did. In fact, he suggested that the entire process needed to be fixed:

Everything, they could have done everything differently. You know, they spend . . . 19 weeks getting [you] ready to be a soldier . . . and I was processed out in 2 weeks. I was a number. The hardest part—which should have been the easiest part—was turning gear in. That was the most challenging and emotionally difficult, actually.
After I left, it was [discovered] that [they] had a money-laundering thing going on. If you went down to turn your stuff in, they’d kick it back out and say, “Take it to this [particular] cleaner” . . . and if you came back with that receipt, they’d accept it. And the people running it were all retired . . . they also owned that [cleaning] business. Everything could have been done differently. They focused too much on getting guys into the VA without adequately assessing them. I know why they were doing that looking back . . . hurrying up so the processing would result in a smaller disability amount than they were actually entitled to. The education benefits were just a PowerPoint—completely glossed over. I had no idea how to apply for college or do a resume. Everything was just signed off and, by that time, I really wanted to get out, so I forged a few signatures because I didn’t feel like waiting in line.

From Warfighter to Student—Ambiguity and Metamorphoses

Relocation. Each participant had a unique experience transitioning to college in general, and relocating to ACC in particular. Each also chose to enroll at ACC for reasons of his or her own. In some instances, the decision was significantly based upon cost. Matt, who conceded he was financially insolvent at the time he decided to enroll in classes, confirmed that he was too broke to pay my bills, and I knew I had money sitting in the GI Bill. That was the main reason. I [said to myself], “I’ve got to use this money.” I had one chance, and [that] was the starting motivation that got me in the door. I could’ve cared less about what I was going to study . . . I needed the money, and it just led to this road.
Mark spoke in a more circular fashion when he described his decision to relocate to ACC in particular. He disclosed that his decision was influenced in large measure by his lack of familiarity with college in general as well as his desire to make the best selection he could using the information to which he had access. He declared,

I don’t really know. I think maybe I decided on [ACC] because I knew I could get my associate’s there, and I thought at least I’d go to college and get an associate’s. Honestly, [I had very little] experience and knowledge. I didn’t really know a lot about community colleges. I received the flyers and pamphlets and the magazines in the mail—they have pretty good advertising—and you read through things, and for someone [who] doesn’t pay attention to the college experience, I thought I could get a 4-year degree initially from [ACC]. You hear the word “college,” it’s like a junior college; but then I thought, “No, it’s not possible, and everyone talks about getting a 2-year degree.” As far as whether it was [ACC], online, or another big college in [hometown], I chose [ACC] mainly because of [my lack of] knowledge. I didn’t have much knowledge about other places. When I went through high school, I never took the SAT or ACT, so I thought maybe here at [ACC] they [would] kind of overlook that. I didn’t know for sure. Plus, I was too old when I enrolled. But, I also chose [ACC] simply because I learned, I [could] go there for low cost, get my associate’s, and then transfer wherever I want to go. It gave me that inside knowledge of what I needed to know about college. If someone doesn’t have the college experience [like I didn’t] or know anything about going to college . . . going to [ACC] or a community college [period] is the best way to do it.
Other participants indicated that, although they had taken the cost of attending ACC into account when deciding among their alternatives, they ultimately chose to relocate there because it was convenient, had a good reputation, or was easy to gain admittance to. Paul was no stranger to the community college experience by the time he enrolled at ACC and appreciated its accessibility. He noted, “I was at a community college before in Michigan. It was fairly close to where my parents lived, so it was convenient. Then, [ACC] was the closet community college to [community of residence], where I am staying right now.”

Luke had researched different schools and was more attracted to ACC by what he had learned during casual conversations with friends than anything else, except for the fact that attending ACC would also provide him with the opportunity to invest some time in a location other than his hometown. He relayed,

I heard it was a pretty good college to go to. I had a few friends [who] came here and they said, “Yeah, it’s a really good college.” Even though we had a community college in my hometown . . . I just wanted to get away from there for a little bit. Ease of admittance turned out to be the deciding factor for Mary. Ultimately, she was very pleased with how hassle free the experience had been. She explained,

[ACC] was easiest to get into right away, and I had actually applied there in the past. I just got out of the Army, and I wanted to jump into something right away. The others schools—it was too hard of a process, and I didn’t want to deal with it at the time. [ACC was] nice, and quick, and easy!

**Effort.** All the participants believed they had made the correct decision when they decided to enroll at ACC. For the most part, each participant also believed that he or she
either had made or was making reasonable progress. At the time of their individual interviews, participants had attended ACC for various lengths of time. Matt had graduated from ACC a few years before his interviews, but indicated that he had invested a total of 2 years at ACC. Paul confirmed during his interviews that he was in his first semester at ACC, and John indicated that he had been attending courses at ACC for approximately 14 months. At the time of her third interview, Mary had graduated from ACC, where she indicated she had invested four semesters, including a full load one summer. Mark and Luke each had been at ACC a little longer. Mark had attended classes for 2 years and explained that he was two semesters away from graduating. Luke indicated he had been at ACC for 2½ years but did not suggest how soon he believed he would complete his studies.

**Trajectory.** Even though all the participants eventually chose to invest their time and energy pursuing a degree at the same community college, no two of them entered the same field of study. As a group, the participants had a wide variety of interests, some of which bordered on passions, and were very motivated to do as well as possible in the classroom.

Matt had completed an English/English Education major a few years prior to his interviews and had successfully transferred to a local 4-year institution to complete his BA degree. During the course of her three interview series, Mary was in the midst of preparing to transfer and was completing an English/Secondary Education double major during our early conversations. Paul initially had focused on the ACC Mechanical Technical program but had since transferred to its Associate of Science program. Luke was enrolled in the Education program. Mark was focused on earning his AA degree in communications, but was considering one of the trades (construction). John was working to complete his business
Specialist degree, which he indicated would free up enough time in his schedule that he would be able pursue a second AA at ACC, in marketing management.

**Self.** The choice of degree programs participants pursued during their transitions from warfighter to student hints at, among other things, their interests and abilities. These types of idiosyncrasies became unmistakable when participants were given the opportunity to describe themselves during this period of their life. Matt began by focusing on academics, and observed,

Education-wise, I had the drive to do it. I had to figure out [how] the educational system [worked], because my last education was high school, and this was a totally different experience than high school—for the better. I wish high school would have been taught [like I was] taught here. So, that was one of the challenges. I had to figure out how [that] worked. Those formative years of 18 to 22 . . . I had one way to problem solve . . . the Army way! Whichever way, the flexibility was the challenge— the flexibility that’s allowed in the civilian world. Looking at it now, that flexibility . . . the more comfortable I think we [veterans] are with that flexibility and how we can use that to respond to different challenges that come up through[out] the workday. That is such a highly employable skill . . . the service actually prepares us really well to be flexible through the tight structure—because we’re drilled to always be able to do other people’s jobs. We have to be able to carry that knowledge forward in a different way. We don’t have that set chain of command. We just have to be aware of our surroundings and know how to adapt and overcome.
Though possible, adapting to and overcoming obstacles and challenges proved to be easier said than done for the participants. Mary confided:

I was terrified. I didn’t know how to handle my situation. I was still feeling the backlash of getting out. I wasn’t happy with myself because I felt like my body had let me down at that point. I wanted to stay in the military. I loved it for the most part. And getting out was a kind of slap in the face, like, “Ok, we used you for how many years now and good luck and good bye!” But, I knew I had to hurry up and get back to it; otherwise, if I had waited any longer than I had, I would never have gone. It had to be an immediate thing.

John initially replied tersely, though cordially, to this question before elaborating about his experience and how he began to navigate his transition:

Lost. Even now, I am still struggling with not being a sailor. I am [still] used to the way things were. You met your buddies every morning at 4:30 at the gym. You worked out together. You went your separate ways for work. After work, [you would] meet up, play softball, or [whatever] sport, [and] grab a beer or two and a bite of dinner. Friday, Saturday, Sunday . . . you would party like rock stars. And then [it was] back to the grind. And there was an understanding and a trust level that you had with somebody who was a fellow military member. You knew they had the same kind of training. You knew they would have your back [when it was to the door] of a place that might not be the most reputable, and you didn’t worry about somebody coming through that door because they were looking at that door, versus . . . being around civilian people. They don’t have that training. Now, I always want to be that
guy in the corner with my back to the wall so I can see everything that is going on, because I don’t trust other people’s situational awareness. Also, my friends [and I] are infamous for this one. I’ll see them every once in a while and they’re like, “I forgot to call you. We had everybody get together over the weekend and we forgot to call you. We’re not used to your being home.” And, I’ve heard through the grapevine that it was going to happen, but I don’t just show up, either, because I feel like the oddball out. And my infamous thing I tell people now is that, “I was born and raised here, but I didn’t grow up here.” I moved away at 18 [when] all my friends hit the party stage and [did] the college life. They did all this stuff together for 20 years. I wasn’t here... I was gone.

Paul also shared how he had gone through a period of introspection and emerged from it with an enhanced interest in school. He explained,

After I got out, I was actually on unemployment. I wasn’t in a hurry to get a job or go to school. After 3 weeks, I really didn’t like not doing stuff. It was the same day over and over... dishes... laundry. Not that I don’t respect other individuals, whether male or female, that do homemaker stuff, but it’s not my thing, and it just dragged on. I [realized] I just love learning. I love going to class, and some classes are better than others. But... [school] just [became] something I was looking forward to.

Mark referenced a different type of perspective and suggested that, the longer he considered his circumstances, the more convinced he became that he would soon be putting
to use some of the skills he had picked up in the military. He believed this because (referring to himself in the third person)

well, he was driven. During that period, he knew what he wanted; he knew that even if he was in a class with all people younger than him, that he was still going to shine. Even though he was an adult, he thought he should shine . . . [even though he was] still learning how to be a student all over again just the same as [the others were] learning how to be college students.

Similarly, Luke demonstrated great honesty, sincerity, and creativity in the way he approached his circumstances, noting,

I would probably describe myself [at the time] as [someone with] an outgoing personality [who had] a few flaws and [had experienced some] setbacks. I was learning to deal with PTSD and depression. If it wasn’t for going to school, I probably would not have been able to deal with it [the way I did]. I learned that if I put my mind on something, it [would help me] deal with what’s going on elsewhere.

Socialite. The participants were able to focus on themselves and their own needs when doing so was appropriate. They all also were quite adept at reading other people and responding to others’ needs, desires, and preferences as well. For these reasons, participants were socially astute enough to consistently and convincingly explain the types of social change they had undergone during their transition from warfighter to student; which, in some cases, was ongoing at the time participants were being interviewed.

Matt had earned his degree at ACC years earlier and reminisced about
failed relationships. I can wrap that up in just that phrase. A lot of relationships that failed—and that’s normal now—but most of mine failed because I wasn’t ready. I wasn’t fully adjusted to the civilian world, and I was caught in that process. And the people I tried to bring along with me, I think, paid too high of a cost being involved with me at the time. I put them through too much, and I regret that. But at the same time, it got me to where I am today. It was part of that process. And, it’s a good cultural thing to be aware of—that we all affect each other. Sometimes we are along for the ride, and other times we know we are going to get dumped. But as long as we do what we can to get everybody else to where they want to go, so what if we fall off. [My] family also had misconceptions of what kind of person I was. . . . I had to be able to balance [what they were thinking I would be like with who] I was coming home. One of my favorite memories of when I came home was . . . talking to Dad in the barn . . . working in the barn with the cows and talking with dad about everything. Much like Matt, most of Mary’s time as a student was behind her by the time she was interviewed. She explained that she assumed responsibility for her social interactions at ACC and that she

had to adapt to being around . . . kids. I am not a people person. I prefer to be by myself, and that’s part of the reason I want to be a teacher—because at the end of the day I can go home. I [no longer] have to deal with them . . . I have the choice of whether or not to deal with them.

Mary was not the only participant who felt that she or he had changed very little during her or his transition to student status. Mark very candidly remarked,
I’d say I never really changed, socially. For me, being my age, it’s hard to find . . . [similar people] especially [when they are still of] high school [or] community college [age]. It’s still that clique . . . who’s popular . . . where do we go . . . who knows whom . . . and for me being an older person . . . it never bothered me. That’s how the younger generation needs to identify [itself] to each other . . . and I don’t really need to identify myself.

John, who was approximately halfway through his degree program when he shared his thoughts, also suggested that he was much less apt to reach out to others than he had been in the past. He said,

I don’t go out very much anymore. When I was in the military, I was that guy . . . Monday through Thursday I was at home; I didn’t leave the house. It was get up, go to the gym, go to work, get off work, maybe play a sporting event, and then go home. I never went out during the week. I’m like that here now, but it’s different. When I go out, if I even go out, I am usually the guy who goes home earlier than everybody else. They get to the point where I’m like, “Ok, now, everyone’s had a few drinks and we’re talking about what happened 5 years ago at this party,” and [someone asks] “do you remember when . . .,” and I’m like, “No, I don’t, I wasn’t there. You guys are going to discuss this for a half-hour? All right, [I’m] going to head home—see you all later.” I just feel like a fifth wheel, so I tend to head home a little earlier than most.

