

# Culture Shock: The Integration of Military Veterans in Higher Education

By  
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**Culture Shock: The Integration of Military Veterans in Higher  
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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences that active duty enlisted military veterans undergo when they enter higher education as undergraduates after their time in service. How do the experiences of active duty military veterans compare to the literature that combines all types of service veterans together? Most research conducted and literature available on military veterans is on Reserve military veterans or the research combines Reservists, National Guard, and active duty service together. This study will only address the situations facing active duty enlisted military veterans who have already completed their military service and are entering higher education as first-time undergraduates.

Active duty military veterans are reentering the civilian and entering the academic world almost at the same time. I am interested in examining the influence of this extreme change in culture. How does the experience of being in the controlled military environment full-time compare to the Reservist? To shed light on this question, I will compare the outcome of my research on active duty veterans to the literature that blends active duty, Reservist, and National Guard.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences that active duty enlisted military veterans undergo when they enter higher education as undergraduates after their time in service. How do the experiences of active duty military veterans who are entering the academic world compare to the literature that combines all types of service veterans together? The term “experience” is defined in this research as the military veterans’ interactions with the people and culture in higher education. It could be interactions in the classroom with other students, a staff member in the registrar’s office, learning how to fill out the FAFSA form online for federal loans, how classroom chairs are set up, or even waiting in line at the campus coffee shop with other students. No situation is deemed off-limits as long as it relates to the higher education environment in which the military veteran is interacting. Participant 1 explains what it was like for her to leave the military and enter college:

It was a culture shock, even for somebody like me who was like I’m in here and I want to get out and go back to school, that was my whole goal. And even I struggled with coming from that kind of community to this, it was like a culture shock. You join this culture and what they do is separate you from society. They take you and form you into a soldier, a Marine, an Airman, seaman, whatever you want to be called. And that in itself was, even those six months, eight months or whatever that you’re separate. You have letters every so often, but in that moment, they warp you into whatever they need you to be. After that, the culture is just so much different. I remember the first time I was called an individual, it was meant as an insult. Way to be an individual! It was bad to be your own person. You’re supposed to go on, be one person, so you guys survive... You bonded with those

people because you were all living in that shithole together. You come back here and everyone is an individual, everybody has their own things, and it's hard...I love the fact that people are individuals and unique, but it took me awhile to get to that spot. It's just a culture shock (Participant 1, 2016).

## **Literature**

Most research and literature available on military veterans is on Reserve military veterans or the research combines active duty, Reservists, and National Guard. There are distinct differences in active duty military full-time service compared to Reserve units or National Guard part-time service because of how much time they spend in the military culture. It is because of this difference why I think those military veterans leaving active duty service will have a more difficult time in college than a Reservist or National Guard service member. This is primarily due to lack of civilian interaction and less freedom while on military service. I propose that active duty military veterans should not be grouped together with the literature on Reservists and National Guard because the types of service are too dissimilar to be referred to collectively.

## **Methods**

This study will address the situations facing active duty enlisted military veterans who have already completed their military service and are entering higher education as first-time undergraduates. This will exclude those of officer ranks since officers already have undergraduate degrees in order to achieve their rank.

Active duty military veterans are reentering the civilian and entering the academic world almost at the same time. I am interested in examining how this change in culture influences their

first semester of college. How does the experience of being in the controlled or total institution military environment full-time differ for the active duty military veteran than the Reservist who is only part-time? To elucidate this question, I will compare the outcome of my research on only active duty veterans to the literature that blends active duty, Reservist, and National Guard together.

Because Reservists and National Guard can attend college while performing their military service, this allows them to have a different college experience than the active duty veterans who are just reacclimating to the civilian world and beginning college at the same time. My research on active duty enlisted military veterans would be able to show if there are similarities or differences between the two types of service veterans in their college experience.

## **Background**

Since the initiation of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (known as the GI Bill or VA benefits) (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 2), military veterans have been making their way to college campuses to make use of their earned educational benefits. Yet, these military veterans are not very visible on the campus, making up fewer than 3% of the total students on campus (Herrmann, Hopkins, Wilson & Allen, 2011, p. 14). Only 20-30% of veterans apply to college compared to 50-60% of high school graduates and 25% of veterans obtain their college degree compared to 40% of high school graduates (Herrmann et al., 2011, p. 120). Fewer than 1% of the U.S. population was serving in the military in 2013 (Arminio, Kudo Grabosky & Lang, 2015, p. xiii), making military veterans a distinct minority in the United States and in the world of higher education.



Current literature regarding military veterans in higher education combines all forms of service: active duty, Reserve, and National Guard. I believe that these types of service are too diverse to be combined when referring to military veterans in higher education. Since they had different experiences in the military, their military experiences influence how the veterans adjust to life in college. How do the experiences of active duty military veterans compare to the literature that combines all veterans together?

The United States Census Bureau defines a veteran as "...men and women who have served (even for a short time), but are not currently serving, on active duty in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or the Coast Guard, or who served in the U.S. Merchant Marine during World War II. People who served in the National Guard or Reserves are classified as veterans **only** if they were ever called or ordered to active duty..." (U. S. Census Bureau). For the purposes of this paper, I am referring only to those men and women who have finished their service in the active duty military and have entered college for the first time.

### **Military Culture**

The volunteer enlisted active duty enlisted military culture varies among the different branches, but they have several fundamental ideals in common, such as honor and integrity (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010, p. 9). It is a rigorous and all-encompassing lifestyle that is highly structured that is concerned with obeying a very clear and structured chain of command based on rank (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010, p. 7).

The military culture is first introduced to the new service member during boot camp or initial training period. This basic training session lasts from eight to thirteen weeks, depending

on the service branch. During this time, the service member is cut off from the civilian world in order to learn about the military, customs, uniform, and discipline and is also exposed to a physical fitness regime and how to use weapons. Participant 6 explains his experience with learning to be a military member in boot camp and then reentering civilian life:

In Marine Corp boot camp we're taught that civilians have no code of conduct, no honor. Like, to be civilian is something you don't want to be. So, they shape you from a civilian into a Marine, where you have a code of ethics, a code of conduct. You have that support, everyone else around you, that's reinforced during the 4 to 5 to 20 years that you're in there. But, when you get out, you're back into this world, where no one has a code of conduct, no rules they live by. It's somewhat hard for you to have this knowledge, and things are the way they're supposed to be, then you go back into the civilian world and it's like no more code of conduct, no rules. It's hard to readjust a little bit. It's just the little things, like people putting their hands in their pocket or like walking on the grass, walking with their cell phone (Participant 6, 2017).

The new military recruit soon learns how to stay focused under stress, lack of sleep, and physical exhaustion. During the boot camp, the new recruit also learns how to rely on fellow recruits and that the group, not the individual, is important (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010, pgs. 10-11). Participants 2 and 3 describe their personal experiences with the group mentality of the Army:

I was in the army, right. So, in the army, you have a platoon of 35-40 people. Everyone is pulling towards a common goal all the time. Your common goals support others' common goals, which supports the higher units' goals, like a pyramid (Participant 2, 2017).

I was sitting in my classes just trying to adjust to a civilian lifestyle. It's kinda different from the military, where you have orders of what to do. Rigidity. I'm just used to order and everything done in a similar way (Participant 3, 2017).

The rigorous and all-encompassing military socialization process emphasizes personal responsibility, health, constant training, self-improvement, and community and civic engagement (Kelty, Kleykamp & Segal, 2010, p. 183). In this highly structured setting, all of the service member's needs are met: wages, medical care, housing, food, and training. Roughly, about half of those serving in the military are between the ages of 17 and 24 and are mostly men (Kelty et al., 2010, pgs. 184-185).

The active component of the military is for full-time service members. This is their full-time job and they wear their uniform every day. When active duty service members are not in combat, their job is to train for combat. Active duty service members and their families live near or on the military base and are expected to move every three to five years to a duty station that is chosen for them. Each of the five branches of the military vary in in how much they move and have control over their service members. The military base is a self-contained community with little exposure to civilians (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010, pgs. 2-3). Participant 2 describes the military base, or post, as a cocoon where everything you

need is on post and that civilians do not seem to understand what life is like on the post (Participant 2, 2017).