Like John, Luke explained that he tended to keep to himself, but for a different set of reasons. Whereas John chose not to participate in activities that did not interest him, Luke
tended to choose solitude because of the comfort doing so provided. He described the social change he had undergone as resulting in a circumstance whereby

I really don’t talk to people like I did before. To me . . . this is still new to me. I’ve only been living [in the area] for 3 years. It is hard for me to make friends, definitely, with my PTSD and all that. I am so much older than everyone. It seems like I am so much older than everyone [who] is going to college, because I am a nontraditional student in college at age 27. I started when I was 25.

Unlike Luke, Paul had done very little to isolate himself. Instead, he suggested he was very aware of how his military training had allowed him to develop social skills that became more valuable every day. He smiled and explained,

I wouldn’t say you get good at “bull-shitting” people, but you learn how to word things correctly [as well as] work with people that you might not necessarily get along with. You learn how to [engage in] conversation with . . . people. My first semester, I was in a group for [an] astronomy [class that] decided to meet at McDonalds down the street from school on a Sunday to get a project going. I was older than most of them . . . and was not afraid . . . to take . . . a leadership role.

Support. The participants were pleased with how their hard work had paid off as they transitioned from warfighter to student status, but they each attributed at least a portion of their success to support received from others. Matt recalled working with a particularly dedicated faculty member who had assisted him with his academic work after he had switched majors. He referred to his former teacher as a “mentor, friend, and now coworker” and quickly pointed out how important it had been to find someone to work with whom he
both respected and trusted. This instructor encouraged Matt to commit his thoughts to writing and was instrumental in helping him understand and appreciate the value of communicating with oneself as well as with others.

Like Matt, Mark focused on how members of ACC had been a source of support and then expanded his answer to include family, too. He suggested,

When I did work study in [an ACC department], they [were] willing to give me time to maybe help another student in English or finish up any of my projects . . . if I needed [the] time. . . . As far as the other staff members, they [were] always willing to give you a hand on something or give you advice. Some of them—don’t get me wrong—people are people; some do, some don’t. But my family, they were like, “Okay, if you want to study or need to rather than go out to dinner, that’s okay, go ahead and study.”

The more the participants described the support they had received, the more apparent it became that the majority of it came from family members. Paul’s family had actually set aside a dedicated space for him to use and in which they could all assist him. He recalled,

The hard part when I was in Michigan with my mother and father and my brother is that because of all of our schedules, we rarely were together during the week. I had a station in the basement where I could do my math. I did a lot of paper writing for my composition course. That is where I did my work—in the basement. Sometimes I’d have my mother proofread my papers, and I often asked my brother—who is very smart—I’d ask him about math. Even my dad could help in math. I constantly bounced questions.
Luke’s family also was very supportive and demonstrated an acute awareness of the high value of his degree pursuit. Although they were not as actively engaged in Luke’s day-to-day activities as Paul’s family had been, they often reminded Luke that they were in favor of his choice to return to school. He recalled,

They’ve been extremely supportive of me going back to school. They knew it was going to be tough for me, for being out of school 6 years—but they were extremely supportive. They were like, “You need a good education.”

John also referenced his family immediately and described how it was not only particularly well positioned to support him but that it always did so with a collective, healthy sense of humor. He shared,

My family was very supportive. My mother was really happy I was going to go to school. My sister, she’s very proschool. I think she is just now finishing her final degree. She’s got a double major in music and education. She’s got a [background in] behavioral science, and basically she is a behavioral analyst, certified through the FBI and CIA, and she uses that to work with autistic children to create programs that use music to help the autistic children better communicate their feelings. She is very much, “If you have problems . . . if you get stressed . . . call me.” My family is very, very supportive. We are also jokesters, so my father’s running joke is, “I can’t be that old; my oldest son is only a sophomore in college!” My cousin . . . who is 19 is like, “Hey, do you want to come to the kegger this weekend? We just need you to buy the keg for us!” There are jokes all the time about me being my age and going back to school, but it’s fun . . . We do have some good jokes.
Mary also described how supportive her family had been. In addition, she referred to friends as well as community members who tried to support postdeployment veterans through the creation of scholarships. She explained,

My family was extremely supportive of me going back to school. My dad, at the time, actually made me a deal that as long as I was in school I could live at home and not pay rent or anything because I was focusing on school. And then they turned around and moved not too long after. But my family has always been supportive of me going back to school. They always told me what a good job I’m doing and how proud they are that I decided not to just sit at home and be lazy after I got out.

Friends have always been supportive. There has never been a time when they’re like, “Oh, you’re studying too much—you need to come hang out.” They’ve always been, like, “You need to get your homework done.” It’s been a good experience with them.

With the scholarships, I’m in the mindset of, well, I feel like my college is always paid for. I feel bad applying for these scholarships when there are people who actually need them. I did receive one, and I felt kind of bad about it. I’m like, “There’s other people that could have used this.” I mean, I do need help with my housing, but I feel a little selfish if I apply for them.

Facilitation. Participants deeply appreciated the support received from others and looked for opportunities to help other postdeployment veterans with their transitions to college as well. However, actively supporting other transitioning veterans proved to be a challenging undertaking for all the participants.
Matt was in the first wave of postdeployment veterans who transitioned to the classroom after serving in a Middle East conflict. He was one of so few returning veterans at the time, he wasn’t aware of any others his age at ACC. However, since returning to ACC as an instructor and subsequently assuming the role of SVA faculty advisor, he likely had assisted more postdeployment veterans in one way or another than anyone at ACC with the possible exception of its VACO. On the other hand, without elaborating, Mark simply conceded that he had not been able to directly help any other veterans. Paul suggested that he had been able to do little other than offer generic advice to other postdeployment veterans about the use of their VA benefits. Likewise, Luke had taken a low-key approach and simply let other postdeployment veterans know that he was always available if they wanted to talk or simply needed someone to listen to them. John conceded that he had done little to outwardly assist other postdeployment veterans other than provide his perspective about various ACC instructors and their personal and classroom characteristics. Mary lamented,

I have been given the opportunity to go down to the Freedom Center, but I just don’t feel comfortable down there. When I’ve gone in there, I feel like I’m out of place because of my age. And, you don’t see a lot of women down there . . . and I get a little uncomfortable.

**Resources.** Participants recognized that many potential resources were available to assist them with their transitions. They also realized that successfully securing the resource(s) they desired depended upon their ability to do two things. First, participants had to identify the resource they desired. Second, they needed to determine with whom to work
to secure access to that resource. Participants described working with a wide variety of gatekeepers to achieve these objectives.

Mark and Luke each described being frustrated by the resources of which they were aware and able to access, at least initially. Mark invoked a personal, navigation-related, analogy and suggested that he would have preferred to understand the overall college process better before he began his studies:

Well, as far as transitioning from the military to school, no, I didn’t have the knowledge. For me, I like to know something before I go and do it. If I got to go to a person’s house, and I’ve never been there before, even if I know what street it is on, I like to have a little more knowledge. Even if it is only 10 miles away, I’m still going to look it up on a map to make sure I know where it’s at. For me, I wish there would have been more information—something to spell it out better—and information that was simpler rather than the college lingo. It’s hard to explain, because I can look at the lingo now, and I know what these terms are, and I know what this is saying. But, before going to school, I’d look at a pamphlet, and I just didn’t understand what those terms meant and what they were talking about at all. So, maybe make things simpler for a regular person to understand [who] doesn’t know and wants to know before they even go do something.

Luke also reflected on the early days of his transition and suggested that, even though things continued to improve, he would have appreciated it if the information he had been looking for at the time had been easier to find and understand. He recalled,
Going to school, I really didn’t find [many] resources. But, as I go through college, each year it seems like more resources [become] available for veterans. I know we [at ACC SVA] are trying to make it so that there are . . . a lot more resources out there for veterans who are just coming in.

Participants also reported how they had appreciated receiving local and individual attention from individuals who were responsible for assisting with their transitions to college. John focused on the admissions process, happily observing, “As far as everything back home—registering here and the Accuplacer test—it was great.” Matt and Paul also believed that the ACC VACO had done an outstanding job anticipating and exceeding their expectations. Matt explained that, as far as resources were concerned, “[ACC’s] were really good. [ACC VACO] was really on top of the ball . . . never had a problem with any GI Bill issues, here.”

Paul concluded

There are a lot of resources. [They’re] out there! There is a lot of information, and it is hard to get through a lot of it. The one thing I would say in working with [ACC VACO] . . . she has told me a lot of what she needs, and I do have a lot of paperwork from when I went through that course I was discussing earlier. It is just this mountain of information you have to delve [into]. I also have all the paperwork I’ve been sent in the mail in conjunction with my schoolwork, so there’s definitely a lot of information. Sometimes it is daunting and a lot [of], maybe too much, information. That is why there are individuals like [ACC VACO]—to assist [with] a lot of that.

Mary agreed with Matt and Paul, and provided additional information about how the statewide benefit delivery system had worked well in her estimation. She volunteered,
Well, the VA has a really good voc-rehab program that I actually am using. I had a meeting with my rehab advisor within weeks after getting home, and the process was so quick—getting into school and having a plan laid out. They’re really . . . for the most part . . . they’re really helpful. Iowa has a good system going. It’s kind of rare. I like being able to use it.

**Obstacles.** Participants explained that they consistently tried to take advantage of as many resources as possible. Some of these resources were designed to help them gain admission to ACC, whereas others were designed to help them navigate social, financial, or emotional challenges. In each instance, participants made particular use of these resources to surmount the very unique roadblocks they confronted. When asked to comment on the biggest challenges or obstacles they had confronted, collectively the participants described an extraordinarily wide range of scenarios. Mary focused exclusively on the day-to-day rigors she associated with attending classes, confiding that she had been challenged by getting used to the class schedule, trying to hurry up and get it done because there is a specific time frame that they give you to get these classes done, and people don’t realize how hard taking five or six classes a semester really is. I only have 48 months, and [I] have to hurry up and get it done. That has been the biggest challenge for me: trying to hurry up and get these classes done when I wish I could sit back and wait a little longer. But, it works out in the long run.

Successfully completing courses and degree programs was a universal goal shared by participants. To do this, each participant had to navigate a maze of finance-related issues and decisions. Paul shared how his particular challenge related to the issue of reciprocity:
Well, the school in North Carolina was going to charge me out-of-state tuition, and I had lived in North Carolina for 7 years. My home of record was Michigan, but I had bills and paid vehicle taxes, all [that stuff in North Carolina]. So, that meant I had to go to school in Michigan while my wife and stepson stayed in North Carolina, so it was like a civilian deployment. That was challenging, but because we had already gone through a deployment together . . . we talked a lot . . . we did Skype a lot. I wrote her letters in the mail just like I would if I was in Iraq. So, that was a hard part, just being away from her and my stepson.

When asked about challenges, Mark also mentioned finances and then broadened his response to include a reference to attending classes and performing well in them. He explained,

One thing, of course, was funding. I do have the GI Bill, so that is pretty nice, because I don’t really have to worry about tuition, and I get a stipend every month. If I was unemployed, I’d be okay there, because I’d get a monthly paycheck for that. But just funding for books, supplies, attending classes . . . [and] sometimes you worry about are you going to be able to fit? Especially at my age, you’re worried about if some type of emergency [were] to happen, [would I be able] to attend class? It’s important to go to class. I can’t miss class for whatever reason. So, you worry about attending class. And then . . . just worry about doing your best. For me, my mediocre would be good. It would be considered good, but my mediocre isn’t good quality to me. I have to be excellent. So, worrying about not performing at my highest level is always a concern of mine.
Mark was not the only one who assiduously self-monitored his thinking and behavior. Luke and Matt also paid particular attention to the emotional responses they had experienced over the course of their transition experiences. When asked about his biggest challenges, Luke mentioned,

Dealing with the PTSD . . . well I know there are some days—and right now I have some classes—where I just can’t sit there because my mind starts doing flashbacks and all that. Even in my Abnormal Psychology class right now, we [are] studying PTSD, and we were watching a video and they had images of Iraq and Afghanistan, and I had to leave the room because it was getting too much for me.

Matt had surmounted some similar challenges and was also very straightforward with his response, which he began by confirming that the hardest part to overcome was the depression and the PTSD afterwards. Once I got a handle on them . . . some coping mechanisms and medications that worked, it really sped up the process. I started working on my own family, got married, and [had] a good personal support network, one that wasn’t based on drinking buddies or anything else where I was alone most of the time. I had a friend and someone I could trust with me by my side, and that made a big difference.

John also mentioned most of the obstacles described by the other participants but added that he was most frustrated by the ignorance displayed by those around him, many of whom he believed had extremely limited worldviews. He described his biggest challenge as being able to talk to people and being able to explain how I feel about things and why my mentality is the way it is. Understanding that some people have never left here is
very difficult for me. We were talking today in Macroeconomics about Australia, and somebody said Foster’s beer was an export. And I said, “No, it’s actually Canadian, and if you order that in Australia you’ll get punched in the mouth.” And they were like, “Really?” And I was like, “Doesn’t everybody know this—yeah! And, you know, Corona is brewed in Chicago!” Damn it, I’ve been around. It’s stuff like that. That is where my struggles are now, dealing with, for lack of a better term—and, this will sound completely wrong—the “social bubble” that people in [local county] tend to live in. They don’t learn about any cultures other than their own.

**Surprises.** The participants described most obstacles as though they had been expected or at least anticipated. This didn’t mean, however, that participants were pleased about the need to invest time and resources in dealing with them. There were some things, however, that did catch them off guard. Each of the participants described one or more surprises he or she had experienced during his or her transition to student status. Luke and Paul both focused on mundane surprises and indicated a fair amount of discontent with all the documentation they were required to deal with. Luke shared,

> What surprised me was how much paperwork there was. [Even though] I got used to paperwork in the military, it just seemed like there was a lot of paperwork to do before you could get to college with the GI Bill and financial aid.

Paul also expressed shock at the amount of paperwork involved in the process. He declared that he was surprised to have to deal with “so much paperwork . . . [and so much] turning in [of] stuff. When you went to [an office] it was . . . fill it out . . . turn it in. . . . You [were] on automatic . . . just answering questions on forms.”
Although Mary was required to deal with a tremendous amount of paperwork as well, she explained that what really surprised her was how quick it was. I didn’t expect to be able to go to school so soon. I had my first meeting with my advisor in June, and I was enrolled not even a month later. School started in August—and it was really quick.

Mark was less surprised with the speed at which he entered his program than he was by the fact that he had made it at all. He shared how surprised he was that I did it. That I actually went to school, even though it’s community college . . . that I even went to college. During high school I never gave college one thought. Then I joined the Marine Corps and thought maybe I could join the Marine Corps and go to college at the same time, and that didn’t happen for various reasons. So, I thought I was never going to go to college. Then, being in the [hometown] area, I realized that for me to get a decent job in the [hometown] area, I [was] going to need to attend college.

Matt was the only participant who expressed surprise at how the process had influenced him psychologically. He explained that he had been most surprised by the mental aspect of [my transition]. I was really surprised. I hadn’t had any exposure to the college culture other than what I saw on TV. And when I got here, it was a totally different thing. Granted, there were some of the Hollywood aspects . . . the parties . . . as much as they can have . . . for a community college. But, the mental part was the biggest thing that surprised me. If you got your brain in order, and you got control over your thoughts, [you] could get a handle on everything else. And
writing allowed me to control my thoughts or have a sense of control. It might have been a release to my thoughts, just giving them the platform to be heard.

John was surprised less by the practical or mental demands of the transition than he was by the lack of restrictions he was subject to and especially by his reaction to the availability of unfettered liberty. He was completely surprised by the fact that I said I wasn’t going to get a haircut or shave for the first year . . . and it drove me so insane I had to go get a haircut in 3 weeks. I feel like a long-hair hippie right now, because I haven’t got a cut in 3 weeks. Having the freedoms I’ve never had before—but not wanting to use them—[was what surprised me the most.]

**Strategies.** All the participants dealt with anticipated events as well as surprises. Over the course of time, each participant developed personalized strategies that helped him or her do these things. Some of these strategies were relatively passive, whereas others required a flurry of activity. Some were health inducing, whereas others were initially counterproductive.

For example, Matt explained that his first strategy was drinking alcohol. He acknowledged that this actually had been an escape route that thankfully grew into writing. Mark adopted a relatively passive approach to his transition. He asserted that I really didn’t make a plan, because I didn’t have any experience. For me it was more of I’m just going to jump in the deep end and see what happens. If I swim, I swim. If I drown, I drown. That’s what happened.
Working with his wife, Paul took a more directed approach to his transition. He and his wife organized the upcoming chapter of their lives, much as they had done working collaboratively together in the past. He explained:

My wife [and I] did a lot of planning [together]. A lot of the planning I was doing [while] I was sitting in her classroom helping her with her work in North Carolina. I [would] sit on a computer [and] research schools and requirements and lists. Man, I had many, many lists: timelines and stuff I had to get done at home . . . things that we [wanted] to do for vacation. Lists were definitely helpful tools.

Unlike Paul, who had a spouse with whom to work, Luke turned inward and, very intentionally, he changed my mindset a little bit. I went from thinking about a war zone to thinking about a community of students. Education wise, I went from a war zone to the learning [zone], so that changed my mindset, and I was able to [focus on learning instead of thinking] back on what was going on and all that fun stuff.

Mary moved in the exact opposite direction and directed her energy and focus decidedly outward. She explained that she simply jumped straight into it. I didn’t take any time to think about it. I think the more you think about it, the more time you give yourself to question every step of the [way]. It’s easier to go, “Boom, okay, I’m going got do this. I’m going to do the research to determine what major I could go into that the VA will approve and just go with it.”

John described taking a long-term view of his situation and creating a plan he believed was feasible. He reflected,
When I was getting ready to retire, I sat down and my biggest worry was finances. [I asked myself if I was] going to be able to make ends meet. I did not want to be that guy who at 38 years old was living with mom and dad. So, when I moved home, I did live with them for about a month, but the second day home I was already looking for a place. A lot of what I did was take [the] time [to use] Facebook and message friends that were back here and [ask questions such as] what the cost of living was like. If I’m looking for an apartment, what’s it going to run me? [I asked] different things . . . and I made a prechecklist of the things I wanted before I walked into the civilian world again.

From Warfighter to Student—Consummation and Reflection

Considerations. Each participant walked into the civilian world John referenced with a different set of needs and expectations. Over the course of time, each participant became familiarized with the ACC campus, employees, and offerings. As a result, each was able to determine whether ACC, as an institution, would be able to meet his or her individual needs. All the participants reported they were quite pleased with their campus experience. As a group, they had difficulty identifying what additional things ACC could have done differently to better meet their needs.

Matt had completed his course work at ACC a few years before his interviews and was among the first wave of postdeployment veterans to return to campus after serving in a Middle East conflict. He explained that, at the time, if had he been asked for his opinion about what ACC could do differently to better meet his needs, he might have asked for ACC to start a student veterans group, but then he reflected that such a request might not have been
of much utility to the school or himself. It was ironic that, half a decade later, he became the faculty advisor to the ACC SVA. Regarding his time as a student, he remarked, “I would say a student vet group? But I know myself. I probably wouldn’t have done it because I wasn’t interested in a student life group then. The college . . . I don’t know what else they could have done, actually.”

John replied in much the same way Matt did:

I really don’t know. I’m going to walk out of here at the end of this summer with my first associate’s degree and, because of the fact that most of those classes partner up, I’m going to be able to get a second 2-year degree in a year! For me, there’s really nothing the college could have done differently or can do differently. I’ve definitely been very happy with it.

Likewise, Mark believed the college was doing everything it could for him. He actually suggested that he would have been comfortable if ACC had tried to do a little less on his behalf. When asked to make recommendations for improvement, Mark replied,

Offhand, I can’t say currently. Even though they recommend you go to an orientation . . . it is helpful, don’t get me wrong, but . . . there are some aspects of it, which I can’t name offhand, but there are some aspects of it that really aren’t needed. But I really can’t say offhand.

Mary had just transferred from ACC to a local 4-year university when she addressed this question during her final interview. She agreed with Matt, John, and Mark, expressing her belief that “with [ACC], they were doing as much as they could. The fact that the school
president is on board and is incredibly supportive makes a world of difference compared to where I am at school now.”

Luke was a charter member of the ACC SVA and remained very interested in the continued viability of this student group. His response indicated that he was focused outward and concerned with meeting the needs of other postdeployment veterans who might be looking for the solidarity the ACC SVA provided. He suggested,

What would probably help is if we had one set area for the club. That way, if you’re a new veteran coming in, you know right where to go. Instead of, “Where are the members?” or “Where are the faculty advisors?” It’s kind of hard to know when you have no room to be able to go to.

Paul simply shared that, although he had no present needs that had been unmet, “I [would] feel comfortable with coming to the counseling services with any issue I [might] have, and I feel confident they [would] be able to handle it.

**Modifications.** All the participants believed ACC was doing all it could to help them succeed and were happy with their transitions. In addition, participants were eager to explain what they themselves had done to succeed in their transitions. They were also gracious enough to admit when they thought they might have been better off doing some things differently. As the participants reflected on their individual overall transition from warfighter to student, five of the six indicated that, if given the opportunity, they would do some things differently.

Matt was the only participant who indicated that he would do things the same way again. Shaking his head slowly from left to right, he suggested,
You know, I wouldn’t do anything differently. I am content with how I did it. There are things I should have done differently and wish I could have, but I don’t want to. Where I am at is a pretty good spot, and if I had changed something back there, I might not have ended up here. So, I am pretty content.

Paul and John both explained that they would have done more academically to prepare for their transitions while they were still on active duty. Paul simply stated, “If I were to change anything, it would have been to do more school before I got out. That would have been it.” John had drawn the same conclusion, but he also explained the reason for his response, reflecting,

If I had it to do all over again, I definitely would have taken some more schooling while I was active. Not because of any reason other than I wouldn’t have had the fear. I would have walked in here and been like, “I know what I’m doing, boom.” The blessing is, though, if I had done that, I would not have come to this school. I would have gone to someplace like [a local 4-year university]. But, having not taken those courses, I came here and . . . maybe it happened for a reason.

Luke shared a somewhat different perspective. He indicated that he would have subjected his foregone conclusion to begin college immediately to greater scrutiny. He described how, instead of assuming he should begin college immediately, he would have asked,

Is this going to be the correct path [for me] to go on? Do I want to go into this right now?” I would [have tried to get settled] before I decided to go to school, so I
[wouldn’t have gone] in it kind of blind-folded, you could say. It is such a hard transition . . . [going] from being in the military to being in school.

Mark was certain that his decision to go back to school was the correct one. Unlike Luke, however, he suggested that he did not start school right away—but wished he had.

Mark explained,

College is such a long road. When I first got out, I didn’t start right away. So, that’s the first thing I would change—or try to advise other people [to do]. Even if it’s one class, even if it’s the minimum you can get, just jump into school; learn what it’s about. I believe that some people don’t jump into school right away because they don’t know what it’s about. . . . For me it’s the simplest thing in the world, and that’s part of why it’s hard for me to go to school, because it’s really simple and it doesn’t take much to get through it, but . . . that’s the thing I would advise—for somebody to do it right away. I would change [how I did it]. Just completely go back 6 years now and just start no matter what. Because I’d be done now or have my master’s at least.

Mary agreed with Mark insofar as she believed she was correct in deciding to go back to school immediately. Unlike Mark, though, Mary indicated that, if given the chance to do things differently, she was not sure that she would have begun classes at a 2-year school.

She speculated,

I think I may have started off at a 4-year university versus [ACC]. The transition between [ACC] and [the local 4-year university], even though it has been really smooth, has been difficult because I am having a really hard time getting to know
people. I think if I had started off at [a local 4-year university] and gone all the way through, it would have been a lot easier for me.

**Transitions.** All of the participants had negotiated numerous life transitions prior to participating in this study. All of them also identified significant, additional transitions they were in the midst of navigating during the course of their interviews. These transitions included, but were not limited to: transferring from a community college to a private, 4-year university (Mary); completing an advanced degree (Matt); preparing to become a father for an additional time (Luke); getting married, becoming a father for the first time, and mourning the death of a parent (Mark); becoming an active member of the ACC SVA (Paul); and preparing to successfully enter the job market (John). As a result, when the participants each explained how the transition to student status compared to other transitions they had experienced during their lives, they were at no loss for words or contextualized comparisons.

Matt had transitioned to life as a student first, relative to the other five participants, and described returning to a very different set of circumstances than participants who had transferred more recently. He candidly shared,

This was probably the most difficult, mainly because of the social isolation that came along with it coming back from active duty. My transition from combat to [being a civilian] was just . . . but the transition to here—to [being a] student—[and the] social isolation . . . there was no one to turn to. This was when we didn’t have the [ACC] SVA, we didn’t know [who] each other [were], and nobody talked about it.

John’s response also indicated the gravity with which he had contemplated his transition to becoming a student after serving in the Navy for 20 years. He agreed with Matt:
This one’s been a lot harder. It’s more on a personal level than anything. I joined the military, and I did certain jobs for certain reasons. When I didn’t make E7, I was very upset. I kind of almost felt like a failure to my family. Because my dad made E9, [and] his best friend was an E9, [and] my brother-in-law was an E8 . . . all these different reasons. So, it almost felt like, when I lost all that, I lost a big part of me.

It’s something I struggle with every once in a while, but that’s the great thing about being here. I can talk to guys like [name of ACC veteran] and Matt and kind of laugh about it . . . and goof around . . . and [teach younger students] . . . life’s lessons.

Luke concurred with the concerns shared by both Matt and John. Working as a truck driver while he was deployed, he had invested a significant amount of time traveling through combat zones. That experience taught him to be constantly vigilant, and it continued to inform his perceptions of his surroundings. He, too, explained that:

it’s a lot harder, because you have the mentality of being in a war zone, and the transition to [school and] civilian life is difficult because all I see—it might be something on the side of a road—and I think IED. It’s just the mindset I have, and it’s hard to break.

Mark took a future-oriented approach when he responded. He chose to focus on how his time in a war zone had prepared him for his eventual transition to student status as well as all other transitions he might undergo at some point in the future. He described the evolution in his thinking:

I’d say ever since the first time I was deployed, nothing compares to that feeling.