The reserve component of the military is made up of the Reserves and the National Guard. The Reservists support the active duty component of the military and they serve in a part-time capacity, one weekend a month and two weeks a year for training. Reserve members attend boot camp with active duty service members, but then transition away to train with their own units. Reservists do not move locations for their service, they serve near where they live and work. National Guard also serves part-time, one weekend a month and two weeks a year. Guard units exist to serve their local community by supporting their state and the federal government in times of crisis or disaster, such as wildfires or floods. Reservists and National Guard can be called up to deploy overseas in times of war. Reserve components of the military live in the civilian world and are separated from daily contact with the military culture (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010, pgs. 3–6). Participant 1 from my research served on both the active duty and the Reserve component of the US Army. She offers this personal view of how Reservists are viewed by active duty soldiers:

You're active duty and you completely hate on Reservists, National Guardist. And then, you know, I did the Reservist and I realized that uh they kinda get a, especially if they deploy and stuff, they really get screwed. Because if they deploy, they're with their community, basically its own subculture. Those guys, they go and they come back, and they're like ok, back into the civilian world, like back you go. So they're like straddling those two worlds. I think a lot of people I met at the Reserve unit were really struggling with that. They give you this joke of a class when you get out [of the military] of how to

build a resume of what you did...they didn't really have any jobs or careers lined up that you could go into afterwards (Participant 1, 2016).

Deployment is a component of the active duty military that is wrought with stress for the service member and their family. The lengthy separation causes anxiety and mental health issues for all members of the family. Since the Reserve components of the military are not accustomed to full-time military life or being away from their families, they face more emotional challenges than active duty families. Being in a combat zone is a mixture of intensity and boredom, service members call it "hurry up and wait." This is a mixture of emotions as they get pumped up for battle, then wait as the orders have changed. Service members face a physical strain of carrying large backpacks of equipment, their weapons, and the protective body armor. They may be sleeping out in the field with no shelter and this can cause stress and sleep deprivation. Being on guard is mentally and physically exhausting, but it keeps the service member safe while in combat. This hyper-vigilance is difficult to turn on and off quickly, even when back home. Seeing their friends and comrades fall in service causes grief and guilt that is difficult to deal with, and they may not have time to properly deal with their emotions before being called back out into the field (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010, pgs. 17-20).

The physical and psychological risks of military service may harm the service member's relationships and carry over to their family. Depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide are the three biggest mental health concerns. Ground troops, soldiers and Marines are more likely to report PTSD and depression than other branches of service or Reserve components since they deploy more often to the more dangerous areas. Cognitive injuries

suffered by the service member are likely to hinder their transition to civilian work, their familiar relationships, and their overall quality of life (Kelty et al., 2010, pgs. 196-197). Participant 2 describes his mental health, “I suffer from PTSD, diagnosed by the VA. But I’ve been in therapy for the last two years, and the therapy has really helped me open up and be more of a human being again and less of a robot. I’ve come back to humanity” (Participant 2, 2017).

What a service member experiences while deployed is not something they can just leave on the battlefield. They bring home that emotional baggage and families do not always know how to handle it. The military recruits the individual, but family members are also affected by the military. The military culture puts pressure on the family to also conform to its standards as the family’s actions reflect on the service member. Military spouses have difficulty gaining employment and often receive lower wages than non-military spouses. The children are also affected by this lifestyle. Moving locations often, interacting with only other military families, and learning to cope with long parental absences are just some of the difficulties military children have to handle, which can obstruct a child’s academic achievement and behavior. Constant exposure to the military lifestyle makes children of service members more likely to enlist themselves (Kelty et al., 2010, pgs. 192–193).

Active duty and Reserve component service members may have different everyday military experiences, but when it comes to deployment time, their lives are suddenly very similar.

### **Academic Culture**

Universities in the United States reflect the middle-class norms of independence that society wishes to see in its college students. The university expects the students to learn and

work independently emphasizing the importance of self, discovering one's own path, and exploring new interests. Students are taught to rely on themselves and not on always on just what the advisors tell them to do (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012, p. 1181). Participant 5 explains his transition from the structured military culture into college when he first experienced that he had to find his own path:

You know where you gotta go, you know who you report to, you know what you gotta do day in and day out, and if not, you're told. I mean, yeah, it's highly structured. It's like, you go into the military with these blue prints for success, then you come into a college environment and you gotta draft your own all of a sudden (Participant 5, 2017).

The cultural and behavioral norms of the military and college life are fundamentally different (Kelley, Smith, & Fox, 2013, p. 28). The culture of academia is based on individualistic values, freedom of choice, personal responsibility, independent thinking, and equal relationships (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 29). This emphasis on independence and expressive individualism is a direct contrast to the norms that the military instills in its recruits of interdependence. Military veterans have a difficult time adjusting to the free-thinking environment of college life from the strict environment of the military. Participant 2 describes his first reaction to higher education:

When you're in an academic environment, especially as an undergraduate, it's 25,000 people all going in 25,000 different directions. So, when you come from an environment where it's team, team, team, and then you get here and it's all on you, that can be hard to

digest at first because you're used to everyone working together as a team (Participant 2, 2017).

The military has their own set of behavioral norms that do not necessarily carry over into the civilian or academic world. It is common in the military to use curse words, give each other rude nicknames, and use acronyms quite often. These military norms are not useful to the service member outside of the military and they have to alter their actions and voice in order to fit into their new academic environment.

In the United States, it is common for the professor or authority figure to be questioned, which completely goes against what military service members are taught about the strict obeying of their superiors. Service members are accustomed to being told what, how, and when to do something, but in college, they must set their own schedule and learn to think for themselves, which can be a very difficult adjustment (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 30). Participant 2 explains his interactions with professors/authority figures:

All of my professors, in the syllabus, from day one would always say office hours are between 1 and 2:30, Tuesdays and Thursdays, for example, right. But, I had this misconception in my head about what office hours are. I don't need or want to go to office hours because that might mean there's something wrong with me, like I'm in trouble. That was totally on me, it wasn't on them. So I had to overcome that (Participant 2, 2017).



The predominantly middle-class norms of independence in American colleges and universities can create a gap in the achievements between non-traditional student veterans and traditional students since non-traditional students are not taught the societal “rules of the game” of independence, connecting to others, and being part of this community (Stephens et al., 2012, pgs. 1179, 1193). Participants 1 and 5 explain their transition experience with college where they did not know the “rules of the game”:

With that whole period, I was kinda floating around lost, per say. It’s just because I wasn’t even sure college was the right environment for me to begin with. I mean, I was never really been academically minded or pushed into that kind of stuff as a kid...That whole first semester, every day I’d go home and like why am I here? What is this all for? That’s still a work in process for me, figuring out my true purpose here. It’s like putting together a really complicated puzzle, you just gotta find the right pieces to put where they go. It’s still an ongoing battle. Being with the SVA [Student Veterans of America] has given me a lot of purpose (Participant 5, 2017).

You go into your school and you’re like, ok, here’s the path you can take to get these kind of jobs. I felt like I didn’t have any idea of what I was doing when I was picking out my classes, when I was trying to study. Trying to get your mind back into the academic world is so much difficult, like so much harder when you’ve done years and years of this active, fast-paced kind of life. It was really hard to sit back down and learn how to write a paper, learn how to use the resources that are there. I remember trying to figure out the library, because it’s all electronic now. Even here, there’s no books in our library, it’s all

electronic. You have to figure out that doing a research paper is not opening up books in a library, it's figuring out how to get through and find articles on these search engines and stuff. I had to sit down with a librarian and be like, how do you do these kind of things? Blackboard, getting it all electronic. Maybe someone who's more tech savvy than me, but I really struggled with that part of it (Participant 1, 2016).

College life is a relatively unstructured time when students undergo a transition in order to find out who they are. Military students must redefine who they are as they leave one culture and enter another one.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Student development theory, total institution, and acculturation are three areas of study which elucidate what military veterans experience in their first semester of college. Since student veterans are a non-traditional student group and minorities in both civilian and academic worlds, few people have experience with these types of students to understand the unique situations that student veterans undergo. These theories lend a framework for staff and professors to apply to student veterans to help understand their experiences in college.