Each new experience after being deployed is literally nothing. There’s no fear toward
it; there’s no apprehension; it’s mainly just, “All right, let’s do this.” Because the first time I was deployed—on the flight there—and the first week I was deployed to Iraq, I was nothing but afraid—completely afraid. In the first week, we didn’t even leave the base, and [we] saw some crazy, crazy things. Ever since that point, I haven’t been afraid to do anything, such as . . . live in a hospital for 2 months . . . when my daughter was born. It’s just something that’s easy to do now and not . . . hold back.

Mary adopted a tone similar to yet distinguishable from Mark’s. She described herself as being relatively at ease with significant transitions in her own life, appreciative of the life she had lived while deployed, and able to constantly move forward as she was unencumbered by domestic responsibilities. She reflected,

I really didn’t think it was that hard when I came back. I honestly missed being deployed, because things seemed easier out there. Since I’m not married, [and] I don’t have to deal with kids . . . for me, I kind of just got back from deployment and continued on with life. I didn’t have to reconnect with kids or spouses or anything, so for me it was probably a lot easier than for most. I just got right back on the horse and just kept going.

**Summations.** Prior to sitting down for the first interview, each participant had invested a tremendous amount of time considering the transition(s) he or she had navigated while moving from an international deployment to an Iowa community college. Each also quickly summarized his or her cumulative experience toward the end of the final interview with me.
Luke used the fewest words in summarizing his overall transition. He explained that the word “eventful” came right to mind. He also reiterated that his major focus during the previous 5 years had been surmounting the challenges associated with PTSD.

Like Luke, Paul summarized his transition relative quickly. After pausing to consider the range of emotions he had experienced, he concluded,

I would describe it as a roller coaster. There are ups and downs in everything you do. But, you have to consider that my last deployment was in 2009, and my first semester [in college] was in 2013. That’s a long road to go down. There [were] a lot of things I had to do . . . and some of it was easy . . . and some of it was hard.

Mark also described a transition that had included a wide range of challenges. He chose the word “adventure”:

I’d say an adventure. Basically, [it was] an adventure [that led to] a realization and, I can’t think of [how to phrase it] right now, but becoming . . . humble. An adventure because, for an active duty person, what I did was, I deployed, and I came back and worked my regular job in the Marine Corps. [After] my last deployment I came back, worked my job in the regular Marine Corps for a couple of months and then transitioned into a civilian life. I tried to figure out how to get a job in the world and held a job for a while but realized that’s not something I want to do, and I realized that I [wanted] to go to school. You do actually better yourself when you go to college. The stereotypical college kid that you see on television isn’t really the way it is. I view [that more as a media portrayal of] a rich person that has gone to college. I really believe that it does actually change you. I mean, it’s changed the way I speak
and everything . . . and the way I write . . . so it changes you there. [It has been] an adventure and just . . . humbling for this [Marine] and the time I was deployed. When you deployed, you went through stuff that a lot of Marines faced at the time. You were like a superhero. You couldn’t—nobody could hurt you—and nobody could touch you. And now it’s more “wow,” kind of, “This is what I missed, what I [was] missing out on.” [It] just [brings] you down to earth and [levels] you out again. John also described a wide range of sentiments as well as the ironic nature of certain aspects of his life since he made the decision to return to the classroom. He alluded to a very particular, self-deprecating type of stress when he suggested his circumstances had been definitely stressful, actually, self-induced stressful. Fun, it really has been fun to take on a new challenge. It’s also [been] very strange. I haven’t gotten a haircut or shaved in 3 weeks, and it’s actually driving me insane. I fight it every day, and it’s just to see if I can kind of get out of that military mentality. It’s really not happiness. Every day, I’m like, “I’m turning into a hippie!”

John also remained very aware of how much he had changed during his transition as well as how influential ACC had been in that process. He was the only participant who specifically referred to the college while summarizing his transition to it, confidently asserting,

I would argue, if I had to summarize it, the one thing that stands out would be this place, the community college. A 4-year school would have been too big. It would have been too much of a culture shock and change from what I was used to. Coming here, this was the catalyst that got me on this path. It facilitated the change [that]
occurred within me. Really. Even when I was at [a local 4-year university] and at grad school, I still kept coming back to [ACC].

Mary immediately and sincerely acknowledged that her transition seemed to have been very different than that of other postdeployment veterans who had transitioned to ACC. She also described an awareness of what many of her peers had experienced as well as the emotional response that witnessing this had triggered in her. She reflected,

It could have been a lot harder than it was. I’ve seen a lot of that struggle, and even though I had my personal issues, I haven’t struggled nearly as hard as others. I feel bad for them for having to go through that. My support system seemed a lot better than most.

Expectations. At the conclusion of his or her final interview, each participant reflected upon his or her transition experience and how it provided a foundation upon which he or she could base future plans, activities, hopes, and dreams. Two participants suggested they planned to approach the near future and upcoming decision-making somewhat flexibly, whereas the other four participants shared concrete plans they had already made.

Luke and his wife were expecting their third child, and he was focused on the pending birth. He suggested that he was planning to take a realistic and practical approach to organizing his future and that he had not made any specific plans for himself. He concluded, “I don’t really know right now. It’s still up in the air. I have to think of my kids first—and my wife—before I plan something for me.”

John also indicated that he was generically focused upon completing his degree and maybe a second AA degree before leaving ACC. Regardless of what he was studying or
where he might find employment, he had decided that he wished to remain physically close to the community in which he had grown up and to which he had returned after his final deployment. He shared,

I will still be in the [local county] area. I’ve decided that is where I want to be. I will, as long as they want [me to], try to be helpful to the Student Veterans Association here at [ACC] and also the school in general—I almost said “working here.” There are a lot of people around the community who have gone to school here, and when you say, ‘Yeah, I’m currently a student at [ACC], they are like, “Yeah, I went there, too,” and the community is now starting to change [its] opinion of [ACC], and it’s a great place to use as a stepping stone to a 4-year college.

John had come to appreciate the value of a good education. Mark, Mary, and Matt had as well, and each indicated the hope to translate his or her interest in academic pursuits into making a contribution to society as an educator of some type. Mark confirmed,

I would like to become a teacher. Will I get there? I don’t know, because, like I mentioned earlier, school is such a long road. For me, I am a person [who] loves, really enjoys, change, so more [school would feel] like I [was] in the doldrums, I guess. I’m repeating myself over and over again. But, I’d like to become a teacher—transfer to a 4-year school . . . and become a teacher. [I want to focus on communications] and hopefully teach communications or public speaking . . . things like that.

Mary indicated a similar interest, although she was a little further along in her pursuit of a degree that was preparing her to enter and command the classroom. She shared,
I am a dual major and a dual minor. I plan to head straight into teaching. I hope to get into [a] high school so I could teach higher [level] English skills. At the same time, being in a middle school, and being able to teach science or history seems like it would be really fun, too! I am just hoping that the transition is as easy as I am hoping it will be. I want to jump straight into teaching. This is just taking so long for me to get to my end goal. I can’t wait for it. It is going to be awesome. I can’t wait to teach!

John had been employed as instructor at ACC for some time and indicated he was interested in staying as long as possible:

I [intend to] get settled into the full-time position here. In 3 to 5 years, I want the SVA to grow, or [I will] do something else with the group. Beyond that, maybe have another book out, possibly. Realistically, I’d like to retire from here sometime. I have no desire to go to another school right now. As much as this place has meant to me, I don’t know if I am going to leave it on my own accord.

Although John indicated a strong interest in remaining at ACC for the foreseeable future, Paul acknowledged that he was favorably anticipating a fair amount of relocation and adjustment in the months ahead. Working with his wife, he had assembled a reasonable plan of action:

[My wife and I] are looking at purchasing a house. At the same time . . . semesters and three credit hours from now, I will be graduating, and right after that I will be going to a 4-year university. One way or another, I will find a way. That means I
will probably be away from my family again, but it is what I want to do, and I think my wife supports me and so does my stepson. It’s definitely a good position to be in.

Summary

This chapter is comprised of participant profiles, a summary of study participants, and a detailed description of themes and subthemes that emerged as a result of analysis of data that were collected to answer the question, “How do veterans who have made the transition from international deployments to an Iowa community college describe their experiences?” The first theme was from civilian to warfighter—calibration and detachment and included the following subthemes: contemplation, familiarity, support, wisdom, and preparation. The second theme was from civilian to warfighter—ambiguity and metamorphoses and included the following subthemes: initiation, alternatives, galvanization, growth, and contribution. The third theme was from civilian to warfighter—consummation and reflection and included the subtheme reconciliation. The fourth theme was from warfighter to student—calibration and detachment and included the following subthemes: education, foundation, expiration, and optimization. The fifth theme was from warfighter to student—ambiguity and metamorphoses and included the following subthemes: relocation, effort, trajectory, socialite, self, support, facilitation, resources, obstacles, surprises, and strategies. The sixth theme was from warfighter to student—consummation and reflection, and included the following subthemes: considerations, modifications, transitions, summations, and expectations. A contextualized discussion of each theme and subtheme may be found in the concluding section of chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of veterans who have made the transition from international deployments to an Iowa community college. Constructionism provided the epistemological foundation for this study. An interpretivist perspective was used to analyze data collected via face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Liminality theory provided a theoretical lens through which to interpret that analysis. This interpretation resulted in six themes, which are addressed in this discussion. This discussion is comprised of a series of conclusions, an explanation of study limitations, a review of ethical considerations, an analysis of implications for policy and practice, recommendations for future research, and a reflexivity statement.

Conclusions

The conclusions to this study were drawn based upon an analysis of study findings. Those findings revealed six chronological themes, each of which was comprised of a number of subthemes. The first three themes were related to each participant’s transition from civilian to warfighter; the second three themes were related to each participant’s transition from warfighter to student. In order, these six themes were:

1. From civilian to warfighter—calibration and detachment,
2. From civilian to warfighter—ambiguity and metamorphoses,
3. From civilian to warfighter—consummation and reflection,
4. From warfighter to student—calibration and detachment,
5. From warfighter to student—ambiguity and metamorphoses, and
6. From warfighter to student—consummation and reflection.

Each of the six themes was found to correlate with a combination of a particular stage and one or more rites associated with liminality theory. In particular, themes 1 and 4 both addressed preliminal stages of transitions, during which each participant navigated one or more rites of separation. Themes 2 and 5 both addressed liminal stages of transitions, during which each participant negotiated one or more rites of transition. Themes 3 and 6 both addressed postliminal stages of transitions, during which each participant welcomed one or more rites of incorporation.

**From Civilian to Warfighter—Calibration and Detachment**

From civilian to warfighter—calibration and detachment was the first theme that study findings revealed. This phase of each participant’s transition was preliminal in nature and required him or her to navigate one or more rites of separation. During this phase, all the participants calibrated the decision to join the military and detached themselves from a civilian lifestyle.

To calibrate the wisdom of their decision to join the armed forces, all the participants consulted with friends and/or family members who had served in the armed forces and sought answers to numerous questions. Participants asked about preferred branches of service, the benefits and drawbacks associated with being trained to perform a particular MOS, duty assignments to be avoided, and basic training locations to be sought. Each participant worked with at least one recruiter to determine if she or he was eligible to serve. The participants also completed the battery of cognitive and physical examinations necessary
to demonstrate that they also were fit to serve as well as the optimum capacity in which they might do so.

To detach themselves from a civilian lifestyle, all the participants physically traveled from their respective residences (or home of record) to a basic training duty station. While en route, they all passed through a MEPS station and were required to swear an oath that obligated them to a contractual period of military service. The swearing of this oath was an example of a rite of separation. Soon after, each participant would also begin a significant right of transition (also a rite of initiation and often referred to as a “rite of passage”) recalled by generations of former service members: basic training or boot camp.

Study findings focusing on this period of calibration and detachment revealed a number of subthemes as well. For example, all the participants engaged in a protracted period of contemplation before deciding to enlist. In some cases, participants included others in these interludes. In other instances, participants simply separated themselves for as long as each believed was necessary and internally processed the question of whether the course of action he or she was considering was appropriate for him- or herself.

Based upon the responses received from others regarding their questions as well as their own efforts to research the pros and cons associated with life in uniform, all the participants developed a particular level of familiarity with the parameters associated with life in uniform. John and Matt both descended from families whose members had served with distinction in earlier conflicts and had access to the many stories family members told. This was not the case for Luke and Mark, although each knew older family members who had chosen to serve at one point or another. Ultimately, each participant believed that she or
he understood enough about the military to make an informed decision to enlist in one of its branches.

Although the confidence to enlist was often described as having been derived from discussions with family members, friends also proved to be an important source of support for each participant. All the participants reported being supported by numerous groups and individuals and being particularly appreciative of spouses and children who tolerated their decisions and the prolonged physical absences that resulted from them. In a few instances, participants did receive mixed messages from friends. Mary, in particular, received very little support from the majority of her friends when she told them she was enlisting, but this deficiency was outweighed by the influence of one particularly influential friend who rigorously supported her decision.

Regardless of the amount of support participants received from family or friends regarding their decision to enlist, all the participants emerged from this stage of transition with additional wisdom. They all reported that the experience of deciding to enlist had taught them a great deal about themselves, their values, and their culture, however each participant defined it. To a person, all the participants described having grown as a human being during the process of contemplating the risks and rewards associated with life in uniform and the decisions they might be required to make while wearing it.

Even though all the participants reported being pleased with the additional insight gained from the contemplation of the decision to enlist, they also reported that preparation, especially prior to attending basic training or boot camp, had not been something they had taken seriously enough. Mark and Matt indicated that they had done very little to prepare for
their initial training and neither suggested he believed he should have invested his time
immediately prior to attending his initial training any differently than he had. Luke, on the
other hand, had successfully begun an exercise program prior to leaving for basic training
and indicated he wished he had done even more to prepare physically for the corporeal rigors
ahead.

**From Civilian to Warfighter—Ambiguity and Metamorphoses**

The second theme revealed by the study’s findings, from civilian to warfighter—
ambiguity and metamorphoses, reflected a phase of the participants’ transition that was
liminal in nature and required each of them to navigate one or more rites of transition.
During this phase, each participant confronted ambiguous circumstances and underwent a
change of identity.

All the participants confronted ambiguous circumstances during this phase of their
respective transition while they completed basic training or boot camp. For example, the
participants were required to suspend conventional thinking and behavior patterns associated
with the pursuit of personal freedom while living from day to day under the functional
equivalent of martial law; adopt a universal standard of diet, dress and appearance despite
how doing so might have made them look or feel; unflinchingly accept orders from
individuals they may have found morally reprehensible or intellectually inferior; and learn
everything possible about staying alive one minute and killing another person the next. As a
result, each participant also underwent one or more personal metamorphoses and acquired a
new identity: warfighter, the contemporary term used to describe a member of the U.S.
armed forces regardless of service branch or MOS. Acquiring this status or designation
required participants (trainees) be able to demonstrate above average physical fitness, applied intelligence, and moral malleability. Participants were required to demonstrate each of these characteristics before graduating from basic training or boot camp, because contemporary war theaters would predictably demand those traits once they were deployed.

Study findings focused on this period of ambiguity and metamorphoses revealed a number of subthemes as well. For example, each participant went through at least one type of initiation. In some cases, this meant a “high-and-tight” haircut; in other cases, it consisted of being fitted for, and wearing, the exact same type of clothing and eyeglasses as everyone else, 24 hours a day for 3 consecutive months. Initiations were not always cosmetic, however. In many cases they were verbal and resulted in participants, such as Mary, being yelled at incessantly by drill personnel or even other trainees. At times, initiations were solely physical, such as during hand-to-combat drills or bayonet practice. Some of the most intense initiations were psychological and required participants to demonstrate a willingness and a preparedness to kill another person.

Participants drew a number of conclusions about these experiences. For instance, they all described alternatives they would have pursued if they were given the chance to prepare differently than they had for such initiations or for basic training or boot camp in general. Most participants indicated they would have done more to prepare physically, such as run or work on core body strength, as Luke suggested. In some cases, participants shared they would have pursued pragmatic alternatives, such as packing fewer personal items, as these were confiscated and put in storage for the duration of their training. John was the only participant who mentioned the result that a lack of familiarity with printed materials
precipitated during his initial round of training and suggested that he would have actually read the manuals his recruiter had made available prior to his departure for boot camp.

Although participants were able to describe how they had changed as a result of basic training or boot camp as well as what they would do differently if they were to attend again, they also indicated that their training had resulted in certain types of personal galvanization. Participants indicated that, as a result of their training, they had become even more rigid in certain thinking and behavior patterns. Mark told a compelling story about how his attempts to help another Marine during training were initially thwarted by a drill instructor but how the experience ultimately resulted in his being even more committed to looking out for the “entire person” and not being satisfied simply with the accomplishment of an assigned mission.

Mark’s enhanced understanding of his personal values was one of numerous instances of personal growth cited by participants that occurred at basic training or boot camp. Luke described how his experiences at basic training had confirmed he could do anything he put his mind to. John and Mary told stories of how their levels of personal self-confidence both soared after graduating from basic training. Matt candidly explained that he grew up in the 16 weeks he invested at basic training.

All the participants continued the growth curve they each began at basic training while at AIT (advanced individual training). Participants attended these specialized schools to learn the skills they would need to perform their respective MOS and make a contribution to whatever armed conflict(s) in which they were eventually involved. Participants selected MOSs in diverse areas, completed training at AIT centers around the country, and were
eventually referred to by the following job titles: Cannon Crewmember, Military Working Dog Handler, Truck Driver, Disaster Preparedness Coordinator, Aviation Life Support Systems Marine, and Signal Support Specialist.

**From Civilian to Warfighter—Consummation and Reflection**

The third theme revealed by the study’s findings, from civilian to warfighter—consummation and reflection, reflected the participants’ transition that was postliminal in nature and required them to navigate one or more rites of incorporation. During this phase, the participants consummated, or solidified, their status as a warfighter and reflected upon the transition they had completed.

The participants solidified their status as a warfighter by participating in rites of incorporation, better known as graduation from basic training and, shortly thereafter, from AIT as well. In some cases, individual participants purchased their own tactical gear, dress uniforms, or special uniform accouterments. Doing so confirmed their intention to remain in the military and complete their term of enlistment. In many cases, new warfighters got tattoos depicting military themes, units, or mottos. In most cases, participants began sharing their own stories with potential recruits as well as with friends and/or family back home. In all cases, participants prepared to travel to their first permanent duty station. This preparation was an example of the overlapping preliminal phase of each participant’s next shared transition. That transition would be complete with its own rite of separation: participants saying good-bye to those with whom they had attended their initial training.

All the participants reflected upon these transitions and how they became a routine part of their lifestyle upon their respective enlistments. These periods of contemplation led
to various types of reconciliation. Participants recalled how leaving their homes and families had been difficult but worthwhile in retrospect. They also explained how their individual identities had been altered. Although they all described aspects of themselves that had not changed, they focused for noticeably longer periods of time on describing new skills, abilities, and perspectives. John and Matt shared perceptive accounts of how basic training provided them an opportunity to live with, and learn from, individuals of ethnicities and faiths with which they had no prior contact.

**From Warfighter to Student—Calibration and Detachment**

The fourth theme revealed by study findings was from warfighter to student—calibration and detachment. This phase of the participants’ transition was preliminal in nature and required them to navigate one or more rites of separation. During this phase, participants calibrated the decision to transition to life as a student and detached themselves from a military lifestyle.

To calibrate the practicality of transitioning from life as a warfighter to life as a student, each participant focused on education as a pursuit. For participants like Matt and Paul, this was a brand new proposition. Neither had given much thought to pursuing an education while they were deployed. Others, like Mary and Mark, had investigated the possibility of completing coursework online, but became discouraged when unable to secure the Internet access that would have made online education a feasible option. At a certain point, however, all the participants committed to finding a school they believed would be a good fit when they were ready to walk back into the classroom.
Prior to entering those classrooms, all the participants made a decision about the type of foundation upon which they wished to base their academic efforts. Matt, Luke, and Mary reported doing extremely little to prepare themselves to return to the classroom, whereas Mark took the pragmatic step of asking current students for tips and advice regarding what he should do before actually beginning classes. Similar to Mark, Paul and John took a proactive approach. Paul sought advice from officers with whom he was stationed, and John approached friends and family members to ask about their experiences as students and what they would suggest he do to prepare himself as he finally became one, too.

During this phase of their transitions, participants also detached themselves from a military lifestyle. As they contemplated the expiration of service obligation, each participant considered what he or she would miss most about life in the military. Matt focused on skills that would likely atrophy, whereas Luke described the constant building of additional confidence that resulted from overcoming frequent challenges. Paul described the maintenance of the mental acuity required to perform in high stress environments, and Mark reiterated how much he appreciated the enhanced discipline he had been required to practice as a warfighter.

Ironically, participants also suggested that, at times, it seemed as though the military never focused on optimization at all. Luke described being disappointed with the way his educational benefits were dispensed, and Matt suggested that the entire out-processing function needed to be overhauled. The out-processing Matt focused on proved to be the most significant rite of separation associated with this stage of the participants’ transition. During out-processing, the participants were briefed regarding what to expect upon their return to the
civilian world, received a final medical and dental examination, turned in all of the gear the government had issued them, and arranged for the shipment home (to the residence of their choosing) of all of their personal property.

**From Warfighter to Student—Ambiguity and Metamorphoses**

The fifth theme revealed by study findings was from warfighter to student—ambiguity and metamorphoses. This phase of the participants’ transition was liminal in nature and required them to navigate one or more rites of transition. During this phase, the participants confronted ambiguous circumstances and underwent a change of identity.

Initially, the participants confronted ambiguous circumstances, at least in a physical sense, upon their respective relocations to a residence within commuting distance of ACC. The participants described the affordability of ACC as the biggest factor in their respective decisions to enroll in classes there, and having done so required each participant to live relatively close to campus. Matt, Mark, John, and Mary had resided near ACC before they joined the military, so they were actually relocating relatively close to their respective homes of record for purposes of pursuing an education. However, none of them were returning to the households they had exited years earlier. Luke had lived within 250 miles of ACC before enlisting as well as after returning to the United States when he was discharged, but needed to move closer so as to live within a reasonable commuting distance of campus. Paul’s decision to attend classes at ACC had required him to move his family to the Midwest from North Carolina.

Relocating to a home near ACC required a period of adjustment for the participants. Each move also was an example of a rite of separation and required each of the participants
to physically detach him- or herself from a familiar location and lifestyle to which he or she had grown accustomed and which had provided comfort and security. Once the participants had settled in, they were able to focus on making academic progress. At the time of their interviews, all the participants suggested that they had continued to put forth enough effort to make the move worthwhile. Matt and Mary had already graduated from ACC, and the other four participants were making steady progress toward their degree-related goals.

The four participants who had yet to graduate each described a realistic, projected course trajectory. Paul had made a mid-program degree adjustment and had transferred into a new program. Luke was making solid progress as an education major, and Mark was happy as a communications major and additionally was considering studying one of the trades (construction). John was diligently working on the first of two associate’s degrees in which he was interested.

The participants’ degree choices revealed personal preferences, hopes, and dreams. The participants were very aware of this aspect of self and shared reasons for the decisions they had made. As participants reflected on their own personal characteristics, they reflected on perceived strengths as well as weaknesses. Collectively, strengths included drive, discipline, fortitude, and ambition. Weaknesses were typically described as sensations they had experienced and wished they could have avoided. These sentiments included: lingering disappointment over the surrender of warfighter status, sense of disorientation amid their relocation and transition to the classroom environment, and sense of wonder at civilians who constantly appeared to display a lack of discipline both in and out of the classroom. Every one of these sensations demonstrated that participants were passing through yet another
liminal (middle) stage of a transition—one in which they felt as if they were caught attempting to function betwixt and between, in the lexicon of Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969).

The sensation of living in “two worlds at once”—being part of both but not completely in either—frequently manifested when participants described relationships they maintained with others on campus. As a socialite, each participant realized he or she had been only moderately successful at participating superficially in the maintenance of the social fabric that comprised the ACC campus community. Oftentimes, the effort required to do so simply proved uncomfortable or even impossible. Matt described failed relationships. Mary explained the need to adapt to students who had always been civilians. Mark lamented how those around him seemed caught up in the need to belong to a particular social circle or clique. Luke and John agreed, and they both shared examples of how they had withdrawn from civilian peers on and near the ACC campus.

Even though participants withdrew from some individuals on and around campus, none of them became completely isolated. To the contrary, all of them described an ample amount of support from faculty and family during this time of adjustment. Matt described a particularly compassionate and competent ACC instructor who had initially been a mentor, subsequently became a friend, and was a coworker at the time of his final interview. Mark, too, described being particularly pleased when ACC faculty had not only provided plenty of latitude to complete assignments and projects but also facilitated his attempts to help other students learn. This was particularly important to him, because he was actively contemplating becoming a teacher himself. Participants also explained how important family
support had been. Paul’s family had constructed a workstation in their basement where he could focus on his studies, and he reported that both of his parents and his brother had provided a great deal of assistance to him with his coursework. Luke, John, and Mary also described how supportive their respective families had been, although none of them reported the type of proactive involvement that Paul did.

When participants described the support received from faculty and family members, they indicated that it had come as no surprise, although it was always deeply appreciated. The participants also conceded that, even though they realized how valuable doing so could have been, they each had been only moderately successful when it came to assisting with the facilitation of other postdeployment veterans’ transitions to life as a student. Matt had transitioned to ACC before most schools in the country were actively discussing the special needs of returning veterans, and he explained that he never really thought about doing anything special for the few postdeployment veterans who returned to school at the time he did. Paul indicated that, although he had shared benefits-related advice with fellow Marines, it had been generic in nature and not part of a sustained effort to inform or assist students such as himself. Luke explained, and the other participants insinuated, that he had simply made other postdeployment veterans aware of his presence and constant willingness to simply listen to them should they desire he do so.