#### **Student Development Theory**

Vincent Tinto's student development theory states that the first semester is particularly important to the student because that is when the students are most likely to drop out of college due to such an impactful life transition (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000, p. 251). Due to the large life transition of leaving the family home and beginning one's own life in college, such a

large amount of change all in a short period of time comes with stress and not everyone can handle that. With the transition from a rigorous environment to a more laidback one, the military veteran has a particularly difficult first semester in college compared to the average student. Not only do they have to relearn how to be a civilian, they also have to navigate this new and different social setting of college. Tinto refers to the first semester as the separation stage, the time when the student has to deal with the influence of separation, transition, and incorporation into this new life (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000, p. 252).

Tinto also suggests that students are influenced by their interactions with the college structures, members of staff, and the social systems. Since student veterans are considered non-traditional and in the minority, they will have a more difficult time in relating to their college and peers. Social identity theorists Tajfel and Turner suggest individuals need to belong to a group in order to feel a sense of wellbeing (Berry & Sam, 2010, p. 475). Participant 1 describes her experience with trying to fit into her new environment:

When I finally, especially when I got into the Social Welfare program, it felt like everything kinda clicked. The people were a lot more accepting, more open, but I was trying to get into a very cut-throat program...It took me years, like towards the end of my senior year before I actually made friends at school. Most of it, I just relied on old friends from school that I had before I left for the Army. I just did not connect with anybody on campus (Participant 1, 2016).

Student involvement theory indicates that the more a student is involved in the collegiate experience, the more the student will gain from that experience (Wolf-Wendel & Ruel, 1999, p.

38). Universities should have activities and groups that allow different students to feel comfortable and accepted with students like themselves. Having a university-endorsed student veteran center would allow the veterans to have a place to be themselves and feel involved with the school and their peers.

Chickering and Reisser suggest that in order to be effective in educating the whole student, schools must have staff members who understand what student development looks like and how to foster it within their student body (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 185). This means that university faculty and staff should be trained to help all types of students, not just the traditional ones. Understanding Chickering's seven vectors of student development would help faculty and staff know that student veterans will not start at vector one and move in a linear pattern. Since student veterans are older than traditional students, and often have families, jobs, and past experiences greatly differing from traditional students, they might start at a different vector and possibly regress before making progress.

Baxter Magolda's theory suggests that people make sense of their current experience based on previous experiences (Baxter Magolda, 2004, p. 31). Since the veteran has had a vastly different world experience rooted in the military and possibly being deployed to war, this will greatly affect how they identify, relate to others and situations, and their overall world view. Participant 7 explains that her time handling extreme amounts of trauma in the military helps her to advise college students in her university career:

It still sticks with me, in all honesty, even in my daily job now. Like, people regularly think things are emergencies or that this is a big deal. And I'm like listen, this is not a big deal. No one is going to die, like no one! We could just forget all about this and never

talk about it again and still, no one would die. None of these things are emergencies. It helps me keep things in perspective, on the positive side of that. But, sometimes it also plays a part in how empathic I am (Participant 7, 2017).

The military veteran going to college who was deployed overseas and has met people different from their own culture will view history class differently from the 18-year-old who has never left their hometown. Because of their different world experiences, student veterans find it difficult to connect with the traditional-age students.

### **Total Institution**

Erving Goffman wrote about his theory on total institutions in 1961. Although his research is over 50 years old, it is still relevant today. Today's military is now on a volunteer basis and it can still be described as a total institution because once you voluntarily join the military, you now have a limited control over your own life. Goffman describes the total institution as a place where all activities of life are conducted in the same place and with the same people, cut off from the wider society (Goffman, 1961, p. xiii). This goes against the social arrangement norm of modern society with a separation of activities, people, and places (Goffman, 1961, p. 6). The military's breakdown of societal barriers can be further illustrated by the fact that the service members' days are planned out for them by their senior ranks and that the authority of the work place does not stop at the end of the day or receipt of a paycheck (Goffman, 1961, p. 10), like a normal job does. As Participant 7 says, "They tell you where to be and when to be there and you do that" (Participant 7, 2017).

Because there is no normal separation of activities, people, and places, military service members are on-call at all times of the day or night. Their higher ranks can control all aspects of their life, well beyond what is happening at work i.e. the service member can be not allowed time off, also known as leave, to see their family, they can have their meal times cancelled, and they also can be restricted to their dorms, known as barracks, so they cannot interact with others. This authoritarian command of one's life is difficult to adjust from when the service member is no longer in the military and suddenly has to figure out what to do in their daily life.

The sociologist Goffman continues on to explain that total institutions provide physical and mental barriers with the outside world to show that they are indeed different, such as high walls, barbed wire, and locked doors (Goffman, 1961, p. 4). The physical exclusion of a military base includes armed guards at the gates and imposing barbed wire to warn outsiders that they are not welcome. Not only does the military have a physical hold on their service members' interactions with outsiders, known as civilians, but it also creates a mental hold on them by having the service members live in a visually secluded world, causing mental barriers. Goffman indicates that the military is in his fourth type of total institution, one that is purposely secluded to better perform some sort of task (Goffman, 1961, p. 5). It is easier for a service member to train without the influence of civilians.

Active duty service members serve in the military full-time while Reservists and National Guard serve part-time. This time disparity in the total institution of the military influences the service members' transition into the civilian and academic world once they have completed their time in service. Reserve military service men and women have civilian jobs and are not segregated from the civilian world. They can continue to work at their civilian jobs, spending only one weekend per month, two weeks per year, and 6-12 weeks in basic training ("Army

Reserve – Today’s Military”) away from home and family, unless they are deployed. Reservists can also attend college in person while serving their country. Without degrading their military service, Reservists could be described as a part-time military since they can have full-time civilian jobs. They have a unique situation of being called-up for active duty at any time and that affects their enrollment more than regular active duty military service men and women. But since they spend most of their time with civilians, their transition into college is typically less arduous.

The active duty service members spend more time in the total institution of the military than Reservists. Active duty service members attend the same basic training camps as the Reservists, but their full-time job is the military and their life revolves around the military. They perform all aspects of their social arrangement with other active duty service members. If they are not married, they live in the barracks together, go to meals together, and work with the same people, which is an example of Goffman’s breakdown of barriers (Goffman, 1961, p. 6).

Although each branch of the military encompasses a different extent of control over the lives of their service members, the active duty service members overall do not get a chance to interact with civilians often since they work on the base (military bases are not open to the public) or in training. They tend to live on or near their assigned military base, and this can be away from their family and friends. Some military stations do not even allow spouses or children so they must be left at home while the active duty military member is serving. A Marine’s length of service can vary between three and five years, while the Army states their length of service can be as little as two years (“Army Reserve – Today’s Military”). This can mean several years away from their family and other civilians. Active duty service members need time and assistance to adjust to the civilian or academic world.

The unstructured life of college is the exact opposite of the total institution that Goffman mentioned. The student veteran is now in charge of themselves and does not have to report to anyone or be responsible for anyone but themselves and their families. No one will make them go to classes or show up anywhere at a certain time. In a study by Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, and Fleming, they found that there was an unexpected culture shock as the student military veterans had to transition from the "...highly structured and routine-based military to the less structured environment of a college campus" (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 21). Participant 7 describes her military transition experience, "I feel like the military does a good job taking care of you when you're in there, but they don't prepare you for taking care of yourself when you get out" (Participant 7, 2017).

Living in such a rigorously controlled environment as described by Goffman can make other adaptations difficult. I believe it is this idea of total institution that makes it more difficult for active duty military veterans to re-enter civilian life or enter academic life than it is for Reservists or National Guard. The interdependence of military members versus independence of academia is something student veterans are broadsided with. From relying on their combat buddies to keep them safe while at war to the complete freedom of college life is difficult to mentally adjust to. The strictness and rigidness of the military lifestyle and total institution must be overcome in order to succeed in the flexible and independent life of college.

### **Acculturation**

Culture shock can occur when an individual is met with an entirely new environment from which they know (Berry, 2005, p. 708). This occurs when a veteran leaves the structured military and enters unstructured college.



John W. Berry's theory of acculturation suggests there are cultural and psychological changes that occur when different cultures collide (Berry, 2005, p. 698). This theory of acculturation can be applied when enlisted active duty military veterans leave the controlled and group-reliant environment of the military and encounter the laid back and self-reliant culture of academia. Social psychology states that people involved in cultural transitions may lack the necessary skills to engage with the new culture (Berry & Sam, 2010, p. 475). This explains why military veteran graduation rates are so low compared to their peers (Zoroya, 2014), they lack the skills necessary to navigate a completely different environment from where they left.

Berry suggests four different acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Assimilation is when the veteran no longer maintains their cultural identity and seeks close interactions with the new college culture. Separation is defined as military veterans placing high value on holding onto their former culture and avoiding interaction with other college students. Integration is to maintain the veteran's original culture while having daily interactions with the other college students. Marginalization occurs from the loss of the original culture (military) and not interacting with the new culture (academic) (Berry & Sam, 2010, p. 476). Participant 6 experienced a negative separation during his first experience in college since he chose to not interact with his new college peers, but thought it was a positive experience:

I was stationed in San Diego, so I stayed there when I got out [of the military]. I was still able to hang out with my friends that were still in the service, still being able to have the community that I had in San Diego when I was in the service. It was a positive thing (Participant 6, 2017).

Adaptation is a stable change that an individual goes through in response to external pressures. Adaptation can be both positive (assimilation or integration) or negative (separation or marginalization) (Berry, 2005, p. 709). If the military veteran adapts to their new environment of college, they have a higher chance of success (graduation) and having a positive and enjoyable college experience. Not adapting to their new situation can cause separation or marginalization and possibly dropping out of school. Problems with acculturation tend to highly occur right after the initial point of contact then decrease with time (Berry, 2005, p. 709). Participant 1 describes the point of when she knew she had adapted from the military into the civilian world:

I was talking to my wife, she's still in [the military], and she's up in Alaska because she got orders out, and I was like, I have to finish school here. I can't just stop right now. So, she's in Alaska and I went up to talk to her. We were hanging out with some of her friends and buddies and I remember I was just like I no longer have that connection with this anymore, I just don't have that connection where I can do these things that I used to do. My old Army buddies, we would just do these things, stupid things. You have that connection and I just no longer have that...it was fun, but it's no longer me (Participant 1, 2016).

How to handle culture shock, also called acculturation, the importance of acceptance in college, and what it is like to leave a total institution and enter a free academic environment are a few theories that are important to understand when studying the affects of veterans leaving the military and entering college in order to help them succeed and graduate.

## Literature Review

The current published literature and dissertations on military veterans in higher education use research that does not separate the three types of military service: Reservists, active duty, and National Guard (Arminio et al., 2015, p. xiv; Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 5; Kelley, Smith, & Fox, 2013, p. 3; Wheeler, 2011, p. 80; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014, p. 101). There is some research that uses the broad term “veteran” without ever explaining anything about their sample pool (Herrmann et al., 2011, p. 14), and one book is based on the veteran author who already has an undergraduate degree and was going back to school in order to show how easy it is for veterans to graduate. The majority of the published literature on student veterans is written for a university administration. The current literature and research does not give a complete picture of active duty military veterans in higher education.

Because the three types of military service are so different in the way they are in command of the veterans’ lives, I do not believe they should be combined for use in research. Active duty military veterans will have a different experience entering college than Reservists attending college while serving in the military on weekends. I want to hone in on the acculturation of coming from the strictly controlled military environment to the freer academic lifestyle.

Military veterans are considered non-traditional students who report not feeling comfortable talking to, working in class with, or socializing outside of class with the traditional-age undergraduates and that left them feeling isolated from their college community (Cook Francis & Kraus, 2012, p. 11; Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 8; Cass, 2014, p. 29; Arminio et al., 2015, p. xi; Kelley et al., 2013, p. 13). Student veterans are older than the traditional 18 years when they begin college, and some are married with families to support. This means their focus

is more on graduating college than having a beer on the weekend. Student veterans cannot easily connect to their fellow students due to this lifestyle difference.

One veteran in the literature explains: “I think it [combat] helped me out a lot and it has given me a lot of self-discipline, establishing goals, time management, and everything. There are so many things you get from the military to help you out as a college student” (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 7). Having such a mature experience and outlook on life can be a hindrance when entering an area surrounded by the young and their immature ways. C.E. Kasworm’s research shows that these military veterans “...often have difficulty entering a youthful culture” (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 16). Student development theory indicates that without the connection to their student peers, students are more likely to drop out of school (Wolf-Wendel & Ruel, 1999, p. 38). Since military veterans already have low graduation rates (Cook Francis & Kraus, 2012, p. 12), colleges without an understanding of student veterans might incur even higher dropout rates.

Several sources also agree that having a veteran-only orientation for incoming and transferring students would help the students feel at ease in their new university and give them assistance with their unique situations. A session such as this could more fully address veteran-specific questions such as VA paperwork assistance and where to receive post-traumatic stress disorder counseling (Herrmann, Raybeck, & Wilson, 2008; Kirchner, 2015, p. 116; Kelley et al., 2013, p. 76). Having one office to assist the student veterans with all of their affairs would show them the campus cares about their success, in turn making the student veteran more comfortable on campus.

The book “Creating a Veteran-Friendly Campus: Strategies for Transition and Success”, contains multiple studies done by different people. Chapter one is the only study where the

authors conducted their own interviews/research. In their study, they interviewed 25 students and included National Guard, Reservist, and prior service active duty (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 5). If someone is in a Reservist or National Guard unit, they may be required to wear their uniform in public. Once someone on active duty has completed their time in the service, they are no longer required to wear a uniform. This makes it easier for active duty veterans to blend into the civilian crowd. This study also did not distinguish between enlisted and officer rank (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 7). In order to be an officer, one must have completed a Bachelor's degree before joining the military. Already having been to college will make it much easier to go back to college. Being an officer in the military also means you attend a different boot camp and have different jobs while in service. This makes the cultural experiences of the enlisted and the officer to be vastly different.

“Preparing Your Campus for Veterans’ Success” does not contain the authors’ original research; instead, it is a handbook that contains advice and examples from other research to be used by university administrative staff. The authors were guided by several military veterans when writing this book about the best practices for university staff serving student veterans (Kelley et al., 2013, p. xi). The authors do not differentiate between the different types of military service and specifically say their terms “student veterans” or “military students” refers to active duty service members, reservists, National Guard, and veterans (Kelley et al., 2013, pp. 3–4), but does not mention anything about enlisted versus officer rank.

Arminio, Grabosky, and Lang state the purpose of their book is to give university professionals resources to help marginalized student groups (Arminio et al., 2015, p. xii). They use the term Student Veteran and Service Members (SVSM) when referring to active duty, Reservists, and National Guard. They specifically say that though Reservists and National Guard

are only considered veterans if they were called up to active duty, the authors still include them in this study. They are also covering those veterans who have been dishonorably discharged as well (Arminio et al., 2015, p. xiv). The authors conducted their own research by interviewing 16 college staff employees and 14 students, one of which was a spouse of a National Guard service member. The students were a mixture of undergraduates and graduates (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 23-24). Enlisted or officer rank was not discussed.

The majority of published research on military veterans does not create a complete picture of their interview participants. Many qualitative research methods are not listed such as fully explaining the sample pool or what their interview protocol was. The current literature does not break out the experiences of active duty from Reservists and National Guard in reference to their college experience.

### **Methods**

In this study, I have interviewed seven former active duty enlisted military veterans. Six are currently in college, one is a university staff member, and all are no longer in military service. My goal is to explore the active duty veterans' college experience and see how it compares to the published literature that combines all types of military service. How does my research on active duty enlisted military veterans differ or liken to the published research?

I have conducted seven in-person interviews that were recorded with permission and then transcribed. The participants are self-disclosed active duty enlisted military veterans and current or former students. Open-coding of the data was used to help organize and categorize the participants' results. Open-coding is defined as to organize the data into categories that aids in the development of concepts as the data is reviewed (Maxwell, 2013, p. 107). I also reviewed the

interviews after they were completed and continued to code them into negative or positive categories, then grouped them into major themes. Negative is defined as an interaction that has adversely affected the student veteran in their goal to graduate or introduced a hurdle to overcome. By a positive, I mean that the student veteran has had some sort of interaction that helps them on their path to graduation.

There was one Likert scale question that the student veterans had to self-rate their college experience on a scale of one to five, one being the most positive and five being the most negative. A Likert scale question requires the interviewee must self-rate how they feel about something on a numerical scale. Their answers to the open-ended, semi-structured questions were grouped into themes by making a chart of the most common answers, then making a hash mark in a column every time another participant stated something similar. When grouping together what the participants had said, I came up with four major themes that all the statements fell into: maneuvering bureaucracy, students, staff/professors, and acculturation.