The participants indicated that the act of simply listening, along with effectively explaining to others what they had needed to succeed, proved to be of the utmost importance when it came to securing the resources they required. They explained that their ability to access information, individuals, and money were key objectives for them before they began
classes as well as over the course of each academic term. Learning how to work with the ACC “establishment” proved to be yet another example of a rite of transition (rite of passage) through which the participants passed during this liminal, ambiguous period of transition.

Even though all the participants ultimately were able to access most of the resources they needed to succeed as a student at ACC, successfully doing so did not mean they were left without additional personal obstacles to surmount. Participants reported a wide range of additional challenges, including issues related to finances, social interactions with faculty and classmates, and the processing of emotional responses they experienced. On occasion, these episodes took the form of depression or bouts of PTSD that lasted for various durations of time. The ambiguity each of these challenges presented was seldom trivial and often required a participant’s long-term undivided attention to identify, assess, and overcome.

In many instances, participants were able to predict obstacles that would eventually occur. In other cases, various challenges came as surprises. Some of the aspects of their individual transitions that caught participants off guard were relatively mundane and inconsequential, such as the almost overwhelming amount of paperwork required for many of the transactions that Luke, Paul, and Mary described. Mark was quite pleased to report his feeling of shock that he had actually made it into college at all, whereas Matt reiterated how surprised he had been by the mental gymnastics he was required to perform during his early days as a student. John offered an alternative perspective, describing in great detail how shocked he had been at his reaction to the complete freedom he finally had to do whatever he wanted. He concluded by suggesting he had been even more surprised by how routinely he had decided to refrain from taking full advantage of his newly acquired liberty.
Participants dealt with these surprises using a variety of strategies. Some, including the drinking of alcohol as a coping mechanism, were pursued for a short time and only until more effective habits were acquired. Paul found it helpful to continue to collaborate with his wife when planning effective ways to deal with surprises, and Luke described how being very intentional about monitoring and changing his mindset had proved to be of great utility. Mary described how she simply attacked day-to-day surprises head on, whereas John indicated he frequently took a more circumspect approach. He habitually researched decisions thoroughly and was more apt than many of the other participants to seek the opinions of others before making a decision himself.

From Warfighter to Student—Consummation and Reflection

The sixth theme revealed by study findings was from warfighter to student—consummation and reflection. This phase of the participants’ transition was postliminal in nature and required them to navigate one or more rites of incorporation. During this phase, the participants consummated or solidified their status as a student and reflected upon the transition they had completed.

Each participant solidified his or her status as a student by acting like one. The participants registered for and attended classes prepared to contribute and learn; mingled with other students and faculty before and after class; and utilized ACC facilities and amenities such as the library, cafeteria, and bookstore. The participants also negotiated the same postliminal rites of incorporation as other students did, including orientations, shared meals in the student union, and group attendance at campus-wide assemblies.
As a result, all the participants had plenty of student experiences to compare and describe when they reflected upon their transition and what it had meant to re-enter the classroom. As a group, participants were very pleased with ACC. They appreciated the range of courses and majors it offered along with its affordability, open door admissions policy, and welcoming and collegial atmosphere.

When asked about additional considerations ACC might have entertained upon their behalf, participants had very few suggestions. Matt had attended ACC along with very few other postdeployment veterans shortly after the first wave of warfighters returned from Middle East conflicts and indicated there was little if anything he believed ACC could have done differently that would have enhanced his experience as a student. Mark and Mary both believed ACC had done everything it could have and were very happy with their student experiences up to that point. Luke appreciated the fact that ACC had started a SVA. His solitary suggestion was for ACC to dedicate a physical space for the group to convene. Neither Mark, Paul, nor Mary indicated they believed ACC could do anything to better meet their needs as students. Mary went so far as to praise the ACC president for the constant support he offered postdeployment veterans, and Paul indicated he had complete faith in ACC counselors and their collective ability to meet any future need he might have.

In addition to being pleased with ACC, participants were also happy with themselves. They all believed they had made a significant contribution toward their own individual success at ACC. Most also acknowledged that one or more modifications in their own thinking or behavior would have likely enhanced their prospects for success at ACC. Matt was not one of them, however. He had graduated a few years before his interviews and
indicated that, if given another chance, he would do nothing different than he had done previously. Paul and John suggested they would have done more to prepare to prepare themselves academically, perhaps pursuing more formal education during their respective deployments. Luke confided that he might have given more thought to the question of whether pursuing an education was the proper path for him to take after his discharge, whereas Mark explained that he wished he would have gone back to school much sooner than he had. Like Mark, Mary believed she had made the correct decision when she decided to return to school immediately after she had been medically retired, but added that she would have given additional consideration to going directly to a 4-year institution.

As the participants reflected on their long-term transitions, they all explained how they were simultaneously involved in multiple, significant short-term transitions as well. These transitions included transferring from a community college to a private, 4-year university (Mary); completing an advanced degree (Matt); preparing to become a father for an additional time (Luke); getting married, becoming a father for the first time, and mourning the death of a parent (Mark); becoming an active member of the ACC SVA (Paul); and preparing to successfully enter the job market (John). The act of transitioning from one status or location to another had become a topic each participant now routinely discussed.

Participant discussions regarding their transitions from being warfighters to living lives as students at an Iowa community college inevitably led to summations of these experiences. Words like “eventful,” “roller coaster,” “adventure,” and “stressful” were volunteered to capture the essence of individual journeys. The participants had each assumed a risk when they enlisted, and each had lived through at least one international deployment
and was now telling about it. All the participants indicated that they believed that they had made the correct decision when in their respective decision to enlist, no matter how different the experience was from the way each of them had assumed it was going to be.

Shortly after the participants summarized these aspects of their recent past, they concluded by describing their expectations for the future. Luke was looking forward to welcoming an additional child into his family, and John was excited to finish the first of what he hoped would eventually become a pair of associate’s degrees. Mark and Mary both described a strong interest in becoming teachers. John was committed to building a career at ACC as an instructor, and Paul was already in the preliminal phase of preparing for his next transition—this time to a 4-year institution where he could complete his studies and then physically reunite with his family after one last extended period of time away from them.

**Theme Summary**

In this study, data analysis resulted in the six themes identified above. Each of these themes correlated with and was interpreted as contextualizing one or more of the participants’ various transition phases (preliminal, liminal, or postliminal) as well as the corresponding rite(s) (separation, transition, incorporation) the participants negotiated as they passed through each of those phases. Each of these themes was discussed in a linear fashion as well as in the chronological sequence in which it was understood to have occurred. That is, each theme was discussed in isolation, before and/or after another theme. Such a presentation could create the impression with the reader that the participants were only ever experiencing a single transition at any one moment in time. This was not the case.
Each participant was actually always experiencing a multitude of transitions simultaneously. Each of these transitions had begun, and would end, at a different time. These transitions were also comprised of the same three sequential phases (preliminal, liminal, postliminal) that would inevitably overlap with one or more of the three phases of other transitions. For example, the overall transition experience of each participant during basic training or boot camp was accurately described as beginning prior to basic training or boot camp (preliminal phase), continuing during basic training or boot camp (liminal phase), and ending on graduation day (postliminal phase). During this multiweek transition, however, the participant also was undergoing many additional simultaneous transitions of shorter durations that were not articulated in this study due to space constraints. Some of these transitions were social and/or cognitive in nature and included developing relationships, adjusting to life away from previously taken-for-granted support networks, developing military bearing, and learning new concepts.

Liminality theory was conceptually sophisticated enough to account for the complexities associated with these various experiences because it was sufficiently static and elastic. It was static insofar as it provided recognizable, sortable categories of phases (preliminal, liminal, postliminal) into which participant transition activities, including various rites (separation, transition, and incorporation) could be organized. It was elastic insofar as it allowed for a complete investigation of an unpredictable combination of these categories and activities. Although each of the transition experiences reported by this study was thoroughly analyzed, the study itself was subject to a number of limitations, described next.
Limitations

Unlike this study’s delimitations, which could be controlled, its limitations could not be manipulated. These limitations influenced this study’s findings and conclusions, which are discussed above, as well as its recommendations, which are set out below. These limitations resulted from the design of the study, availability of participants at the research site, data collection techniques employed, and the time available to write this report.

Qualitative investigations are designed to offer findings, conclusions, and recommendations that are informative as opposed to being literally generalizable. This characteristic distinguishes qualitative study results from those that are associated with quantitative research. For this reason, this study’s findings, conclusions, and recommendations are limited insofar as they were not intended to be completely applicable, even in analogous circumstances. Five of six study participants were male, and all six self-identified as Caucasian. As a consequence, this study’s findings, conclusions, and recommendations are limited to a synthesized perspective provided by a relatively homogenous group of individuals. The data collected during interviews were self-reported and, therefore, inherently subjective. This characteristic does not diminish the authenticity of the data but must be accounted for when evaluating the nature and potential applicability of its findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The duration of the data collection phase of this study provided for prolonged engagement, but this document was written in a short period of time. Additional composition time would have allowed for additional analysis and detail.
Ethical Considerations

Merriam (2002) reminded readers,

Although qualitative researchers can turn to guidelines, experiences of others, and government regulations for dealing with some of the ethical concerns likely to arise, the burden of producing a study that has been conducted and disseminated in an ethical manner lies with the individual investigator. No regulation can tell a researcher when the questioning of a participant becomes an interrogation rather than an interview, when to intervene in abusive or illegal situations, or how to ensure that a study’s findings will not be used to the detriment of those involved. (p. 30)

In preparation of conducting and disseminating my research in an ethical fashion, I sought guidance from other investigators’ experiences as well as from university IRB protocols. In the first instance, Esterberg (2002) counseled that ethical research is guided by fundamental questions, such as:

- How should we conduct research so as not to hurt others?
- What kinds of relationships should we attempt to create with our research subjects?
- What kinds of power relations are there between those who are doing the research and those who are being researched?
- Who benefits from social research?
- Who should [emphasis in original] benefit? (p. 44)

In the second instance, securing IRB approval (Appendix D) to conduct my research required me to demonstrate I had also resolved questions of a decidedly practical nature. These included, but were not limited to, questions regarding: potential conflicts of interest; the
purpose, expected benefits, and timeframe of the study; participant selection; recruitment procedures; screening procedures; potential compensation of study participants; my research plan; my data analysis; the consent process; potential risks to study participants; and privacy and confidentiality.

After synthesizing both types of resources, I concluded that I had assumed, and would do anything necessary to execute, an affirmative duty to consistently protect my study participants from exploitation, misunderstandings, trauma, and embarrassment. As a consequence, I focused on fulfilling two distinct, ethical obligations: facilitating informed consent and providing for participant anonymity (Esterberg, 2002).

To fulfill both obligations, I constantly monitored my researcher–participant relationships. I refrained from acting or speaking on behalf of study participants individually, either on campus or out and about in the nearby community; and I never exchanged money or any type of resource with study participants. I explained to any participant who sought individualized legal advice (based upon his or her knowledge I had earned a law degree) that providing it would be unethical given the circumstances, and I suggested without exception that they investigate the possibility of retaining the services of a licensed attorney if necessary. I prepared printed, hardcopy rosters that contained the names and contact information of service providers who specialized in the recognition and treatment of depression, PTSD, and TBI, and I was prepared to share them with any participant who required such assistance. Fortunately, no participant ever indicated he or she might benefit from securing access to such information.
Before beginning each participant’s first interview, I thoroughly reviewed with that participant the informed consent document (Appendix C) I had created for this investigation. At this point, each participant signed an implied consent form to confirm awareness and understanding of the IRB processes, rules, regulations, expectations, and corrective procedures which were in place to protect them as well as their rights. All the participants knew, for example, that they had the right to ask me any questions they wished, to refrain from answering any questions they did not wish to answer, or to terminate their participation in the study at any time.

I also took numerous measures to ensure participant anonymity. Specifically, I:

- Restricted access to data to my major professor and myself;
- Stored data in a password-protected computer file;
- Erased interview recordings within a month of their final transcription;
- Used pseudonyms for persons and locations;
- Refrained from identifying the research site;
- Referred to the research site and study participants generically while maintaining factual accuracy;
- Referred to nonparticipants and locations generically while maintaining factual accuracy;
- Made use of date ranges;
- Refrained from using data that could logically refer to, or reference, any particular study participant; and
• Used gender-neutral references when describing study participants and their experiences, as appropriate, when necessary.

I was able to conduct this investigation ethically as a result of consistently and comprehensively monitoring and maintaining participant informed consent as well as proactively protecting participant anonymity. Ethical and equitable research practices resulted in the acquisition of authentic and applicable study findings and conclusions that have implications for policy and practice, which are described in the following section.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Policies and practices at Iowa community colleges need to continue to evolve at the same time that increasing numbers of postdeployment veterans transition to these schools for the purpose of earning a degree. Policies at these institutions are the conceptual guidelines that govern behavior and decision making, whereas practices consist of the practical application of these guidelines.

To create optimal policies and improve those that are flawed, decision makers need to have access to the highest quality information possible. This study’s findings indicate that community colleges could better meet the needs of transitioning postdeployment veterans if boards of trustees, administrators, faculty, and staff would:

• Assess what is already known about this unique subset of students, based upon formal research as well as anecdotal information;

• Allocate time for assigned (dedicated by virtue of job title) stakeholders to continue to familiarize themselves even further with the literature that describes these
students and their needs and to monitor this literature constantly for updates and additional perspectives;

- Synthesize this literature in an easily accessible and understandable format;
- Update this organic resource as necessary; and
- Routinely evaluate their collective efforts to accomplish each of these tasks.