I continued with open-coding to compare what the interviewee has said to what Likert scale rating they gave their college experience to see if it coincides or differs. Then, I analyzed my findings of active duty military veterans and the research in the literature to see if the college experience for all military veterans is similar or different. The comparison between my participants and those in the literature cannot be exactly the same since we did not ask the same questions and the published literature never listed their interview protocol. The comparison will be based on a general sense if the experiences are similar or not based on the participants' responses in my interviews.

Based on student development theory and acculturation theory stating how important the first semester is to the success/graduation rate of students, I have focused all of my questions on

this time period of the student's college career, except for the Likert scale question which asks for an overall college experience rating. Conducting semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allows me to gain other insights that I previously had not considered and for interview adaptability based on the participants' answers. Since I am not a military veteran, by letting the student veterans talk freely, I learned more about the situation facing these students than just what is in the literature or than just my own preconceived ideas.

Due to time constraints and the participants available, I was able to conduct seven interviews. The snowball sampling method is described as getting other people to recommend participants instead of you knowing or contacting them directly (Mertens, 2015, p. 333). My original idea of using the snowball sampling method to get interview participants did not work out so after a few months, I changed plans. At first, I contacted between six to eight colleges near my location that have a webpage promoting veteran services, but those colleges did not pass along my information to their student veterans, so I had to find another way to get participants.

I made initial contact by emailing the educators listed on local school's veteran offices websites and tried to start a relationship from there. I planned to use those educators to recommend students to be interviewed who have self-disclosed that they are active duty military veterans, since they work closely with them and ask that they pass my information on to those students. This did not work due to not having a relationship with any university other than my own.

The only participants I was able to interview were all currently studying or working at my own university, so I switched to cluster sampling (Mertens, 2015, p. 330) by obtaining participants from one specific location. I went to my own college's veteran center where I spent time so the student veterans learned who I was and what I was doing there. Then, I was able to



ask brief questions to see if the student met the criteria for this research and then asked if they would participant in my research. I was able to obtain two participants by this method. I expected to interview between four and ten people to provide rich data (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126) of the college experiences of active duty military veterans, but not necessarily enough information to generalize my findings. By using seven interviews of participants from various undergraduate experiences, I was able to do still provide such a rich data context.

The interviews were conducted in reserved rooms in the library, a tutoring room, an office, and at a student veteran center. The locations were semi-private, this allowed both the participant and I to feel comfortable with each other since we have never met until then. The participants were emailed the interview protocol and the consent form before the interview and the signed consent form was collected at the time of the interview. The interviews were recorded with a hand-held recording device. After the interviews, the recordings were copied over to a USB memory stick which holds all of my research. Both the memory stick and the recording device are held at the researcher's home in a locked file cabinet.

I planned on using participants from only certain types of colleges. Using the Carnegie Classification system, these colleges are categorized as four-year public institutions and two-year public community colleges ("Carnegie Classifications | Institution Lookup,"). The reason public colleges were chosen is their acceptance of post 9/11 GI bill funding, which is a major funding source most military veterans use to pay for their education. While some for-profit or technical colleges accept the same funding, these are not included in my study because of their relatively low graduation rates for veterans (Westervelt, 2016).

I anticipated a few challenges to arise during this study, but did not think it would be so difficult to make contact with student veterans at other universities. I suppose the staff did not

want to flood their students with emails regarding someone they have never met and they also wanted to protect their students' privacy. In my emails to staff, I always requested them to pass my information along to their students, not the other way around in order to protect student privacy. Students were not available during semester breaks making it difficult to schedule the interviews. My interviews were scheduled at the very end and beginning of a semester when the students were still in town.

Word-of-mouth snowball sampling did not work and the only way I was able to get participants was to actively ask people at my own university and for friends/family to contact people that they knew who fitted my criteria.

## **Participants**

Two of my seven participants were contacted by me directly via email. A veteran orientated staff member at my university gave me a few names of people that they knew fit my research criteria. I emailed those students and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed and they agreed. I emailed them a copy of the interview protocol and the consent form so they understood this was completely voluntary, and they still agreed to be interviewed and to have that interview recorded. One participant is a friend of a family member and my family member emailed that participant my information and the participant contacted me willingly to be interviewed. One participant contacted me off of a flyer that I had left in my university's student veteran center. We met at that same center for the interview, and as they were leaving, I randomly asked two other students in the veterans' center if they would like to be interviewed and they agreed. The seventh and final participant was recruited unexpectedly at a staff conference. I was explaining to a group of random fellow staff members about my research, and

then someone from that table said they are a military veteran and would be willing to take part in my research. All seven participants were given and signed the consent form so they understood what the study was about and that it was completely voluntary and did not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

Four of the seven participants are current undergraduates, two are graduate students, and one is a university staff member. Three formerly served in the Army, one in the Marines, two in the Air Force, and one was in the Navy. I wanted to make sure to include someone from four of the five major branches of military service to make the rich data of my research more thorough. Three of the seven participants are female. This did not accurately represent the gender percentage of today's military, which is a majority male. I was lucky enough to find almost as many females as males willing to participate in my research. The gender of the participants was specifically mentioned only in the females' interviews, the rest of the participants' gender was never implicitly stated, but was just based on observation.

The participants will be referred to in this study as "Participant" and a number in order in which I interviewed them. No defining information will be used to protect the identity of the participants, including naming their undergraduate university.

Participant 1 is a female who served in the Army from 2009-2012 and was stationed in Korea. She is a current graduate student who will graduate in May 2017, but her undergraduate school is a 4-year, large, public university located in the Midwest ("Carnegie Classifications | Institution Lookup,"). She was not married nor had children during her undergraduate career and managed to live at home with her mother while attending school to save money. She is a first-generation college student.

Participant 2 is a male undergraduate who served in the Army from 1990-2005. He currently attends a 4-year, large, public university located in the Midwest (“Carnegie Classifications | Institution Lookup,”). He was married during his undergraduate experience and they had a baby during his hectic senior year. They lived off-campus and he credits his school success to the help of his wife, who has a Master’s degree.

Participant 3 is a male who served in the Army from 2003-2009. He is a current graduate student, but his undergraduate school was a 4-year, large, public university located in the South (“Carnegie Classifications | Institution Lookup,”). He went on three tours of duty into warzones during his Army career. Participant 3 lived in the dorms during his time as an undergraduate and was not married nor had children at that time. He is a first-generation college student.

Participant 4 is a female undergraduate who served in the Navy from 2007-2013. She currently attends a 4-year, large, public university located in the Midwest (“Carnegie Classifications | Institution Lookup,”). She lived in the dorms and did not find it to be a problem. The management had her living with older, mostly international students. She is not married and does not have any children.

Participant 5 is a male undergraduate who served in the Air Force from 2007-2015. He currently attends a 4-year, large, public university located in the Midwest (“Carnegie Classifications | Institution Lookup,”). He lived off-campus and was engaged to be married during his time as an undergraduate. He credits his success in college to his fiancé who had helped him survive and keep up with bills when the VA educational housing payments were late. He has no children.

Participant 6 is a male undergraduate who served in the Marine Corps from 2008-2012. His first school was a 2-year, large, public community college on the west coast (“Carnegie

Classifications | Institution Lookup,”). He lived with a Marine buddy, even when he was no longer in service, and that allowed him to maintain the same community to which he was accustomed. The community college that he attended did not have a veterans group, despite being near so many military bases in Southern California. He is a first-generation college student who is currently not married and does not have any children.

Participant 7 is a female who served in the Air Force from 1998-2004 and attended undergraduate college from 2004-2008 at a 4-year, large, public university in the west (“Carnegie Classifications | Institution Lookup,”). She is a first-generation college student whose father was an enlisted Marine. She was married to an active duty enlisted Airman and had a child while attending undergraduate college and commuting an hour each way to school since they lived on a military base. She is currently a department student advisor at a university.

Table 1: Participants

Participant 1	Female	Army 2009-2012	Current graduate student	4-year, large, public university in the Midwest
Participant 2	Male	Army 1990-2005	Current undergraduate	4-year, large, public university in the Midwest
Participant 3	Male	Army 2003-2009	Current graduate student	4-year, large, public university in the South
Participant 4	Female	Navy 2007-2013	Current undergraduate	4-year, large, public university in the Midwest
Participant 5	Male	Air Force 2007-2015	Current undergraduate	4-year, large, public university in the Midwest
Participant 6	Male	Marine Corps 2008-2012	Current undergraduate	2-year, large, public community college in the West
Participant 7	Female	Air Force 1998-2004	University staff	4-year, large, public university in the West

## **Interview Protocol**

My interview protocol focused on 8 main open-ended questions with unwritten probing questions and one Likert rating question. The design to these questions was to get the military veteran to tell stories about their undergraduate college experience, for example, what it was like for them to leave the military and then start a new and different chapter of their lives by attending college. The first questions were just introductory questions to insure that they were prior service active duty enlisted and asked in what branch did they serve and the years they served. The next questions asked which college did they attend and for which years. Those questions helped confirm that their service and college fit into my research criteria and as introductory questions to help initiate social interchanges and conversation between researcher and participant.

Because problems with acculturation tend to highly occur right after the initial point of contact then decrease with time (Berry, 2005, p. 709), most of my questions revolved around the first six months of college. The third question was a Likert rating question that specifically asked them to self-rate their overall college experience. As stated previously, Tinto's student development theory states that the first semester is particularly important to the student because that is when the most students tend to drop out of college (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000, p. 251). I wanted to focus most of my questions on the participants' first six months, while wanting to know how the participants felt about their overall college experience, to find out whether their culture shock of college increased or decreased with time.

The next four questions focused on their experiences/interactions in general but also anything specifically negative or positive that happened during their first six months. This was meant to get the participant talking and telling stories about their college time. I tried to get them

to focus on their interactions with fellow classmates and professors specifically. Their answers determined if they had a difficult or easy first six months. I could then compare their answers from these four questions to the Likert rating question about their overall college experience to see if their time in college became easier or more difficult.

The next question asked if they had sought out other military veterans. This is important to understand because social identity theorists Tajfel and Turner suggest individuals need to belong to a group in order to feel a sense of wellbeing (Berry & Sam, 2010, p. 475) and student involvement theory purports that the more a student is involved in the collegiate experience, the more the student will gain from that experience (Wolf-Wendel & Ruel, 1999, p. 38). Being a non-traditional student, the military veteran feel most comfortable and connected to other fellow veterans. This is important to know because then universities can begin to understand the importance of student veterans having their own space in which they can interact with students like themselves.

The final question asked the military veteran to give their past selves some advice. What do you know now that you wished you had known then? If there was a way to give your freshman self some advice, what would it be? This question opened up discussion for ways the military veteran could have made their own college experience better or easier. This also helped see if the problems incurred in college were self-induced or imposed upon.

I interviewed seven current and graduated undergraduate students for this research. They attended several varying colleges for their undergraduate experience and come from four of the main five branches of the military. Their variety provided my research with a rich data experience.

## Results

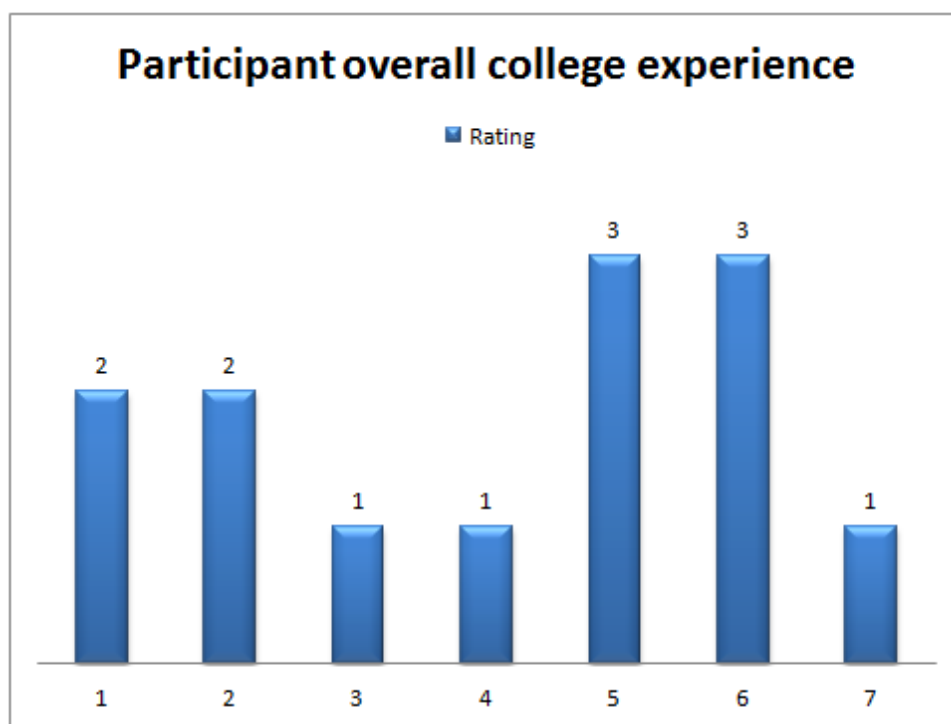
### Likert Question

It was important to find out what the participants thought about their entire college experience versus the first six months. This would show if the student veteran's college experience had a positive or negative movement. Using a Likert question, I could compare what they said to how they felt. Some of the participants had mostly negative things to say about their first six months in college, but they said overall their college experience was very positive. That shows that they had an increase in positive opinion that might have resulted from just getting used to how college works, getting used to being around civilians, or possibly meeting a very helpful professor. If they had ranked their overall college experience as negative, this could mean that college did not get easier for the student as time went on and that they struggled for their entire undergraduate experience.

I asked the military veterans to rank their overall experience in college, on a scale of one to five, one being very positive and five being very negative. Out of the seven participants interviewed, two rated a 2, three rated a 1, and two a 3. This is listed out in an easy to read view in Chart 1, below. These results indicate my participants had a fairly positive overall experience in college and that their first impressions of college generally increased with time and getting over the first initial shocks of such a different environment.



Chart 1: Likert Responses



### Common Themes

I coded the most common concepts that the military veterans said during their interviews into four main themes: Maneuvering Bureaucracy, Students, Staff/Professors, and Acculturation. Responses were either distinctly stated or could be inferred by enough examples given. Maneuvering Bureaucracy includes any interactions the military veteran has in enrolling in classes, talking to advisors, or choosing a major. The Student category is open to include any interaction with other students, either in or outside of class. Staff/Professors category describes professors, military related staff at the college, or dealing with GI Bill paperwork as it has to go through a person and is not technically a university bureaucracy. Lastly, the Acculturation section will discuss the process of leaving the military and getting adjusted to civilian and university life.

The majority of my interview participants had a difficult time maneuvering the bureaucracy of the college. Five out of seven participants said it was difficult to figure out which classes to take, which degrees to pursue, and were hindered by advisors. Bad advisors who did not know which classes the students needed to take to comply with which degree, so they ended up taking extra classes that were not needed, which wasted the student's time and money. This caused them much frustration and wasted their time and GI Bill, which only covers 36 total months of college. There was insufficient advice about which career path to choose and also no classes taken from the military transferred over to college credit. One participant stated feeling lost at college and two stated they had difficulty handling their anger because they were given such bad advice by staff on which classes to take or to retake classes, leading them to have a longer time in college. Three of seven said they should have done a better job of asking for help when they needed it, indicating that the school was not totally at fault for the class mistake.

An everyday interaction for the military veteran was having classes with other students. Of these military veterans, three out of seven said that they consider the other students to be disrespectful in class. Six out of seven stated they did not fit in with, were older than, and had nothing in common with the other students. Two out of seven said they experienced being prejudiced as a stereotypical military veteran by other students and also the staff. Four of seven said it was important for them to make themselves get involved at the school.

The professors and military-related staff had a good impact on the military veterans interviewed. Four out of seven said their professors helped them to connect with their school and to feel involved. The military-related staff at the universities also proved valuable to the student veterans' success. Three out of seven said they had access to fantastic veteran centers that helped

them with the difficult GI Bill paperwork as four of seven said they had a difficult time dealing with all the GI Bill paperwork to cover their tuition and rent expenses.

After leaving the controlled environment of the military and entering the individualist society of college, three of seven said they had a difficult time adjusting to their new life. Four of seven said the military's goal focused on the collective and while at college, it is up to the student to set their own goals. The military provides a transition class to help the veteran prepare for their upcoming civilian life, but two of seven said their transition class was of no help. With their time away from school for their military service, four of seven stated it was difficult to relearn how to be a student again. Five of seven actively sought out other military veterans on campus with whom to connect.