Once these stakeholders have access to an adequate amount of high quality, reliable information, they must constantly account for it while making decisions and remain ever mindful, as study findings indicate that postdeployment veterans may:

- All be classified similarly in certain respects for practical purposes, but they do not necessarily hold identical opinions about socially or politically divisive issues and/or topics;
- Be at different stages in their respective transitions and therefore have distinguishable needs and desires;
- May or may not seek or accept assistance;
- Accept various degrees of assistance in those instances when it is desired; and
- Have interrelated or matrixed social needs that influence their relationships with numerous other community members, including: parents, siblings, spouses, children, care and/or service providers, military liaisons, and employers.

Such an understanding would help those who are seeking to assist transitioning, postdeployment veterans when implementing particular practices to improve campus facilities, events, offerings, and culture. Study findings revealed that transitioning veterans would likely welcome any school’s effort(s) to:
• Organize a student veteran organization;

• Create a dedicated space for veteran to meet, such as a lounge or union;

• Offer orientations (or orientation breakout sessions) designed specifically for veterans, such as those that would deal with processing military educational benefits; identifying, assessing, and treating depression, PTSD, and TBI; opening accounts and transacting business with local caregivers and service providers; and counseling and coaching regarding how to reduce the stress and feelings of dislocation that frequently accompany physically relocating to a new community for the purpose of attending classes;

• Invite veterans to help design curriculum and share their experiences in the classroom;

• Maintain and conspicuously publish constantly updated lists of online resources designed for use by veterans and their families;

• Create and fund veteran scholarships;

• Increase the number of online offerings that are available;

• Invite veterans to participate on relevant panel discussions;

• Remodel or retrofit campus infrastructure that is not ADA compliant;

• Make campus facilities or amenities available at a reduced fee or free of charge as a show of appreciation;

• Sponsor and fund exchange programs with veterans organizations at other schools;

• Involve veteran families and support groups whenever possible at campus social events and activities;
• Constantly re-educate trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, and other students about issues relevant to veterans as well as active duty service personnel and potential recruits;

• Hire adequate personnel to assist VACOs so that, with respect to veterans, no single person at any one institution would be held responsible for answering every e-mail/voicemail/question, clarifying every issue, interpreting every policy, explaining every program, and participating personally in every document exchange (routine paperwork);

• Allow transitioning veterans to audit a limited number of initial classes free of charge for reacclimatization purposes; and

• Creatively partner with other schools and organizations when combining resources to allow for the creation of otherwise financially impractical solutions to problems that confront veterans.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Each of the above implications for policy and practice was informed by the research conducted for this study. In a similar fashion, future research will inevitably create implications for myriad additional stakeholders whose interests will be aligned with those of postdeployment veterans who elect to transition to an Iowa community college. Based on this study’s findings and conclusions, the following are recommendations for such future research.

First, additional research regarding postdeployment veteran transitions to Iowa community colleges that utilizes different research methodologies as well as that which is
focused on a variety of yet-to-be researched organizations, related individuals, and veterans should be conducted.

Next, this qualitative study was designed using a constructivist epistemology, an interpretivist theoretical perspective, a theoretical lens known as liminality theory, and phenomenological research methods. In the future, researchers should consider designing studies that are similar in other respects but which use an objectivist or subjectivist epistemology, a positivist or critical theoretical perspective, any other type of theoretical lens, and/or research methods associated with distinguishable investigative procedures such as grounded theory, case studies, ethnographic studies, narrative analysis, or postmodern research.

Investigators may also want to consider researching organizations that are comprised of individuals who harbor shared and potentially illuminating perspectives about transitioning postdeployment veteran experiences. Military units (National Guard and federal reserves components) themselves, private colleges and universities, and employers of various sizes are three types of organizations with which transitioning veterans come into frequent contact that could provide supplemental, firsthand information about their experiences.

Researchers who are interested in learning more about postdeployment veteran transition experiences may also want to focus their attention on the types individuals who frequently interact with transitioning veterans but whose perspectives have been researched and reported upon with even less frequency than those of veterans themselves. Individuals who meet these criteria include grandparents, parents, spouses, domestic partners, siblings,
children, caregivers (medical, dental), service providers (legal, financial, realty), and higher education stakeholders (trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, classmates).

Finally, researchers should consider investigating additional transitioning postdeployment veterans who comprise subsets within this underserved student subset. Examples of these types of transitioning postdeployment veterans include women, racial and ethnic minorities, officers, those who are enrolled exclusively in online courses, and those who self-identify as having disabilities of some sort.

The study of transitioning postdeployment veterans is still in its infancy. However, there is a pressing need to understand the essence of the experience these students share. The studies that have been conducted to date have provided a solid—though limited—foundation upon which to construct future research efforts. The recommendations for future research set out above are all examples of the type of research which, if conducted according to the precepts associated with high caliber qualitative inquiry, would result in useful knowledge that could make a significant contribution to the literature that informs policy and practice in this field.

Reflexivity Statement

I engage in constant introspection and have contemplated the drafting of this section of my study for an extended period of time. The attorney in me accepts the presupposition that any document I submit for review ought to be complete on its face. The graduate student in me, confronted with the necessity of submitting a qualitative write-up by a certain date, has finally conceded it will likely never have felt as though this was possible. Each task associated with doing so seems to multiply its features. The more I review what I have
included, the more I want to supplement and/or clarify the message that appears upon these pages.

Once again, I find myself smiling as I consider advice I received from my undergraduate advisor, Richard Hilbert; who in my opinion remains the most competent scholar with whom I have personally worked. When I was confronted with a similar task years ago, he reminded me that with composition, as with all social interactions, “practicality takes precedence.” I have thought a lot about Rich lately and his mentoring style and how deeply he cared about his students, and how I owe him an additional, heartfelt “thank you.” Once again, I find myself heeding his advice. For practical purposes, I will conclude with the following thoughts, despite the lingering—though rapidly dissipating—compulsion to write even more, based upon the hopeful suspicion that doing so would, with incrementally increasing accuracy, more completely describe the conclusions I have drawn regarding the process I am thankfully completing.

In the researcher’s role section of this dissertation (chapter 3), I commented that I frequently used the process of *epoché* (bracketing) to maintain real-time cognizance of how my biases, proclivities, predispositions, worldview, etc. continued to influence the decisions I made and the actions I took while I completed this study. My experiences as a law school graduate, graduate student with ABD status, former sergeant in the U.S. Army, and director-level employee at the research site all influenced my completion of this study.

As a law school graduate, I sought complete answers to interview questions. I often probed for clarification to participant responses as I had been trained to do in preparation for a career that would have likely required me to engage in the same type of behavior with
witnesses in a courtroom setting or administrative hearing. My time in uniform as an active duty soldier serving in the U.S. Army also helped me to design and execute this study. This was the first qualitative study of postdeployment transitioning veterans that was written by a former active duty service member. The perspective from which I wrote makes this study unique contribution to the literature in the field. My status as a director-level employee at the research site allowed me unfettered access to study participants with whom I had established authentic, trust-based relationships months before beginning the data collection phase of this study. As a result, I was able to base study findings and conclusions on authentic, no-holds-barred, candid feedback from individuals with whom I enjoyed open, respectful, and collegial relations. The relationships I appreciated and enjoyed with participants by virtue of my eventual position as a coadvisor to their SVA further enhanced the depth and breadth of responses I received to interview questions as well as my ability to unobtrusively engage in participant observation and document analysis.

All of these experiences and personal characteristics influenced my investigation in one way or another. As I completed this study, however, an additional realization occurred to me. I believe that over the course of my investigation, I was influenced to a much larger degree by the decision I made to use Van Gennep’s (1960) liminality theory as a theoretical lens to help structure my inquiry. I now understand that the components of liminality theory that I used to describe postdeployment veteran transitions to an Iowa community college could also be used to describe my transition through the various stages of completing this study. I continue to wonder if this was an ironic sequence of circumstances or a series of self-fulfilling type prophesies.
This study’s findings ultimately revealed that all the participants were navigating multiple liminal phases (replete with rites of transition or initiation) themselves throughout their overall individual transitions and frequently found themselves in a situation in which they felt caught betwixt and between—neither here, nor there—at once an insider and an outsider. And so it proved to be with me over the course of my investigation. I frequently found myself caught betwixt or between liminal phases of one dissertation-writing-activity or another. I routinely felt neither here nor there. As I drafted study chapters that were never really complete—because a single change to a single sentence in one chapter often required me to rewrite significant portions in another—the status of my write-up was always ambiguous. I was never able to figure out what percentage of the writing I had completed. I also maintained simultaneous insider and outsider status throughout this study. On the one hand, I had served on active duty, just like each participant, and for that reason would be considered an insider. On the other hand, I had never deployed, but each of the participants had; for that reason, I would have been considered an outsider. I navigated both identities simultaneously for the duration of this study—always in a liminal, ambiguous state myself.

Now, I find myself leaving that liminal, or middle stage, with respect to my transition as a scholar and preparing to enter a corresponding postliminal stage. The dual-stage rite of incorporation associated with doing so is comprised of the successful defense of this dissertation followed by the making of any modifications to it that are recommended by my program of study committee members.

As I reflect upon my circumstances, I have come to three conclusions. First, my positionality constructively influenced my selection of an appropriate, warranted study topic
as well as the robust execution of my study design and reporting. Second, my choice of theoretical lens has served to educate me as much about this experience and myself as it did to situate the interrelated components of my investigation. Third, the fact that it is not possible to completely articulate responses to inquiries I receive regarding the depth or breadth of the effort required to complete a dissertation, or describe the rewards I associate with doing so, simply confirms to me the efficacy of my decision to have pursued this undertaking.
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APPENDIX A. RECRUITING SCRIPT

- Welcome
- Thank you
- Veteran myself: emotions/memories
- Desire to share with others
- Doctorate degree requirements
- Combined interest (need to learn enough to write about essence of transition experience)
- Inclusion:
  - If you have been deployed to a war zone and either (1) were enrolled, or (2) are enrolled, or (3) will be enrolled at a community college in Iowa, and are interested in learning more about participating in my study,
- Possession of valuable information
- Contact information
  - [Redacted]
  - [Redacted]
- Things potential participants should know:
  - The title of this study is “From war zone deployments to an Iowa community college campus: Experiences of veterans who have made the transition.
  - Seth D. Gilbert/principal investigator/enlistment
  - Research interest = veteran transitions – especially those during which veterans move from overseas deployments to community college campuses.
  - The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of post deployment veterans who have made the transition from a war zone to an Iowa community college campus.
This study will focus on veteran experiences before, during, and after deployments, and the effect they had on veterans who became students at an Iowa community college after their deployments.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you served in a war zone before you enrolled at an Iowa community college.

If you agree to participate in this study, you can expect the following things to happen:

- I will interview you three times in person, and may communicate with you in person, on the phone, or by email to follow up on interviews, ask you additional questions, or provide answers to any questions you might have.

- Each interview will last about an hour and a half.

- During each interview, I will ask you questions about your life before, during, and after your deployment(s), with a focus on how you transitioned from a war zone to an Iowa community college.

- I will ask you to comment on the research process that I am using, and whether I am interpreting your responses to my questions correctly.

- I will ask you to explain any improvements you believe I could make interpreting the information you provide.

- Each interview will be audio recorded.

- A transcript will be produced from each recording.

- Each recording will be erased within one month after it has been transcribed.

- You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer.

- At some point, I may anonymously observe how you interact with others during events you attend around campus or out in the community, but I will not draw attention to the fact that this is happening.

- Complete three interviews and ensure that your answers to interview questions have been interpreted correctly.

- Interviewed approximately once every week or ten days for approximately one month at a time that is convenient for you.
• May experience emotional or psychological discomfort while or after answering questions.

• You can choose to not answer any question at any time.

• You can also choose to stop participating in the study at any point.

• If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you.

• Transition experiences are very valuable for veterans and others such as friends, family members, service providers, and educators who help veterans to transition to Iowa community colleges.

• You may feel a strong sense of reward or pride.

• One of the best ways to help other veterans is to share your experiences so that policy makers in the military and government and decision makers and administrators at community colleges can learn about what works well for transitioning veterans and what needs to be improved.

• You will not have any costs.

• You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

• 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.

• You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

• Records identifying you 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, auditing departments of Iowa State University, 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.

• These records may contain private information.
• To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken:

• Access to your data will be restricted to my major professor and me.

• When your data is not with my major professor or me, it will be stored in a password protected computer file in a locked area.

• Interview recordings will be erased within a month of their final transcription.

• All names of persons and locations will be changed to protect privacy.

• The research site and study participants will be referred to as generically as possible while literal, factual accuracy is maintained.

• Generic references will be used when referring to non-participants as well as locations.

• Date ranges may be used to help ensure confidentiality.

• Information will not be included that could logically refer to, or reference, any particular study participant.