The overall perception of the military veteran entering college was that they had a difficult first six months, but then their experience progressed in a positive direction. An unexpected result to these interviews is that a majority of the military veterans interviewed were first-generation college students.

### **Comparison to Literature**

In order to understand if the findings of my own research on active duty military veterans are comparable to the published literature on all military service types, I will compare my interviews to the findings in three books. They are coded into four themes: Maneuvering Bureaucracy, Students, Staff/Professors, and Acculturation. First, I will give a general report about their participants, then state what the three works say about the theme using their research findings. I will state what my findings are and give examples from my interviews.

Since these published studies and my own research did not use the same set of questions, it is possible that a study may not have any research on the same theme that I did. I did not discuss deployment and PTSD with my research participants since my focus was on the service member's transition into college, but it was discussed in the published studies because being in a war zone does affect the student in the classroom.

### **Published Research**

The book "Creating a Veteran-Friendly Campus: Strategies for Transition and Success" contains multiple studies by different people. Chapter one is the only study where the authors conducted their own interviews/research. In the authors' study, they interviewed 25 students and that included National Guard, Reservist, and prior service active duty (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 5). If someone is in a Reservist or National Guard unit, they may be required to wear their uniform in public while prior service active duty are not required to wear a uniform anymore. This makes it easier for active duty veterans to blend into the civilian crowd. This study also did not distinguish between enlisted and officer rank (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 7). In order to be an officer, one must have completed a Bachelor's degree before joining the military. Already having been to college will make it much easier to go back to college. Being an officer in the military also means you attend a different boot camp and have different jobs while in service. This makes the enlisted and the officer have much different cultural military experiences, so it is important for a study to distinguish rank of interview participants.

"Preparing Your Campus for Veterans' Success" does not contain the authors' original research; instead, it is a handbook that contains advice and examples from other research to be used by university administrative staff. The authors were guided by several military veterans

when writing this book about the best practices for university staff serving student veterans (Kelley et al., 2013, p. xi). The authors do not differentiate between the different types of military service and specifically say their terms “student veterans” or “military students” refers to active duty service members, reservists, National Guard, and veterans (Kelley et al., 2013, pp. 3–4), but does not mention anything about enlisted versus officer rank.

Arminio, Grabosky, and Lang state the purpose of their book is to give university professionals resources to help marginalized student groups (Arminio et al., 2015, p. xii). They use the term Student Veteran and Service Members (SVSM) when referring to active duty, Reservists, and National Guard. They specifically say that though Reservists and National Guard are only considered veterans if they were called up to active duty, the authors still include them in this study. They are also covering those veterans who have been dishonorably discharged as well (Arminio et al., 2015, p. xiv). The authors conducted their own research by interviewing 16 college staff employees and 14 students, one of which was a spouse of a National Guard service member. The students were a mixture of undergraduates and graduates (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 23-24). Enlisted or officer rank was not discussed.

### **Maneuvering Bureaucracy**

A common theme mentioned by Reservists is that they had to withdraw in the middle of the classes/semester when they received activation orders (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 6). This is not something that happens to service members who are no longer in the service. Activation orders mean that a Reservist or National Guards are moving from their part-time military status into a full-time status, usually to be sent to a combat zone (deployment) or area of natural disaster. This impacts their classes because they have to drop out mid-semester and try to

re-enroll in that same class when they get back. Not all schools are accommodating to this, even though activation orders are a law that cannot be ignored. The Reservists may end up with an incomplete or withdrawal on their transcript, making it difficult to keep a high grade point average (GPA).

O'Herrin states that veterans have a difficult time figuring out the complex bureaucracy of higher education. This makes them feel alienated, confused, and overwhelmed before they even begin their college experience. They do not even know where or who to turn for help (Kelley et al., 2013, p. 66). Checklists should be provided so the students know what they need to do and where to go when they start at a college (Kelley et al., 2013, p. 67). Student veterans take classes while in the military, but classes on their military transcripts often do not transfer over into academic credit, leaving the student frustrated and discouraged that their time in service did not count towards their higher education (Kelley et al., 2013, pp. 74–75). Because student veterans are older than traditional student and have more life experience, being forced to stay in the residence halls may be unacceptable to the veteran with a family (Kelley et al., 2013, p. 78) and the Residence Assistants (RAs) are not trained to handle students with PTSD.

Staff have noticed that student veterans are often lumped together with other incoming freshmen, but being older and more experienced than the average 18-year old, they need to have their distinct situations recognized. College policies are not written toward military deployment and training cycles of Reservists and National Guard (Arminio et al., 2015, p. xiii). Residence hall staff should be trained on how to handle student veterans with PTSD who do live on campus, like what to watch for and what may trigger flashbacks (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 88). SVSM students felt a sense of isolation and frustration with their university administration (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 41).

A majority of my interview participants stated that they had a difficult time in determining which degree to pursue and which classes were needed for that specific degree. They were frustrated because they had to retake classes because an academic advisor gave them wrong advice, and nothing from the military transferred over into academic credit, which they felt was a disgrace to their time in the military. Their comments about dealing with the bureaucracy of college are below and reflect the same frustrations as the published literature does:

Because I had to take a lot of freshman classes, there was, it was hard because I wasn't focusing on what I wanted to do, had to get all of the BS out of the way. Which is typical of any undergraduate, but for me, I had a twenty year gap between high school and college. There was a lot of stuff I had to learn through trial and error, like how to write an argumentative paper, how to cite properly, and how to just stay on top of the coursework, how to read the syllabus, getting to know my professors (Participant 2, 2017).

I remember looking at websites to find out where do I go to activate my GI Bill and stuff like that and what are my benefits, on my own. Find an advisor. There probably were advisors but they weren't pointed out to me. I didn't necessarily know that they existed, that was my first time at college. Seek out more help, try to do as much alone as I did (Participant 6, 2017).

It took a long time to understand how the university works. When I first started, I didn't really know what I wanted to go to school for. I had started in higher education,

sculpture, so I wanted to teach high school sculpture...I still didn't know which degrees made money, neither of my parents went to college. Like, I didn't know very many professions that required a Bachelor's degree. I didn't get advised very well on how to figure out what you're good at (Participant 7, 2017).

When you first get to the university, they gave you an advisor but you don't really meet with them unless you make an appointment. They tried. I originally started off wanting to do the nursing program. I kinda just got bad advice. They told me, even though I had already taken all of these classes at community college, they suggested that I take them over again because it would give me a better chance to get into the nursing program. I spent one year retaking classes that I've already taken, which definitely made me even more angry. Then I didn't end up getting into the nursing program. I was a medic...but nothing counted (Participant 1, 2016).

Participant 1 then goes on to discuss the lengthy and difficult college paperwork:

I was like FAFSA, what?! I gotta fill out all of this stuff?! Oh man, yeah. Just figuring all of that all out was just lining up the applications, something so simple like that. And then it's just like going through the motions. Thankfully, I had a couple of friends, once I got into the program, who were very like, remember to do this, this, and this. And they really helped me be able to organize all of that because there's really nobody telling you what to do. As bad as that sounds, in the Army, they told you what to wear, where to live, how to dress, like everything. So, that was kinda difficult, at first, trying to figure out how to do



all of this by myself and no one's telling you, ok by the way, you need to submit for every single month that you're in school for your GI Bill (Participant 1, 2016).

The participants in my research had similar difficult experiences as those in the published literature when they tried to enroll in the correct classes for their degree and to just interact with the business of college bureaucracy overall.

### **Students**

Some military veterans were asked inappropriate questions by other students about their service. They have also stated that they cannot relate to non-veterans students because those people just cannot understand their experiences unless you have experienced them yourself (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 11). This book did not discuss at length student veterans' relationships with other students.

A military veteran quoted from Doenges' work state that other students are little kids who have not seen the real world yet. They spend their days on the internet and have no idea what life or stress is like (Kelley et al., 2013, p. 19). When a student veteran communicates in a direct manner, as they learned how to do in the military, it is perceived as being rude, aggressive, or antisocial to other students (Kelley et al., 2013, p. 162). The classroom behaviors of traditional students are considered disrespectful and annoying by student veterans. The military teaches respect and attention, but students often eat and drink in the classroom, use their cell phones, sleep, and talk while the professor is talking (Kelley et al., 2013, p. 187).