• Gender neutral references may be used when describing study participants and their experiences.
  
  o If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

  o Excited to announce my study and invite you to participate in it.

  o If you are interested in participating, or learning more about what would it would be like to do so, please contact me as soon as it is convenient for you and we can discuss your potential interest as well as any questions you might have.

  o

  o
APPENDIX B. RECRUITMENT MESSAGE

Dear Veteran,

Thank you for serving at some point in time as a member of the armed forces of the United States of America! Through your service, you have made an honorable and valuable investment in the security and future of our nation.

If your time in uniform was (or still is) anything like mine, then you probably experience a wide range of emotions and memories when you think about your military experiences, as well as when you try to describe them to others who are interested in them but who have never served in the military themselves.

Since my enlistment ended, I have been searching for a way to accurately share with others what life in uniform is like in a way that will improve the lives of other veterans and the people who care about them, including friends, family, and community members.

During this time, I have also been working on my Doctorate degree at Iowa State University. One of my degree requirements is to complete a dissertation or "research study", on a topic of great personal interest that will also benefit people other than myself.

For this reason, I have decided continue my interest in serving our nation with the necessity of completing my degree requirements by combining my interests and researching veterans who transition from being deployed to attending a community college in Iowa. My intention is to learn enough about their experiences that I can write about them in a way that will help others who have yet to go through such a transition.

If you have been deployed to a war zone and either (1) were enrolled, or (2) are enrolled, or (3) will be enrolled at a community college in Iowa, and are interested in learning more about participating in my study, I would really appreciate hearing from you.

You have a wealth of information to share with other veterans! I am very interested in collecting this information and organizing it in a way that can help those who have yet to pursue their education after serving our nation overseas.

If you are interested in volunteering to share your perspective on what it is like to transition from being deployed to becoming a community college student at an Iowa community college, all you need to do is send a one sentence reply indicating your interest to me at the following e-mail address:
and I will contact you and explain the study to you. If it would be more convenient for you to just give me a quick phone call, you can reach me anytime at the following cell phone number:

To help you decide if you would like to participate in this study, you should know the following things about this study:

The title of this study is “From war zone deployments to an Iowa community college campus: Experiences of veterans who have made the transition.

My name is Seth D. Gilbert, and I am the principal investigator for this study. I served for four years with in the US Army, both in the United States and in Korea. My research interest is focused on veteran transitions – especially those during which veterans move from overseas deployments to community college campuses.

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of post deployment veterans who have made the transition from a war zone to an Iowa community college campus. This study will focus on veteran experiences before, during, and after deployments, and the effect they had on veterans who became students at an Iowa community college after their deployments.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you served in a war zone before you enrolled at an Iowa community college.

If you agree to participate in this study, you can expect the following things to happen:

- I will interview you three times in person, and may communicate with you in person, on the phone, or by email to follow up on interviews, ask you additional questions, or provide answers to any questions you might have.
- Each interview will last about an hour and a half.
- During each interview, I will ask you questions about your life before, during, and after your deployment(s), with a focus on how you transitioned from a war zone to an Iowa community college.
- I will ask you to comment on the research process that I am using, and whether I am interpreting your responses to my questions correctly.
- I will ask you to explain any improvements you believe I could make interpreting the information you provide.
- Each interview will be audio recorded.
- A transcript will be produced from each recording.
- Each recording will be erased within one month after it has been transcribed.
- You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer.
• At some point, I may anonymously observe how you interact with others during events you attend around campus or out in the community, but I will not announce or draw attention to the fact that this is happening.

Your participation will last for as long as it takes to complete three interviews and ensure that your answers to interview questions have been interpreted correctly. You will be interviewed approximately once every week or ten days for approximately one month at a time that is convenient for you.

While participating in this study, you may experience emotional or psychological discomfort while or after answering questions. You can choose to not answer any question at any time. You can also choose to stop participating in the study at any point.

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. However, your descriptions of your transition experiences are very valuable for veterans and others such as friends, family members, service providers, and educators who help veterans to transition to Iowa community colleges. You may feel a strong sense of reward or pride for helping other veterans make decisions about pursuing their own education after they return from their own overseas deployment.

One of the best ways to help other veterans is to share your experiences so that policy makers in the military and government and decision makers and administrators at community colleges can learn about what works well for transitioning veterans and what needs to be improved. This type of information can only come from veterans like you who have actually lived through the type of transition experience you have.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will not have any costs. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

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. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Records identifying you 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, auditing departments of Iowa State University, 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. These records may contain private information.
To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken:

- Access to your data will be restricted to my major professor and me.
- When your data is not with my major professor or me, it will be stored in a password protected computer file in a locked area.
- Interview recordings will be erased within a month of their final transcription.
- All names of persons and locations will be changed to protect privacy. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.
- The research site and study participants will be referred to as generically as possible while literal, factual accuracy is maintained.
- Generic references will be used when referring to non-participants as well as locations.
- Date ranges may be used to help ensure confidentiality.
- Information will not be included that could logically refer to, or reference, any particular study participant.
- Gender neutral references may be used when describing study participants and their experiences.

As a fellow veteran, I invest a lot of time thinking about ways to help veterans, especially those who are trying to pursue their education at an Iowa community college after they return from a deployment. On behalf of these veterans, and myself, I am excited to announce my study and invite you to participate in it. If you are interested in participating, or learning more about what it would be like to do so, please contact me as soon as it is convenient for you and we can discuss your potential interest as well as any questions you might have.

Sincerely,

Seth D. Gilbert
APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: From war zone deployments to an Iowa community college: Experiences of veterans who have made the transition

Investigators: Seth D. Gilbert

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 describe the experiences of post deployment veterans who have made the transition from a war zone to an Iowa community college campus. This study will focus on your experiences before, during, and after you were deployed, and the effect they had on your transition experiences as a student at an Iowa community college.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you served in a war zone before you enrolled at an Iowa community college.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, you can expect the following things to happen:

- The investigator will interview you three times in person, and may communicate with you in person, on the phone, or by email to follow up on interviews, ask you additional questions, or provide answers to any questions you might have.
- Each interview will last about an hour and a half.
- During each interview you will be asked questions about your life before, during, and after your deployment(s), with a focus on how you transitioned from a war zone to an Iowa community college.
- You will be asked to comment on the research process that is being used, and whether the investigator is interpreting your responses correctly.
- You will be asked to explain any improvements you believe the investigator could make interpreting the information you provide.
- Each interview will be audio recorded.
- A transcript will be produced from each recording.
- Each recording will be erased within one month after it has been transcribed.
- You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer.
- The principal investigator may anonymously observe how you interact with others during events you attend, but will not draw attention to the fact that this is happening. The investigator may watch from a distance, for example, as you interact with other students around campus in the hallways, student union, cafeteria, or library. In addition, the investigator may watch how you interact with members of the general public at activities like Veteran's Day or Memorial Day parades or events you attend at the VA or local
veteran’s center. You will always be asked for permission before this type of observation occurs.

Your participation will last for a total of about four and one half hours; that is, as long as it takes to complete three interviews and ensure that your answers to interview questions have been interpreted correctly. It is estimated that you will be interviewed approximately three different times — about once every week or ten days for about an hour and a half each time - over the course of about one month. Your participation could last longer if your interviews take longer than an hour and a half apiece, or if it takes additional time for the investigator to observe you or understand the responses you give to questions you answer.

RISKS

- While participating in this study you may experience emotional or psychological discomfort while or after answering questions.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. However, your descriptions of your transition experiences are very valuable for veterans and others such as friends, family members, service providers, and educators who help veterans to transition to Iowa community colleges.

One of the best ways to help other veterans is to share your experiences so that policy makers in the military and government and decision makers and administrators at community colleges can learn about what works well for transitioning veterans and what needs to be improved. This type of information can only come from veterans like you who have actually lived through the type of transition experience you have.

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. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

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, auditing departments of Iowa State University, 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. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken:

- Access to your data will be restricted to the investigator and his major professor.
- When your data is not with the investigator or his major professor, it will be stored in a password protected computer file in a locked area.
- Interview recordings will be erased within a month of their final transcription.
- All names of persons and locations will be changed to protect privacy.
- If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.
- The research site will not be identified.
- The research site and study participants will be referred to as generically as possible while literal, factual accuracy is maintained.
- Generic references will be used when referring to non-participants as well as locations.
- Date ranges may be used to help ensure confidentiality.
- Information will not be included that could logically refer to, or reference, any particular study participant.
- Gender neutral references may be used when describing study participants and their experiences.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

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

- For further information about the study contact:

  Seth D. Gilbert (Investigator)

  [Contact information redacted]

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator.
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) ________________________________________________

__________________________________________  (Date)

(Productant’s Signature)

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

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

__________________________________________  (Date)

(Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent)
APPENDIX D. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Date: 12/12/2012
To: Seth Gilbert
From: Office for Responsible Research
Title: From War Zone Deployments to an Iowa Community College: Experiences of veterans who have made the transition
IRB ID: 12-551
Approval Date: 12/11/2012
Date for Continuing Review: 11/19/2014
Submission Type: New
Review Type: Full Committee

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others, and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don’t hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.
APPENDIX E. RESEARCH SITE APPROVAL

TO: Memorandum for the Record

FROM: Provost and Seth D. Gilbert

RE: Confirmation of Approval to Conduct Research

DATE: February 4, 2013

The signature below of Provost grants Seth D. Gilbert permission to conduct research for his doctoral dissertation on the with former, current, and future students and employees.

The signature below of Seth D. Gilbert acknowledges that such permission is expressly granted subject to his adhering to all provisions and agreements set out in the letter he received from the study tentatively entitled From War Zone Deployments to an Iowa Community College: Experiences of Veterans Who Have Made the Transition.

Seth D. Gilbert
Graduate Student
Iowa State University
APPENDIX F. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview 1

• What racial category do you place yourself in?

• How old are you?

• What is your military status now?

• How long have you had this status?

• What branch of the military did you serve in?

• Tell me about why you decided to join the military and how you went about doing it.

• Does military service run in your family?

• How did your family and friends react when you joined the military?

• What advice would you have for someone who is trying to decide if they should join the military?

• How much time did you have between when you signed up and when you shipped out?

• What did you do during this time to prepare yourself for basic training?

• Where did you attend basic training?

• Tell me about your experience at basic training.

• Knowing what you know now, what would you do different if you were getting ready to go to basic training sometime in the future?

• How did your experience at basic training change you?

• Did basic training reinforce any attitudes or behaviors you had before you went in?

• If so, which ones?

• Did basic training change any attitudes or behaviors you had before you went in?
If so, which ones?

How long did you serve?

What was your age range during the time you served?

Where you an officer or where you enlisted?

What was your final rank?

What was your MOS?

What did you like the most about your MOS?

What did you like the least about your MOS?

How many times where you deployed?

What was your status while you were deployed [each time]?

Where were you deployed [each time]?

How long were you deployed [each time]?

Were you in combat during any of your deployments?

Interview 2

How much did you think about the possibility of attending college when you were deployed?

How did you decide to attend classes at this community college?

How long have you been attending classes at this community college?

Were you enrolled in college classes anywhere before your deployment(s)?

What types of courses or programs are you enrolled in now?

What, if anything, did you do to prepare yourself to be a student?
• What, if anything, did the military do to help you prepare yourself to be a student?

• What, if anything, could the military have done differently to help you transition from being deployed to being a student?

• How would you describe your overall situation as you’ve transitioned from being deployed to life as a student at a community college?

• How would you describe yourself [personally] during this period of transition?

• What types of personal changes do you think you have undergone during this transition?

• What types of social changes have you undergone during this transition?

• What types of academic changes have you undergone during this transition?

• What kind of support have you had as you have transitioned from family, friends, community members, and people who work at this college?

• What type of support have you received from other veterans?

• What type of support have you offered other veterans?

• How would you describe the resources that have been available to you during your transition?

• What types strategies did you use to make the transition from being deployed to being a student?

• What types of things surprised you about the process of transitioning to college?

• What have been some of the bigger challenges or obstacles you have had to overcome?

• What aspects of your military training have you been able to put use as a student?

• What kind of reactions have you received from other students or faculty when they have learned that you had been deployed?

• How would you describe the campus culture?

• How would you compare college culture with military culture?
Interview 3

• What is the most helpful thing this college has done to help you successfully transition to life as a student?

• What have other veterans done to help you succeed here at the community college?

• What else could the college do to help you succeed?

• Have you noticed if the veterans who seem to transition successfully to life as a student have anything in common?

• What about veterans who seem to struggle?

• How do you think your transition from being deployed to being a student compares to other veterans?

• What has been the easiest part of your transition?

• What has been the most challenging part of your transition?

• What has been the most surprising part of your transition?

• In what ways, if any, do you feel like you are changing as a student?

• Are you a member of the campus Student Veteran’s Association?

• If you had it to do all over again, what types of things would you do differently?

• How does your transition from being deployed in a war zone compare to other transitions you have gone through during your life?

• Looking back on your life in the military and now as a student, do you see yourself going though any identifiable stages or phases?

• If so, how did you plan for them or try to make them easier to get through?

• If you had to summarize your overall transition experience from the time you were deployed until today in just a few words, what would you say?

• What type of future plans do you have for when your time here is over?

• Do you have any questions for me?