The responses from my research participants reflect the literature in that they consider the behavior of traditional students to be rude and had a difficult time connecting with their fellow students. Their responses about their interactions with traditional students are listed below:

It took me two years before I connected with anybody from my class. I just felt very isolated...most of them are a lot younger than me, I felt like I had nothing in common with them. I was very angry for the first couple of years...This may seem cliché, but it really bugged me that people would talk when the teacher was talking. There were so many times that I just wanted to walk out and leave, there were just norms. They were just being very, very disrespectful (Participant 1, 2016).

When I first got here [college], I really did feel like a fish out of water. There's a tremendous age difference between myself and the typical undergraduate, so there was a disconnect there. There was a tremendous age gap between my fellow undergraduates and me, but that was less of a problem for them than it was for me...They pretty much just accepted me from the start (Participant 2, 2017).

With my peers, I just felt they were younger than me, the age difference was a lot. They were more undisciplined, much more younger, a different kind of personality. I remember when I gave my story, I was finishing tours in Iraq when they were still in high school. I was more respected, but I alienated myself. My first year, I lived in the dorms. Interacting with younger college undergraduates, it was kinda a different lifestyle than what I had. I would just go to the library (Participant 3, 2017).

One thing that was awesome was that I did not have a roommate [in the dorms]. I paid the extra money to not have to deal with the 18 year old roommate. I had one for the first few weeks, then she transferred out, so I just paid the extra money to have no roommate (Participant 4, 2017).

I've definitely noticed that whenever everyone else in your class do figure out that you're an older guy and you know, a vet, especially those that you have to work in groups with, they start to lean on those experiences a little bit. They tend to listen to you a lot more, especially the professors. The professors, once they figure out, you know, I've had nothing but positive experiences from peers, professors because they appreciate our outlook on the world because we've been there and seen it. They enjoy letting us share our experiences and bring them into a context in the realm of the classroom. Especially, I've notice a profound difference in the lower classmen, because kids come here right out of high school all quiet. These classrooms are so discussion-based and that's not typically the case in the whole high school setting. You'd see all these younger kids are very quiet and shy. Then you've got the vet over here rambling in the corner every time something gets asked (Participant 5, 2017).

For sure, I knew I was different from everyone else. When I got out, I was about 25 or 26 and all of the other students were like 18, 19. So, I felt kinda ostracized because from them, and also a veteran, and they were just civilian, a different mindset there. It was hard for me to have friends that weren't military because they didn't have the same mindset,

experiences, or attitude that I had. Group projects were pretty tough because the kids, they weren't very focused. They were just out of high school, probably still living with their parents. It was very difficult when I'm in a more serious mindset because I'm in my mid-twenties and I want to do well and excel whereas they were just kind of not being as serious as I am (Participant 6, 2017).

I still felt that I was older than a lot of the students and the other students irritated me. They'd be like I don't even want to go to college but my dad's paying for it. And I'm like ugh, I spent six years of my life so I could go to college. It was very hard for me to relate to the students that had their college paid for, didn't care about being educated. At that time I was committed to getting my Bachelor's degree, it was like I'm going to do everything I can to get this Bachelor's degree even though it means we eat less this month. I still got GI Bill but it was still hard (Participant 7, 2017).

### **Staff/Professors**

An Army veteran in Ackerman & DiRamio's study stated they would have liked more assistance with their GI Bill paperwork because it is possible they are probably eligible for things that they are not receiving (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 8). Many of the students interviewed said they had trouble dealing with the Veterans Administration (VA) in regards to their GI Bill paperwork that pays for their college. Many veterans were unaware of any veteran services office on campus. One Reservist stated that when they contacted their school via phone in regards to getting readmitted back to school since they dropped out to deploy overseas, the staff member said they would not help them unless they came in in-person, which was not possible

while deployed overseas (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 9-10). University staff are not proficient on how to handle student veterans' unique situations.

Veteran-only orientation sessions were also mentioned in this book as an approach to connect faculty and staff with military backgrounds to the student veterans so they know who to turn to for assistance, including help with the VA paperwork or getting a VA work-study job. This would also be a good time to introduce the veterans with any veteran groups on campus (Kelley et al., 2013, p. 76). Faculty and staff should be trained on how to handle and accommodate student veterans. Their time in combat can affect their interactions in the classroom. Some simple things that the faculty member can do to help are allow the students to choose their own seats and the veteran can pick a place that is environmentally comfortable for them; make sure the veteran is not facing their back to the door when in your office or classroom, this makes the veteran nervous if they cannot see who is coming and going; and allow veteran-only classes so the student veteran is truly around their own peers (Kelley et al., 2013, p. 183).

Many students in the study realized that their military culture affected their college experience; they did not have a lot of patience because they were trained that way. Student veterans are confused by the lack of clear direction in college. One veteran in the study said they had to meet their professor after class and ask them to give them some sort of instruction on his assignment (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 37). University staff are not trained on the military culture, so they do not always understand the need for a private space for the SVSM students so they can be around others like themselves. This left the students feeling isolated and not engaged with their college. Having a student veteran office on campus helped the students interact with their school in the way that they were used to. They received support in a direct manner with clear

steps need to proceed (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 39-40). SVSM reported being frustrated with their professors that call them out in class for being a veteran, which can be embarrassing (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 62-63).

A common theme in the published literature and my own research is the difficulty in dealing with the VA and GI Bill paperwork. This paperwork is not a part of the university but it does affect whether or not a student veteran will be able to pay for tuition and rent. Having staff on hand who understand the VA process and can advise the student veteran would be of great assistance and can make the college experience easier for the student veteran by allowing them to connect to their school. Many of my research participants described having to interact with university staff. Most had difficulty getting the VA benefit paperwork processed and most had a positive experience with their university's veterans' center:

At my college they had a fantastic veterans' center. They had computers there, you could print for free. They had the advisor right there, she was so great, helping me get the GI Bill rolling. It was directly on campus, it was very helpful (Participant 1, 2016).

I didn't see a dime in [VA] education benefits until almost November. That was three months I was going to school almost with no kind of income, no help at all or anything. Come to find out there's a lot of lack in policy down at the Registrar's office. They weren't completing certification until after the scholarship reporting period was over, which meant they were grouping us [veterans] together with, as the same as a traditional student. Ease of convenience for that office while screwing over veterans. So, policy had to be changed (Participant 5, 2017).

Great professors in college played a major role in making the non-traditional student veterans feel comfortable and accepted at the university since they did not connect to their fellow students. They remarked about this below.

The social work professors, when I got into that program, I really felt like I connected. I began to be more social with my peers. They were very helpful and actually appreciated life experience. I remember in one of my ethics classes the teacher asked who has traveled outside of the United States and like nobody could raise their hand. Yeah, I lived in Korea for a year (Participant 1, 2016).

A lot of my professors at first would ask me, call me back after class. I had a professor, he asked me like what's your deal. I'm like what do you mean, and he asks what are you doing here, are you auditing this class? I'm like no, you have to be like in your 60s to audit a class, I'm a little far from that. He's like are you seeking a degree? Well, yeah, that's why I'm here, and he's like well, I just didn't know, I really enjoy your input in class and come by my office hours I want to talk to you, get to know you. I had to overcome stuff like that (Participant 2, 2017).

Prof. S. who's the undergraduate advisor for my department. I have met with him pretty much every semester and he's answered quite a few questions for me about where my career might be going (Participant 4, 2017).

The people were really helpful, like the advisors and teachers. I made a lot of close relationships with my teachers that I still have now. I would say I was more closely related to my teachers than my fellow students, based on my age, based on the maturity of the classes. Those connections made it really enjoyable, a richer time. The teachers that I really connected to pushed me even further. They were always about you should never say no to any project, to any opportunity to see art, to visit someplace (Participant 7, 2017).

But, not all of the university staff was so helpful to the student veterans. Participant 2 dealt with age-discrimination and narrates a story about his negative interaction with ticket staff at a university football game:

I'm a huge college football fan. I've been in love with college football since I was a teenager. Because of that, I got the sports pass. I've been to every single game, as horrible as they were last year! I showed up on game day and walked up to the student entrance, because I am a student. So, I had my ID out and my ticket. A guy stopped me, grabbed my arm, and he's like what are you doing? I'm like, I'm going to the student entrance. And he's like, yeah, no, it's just for the students. And I'm like, I know, that's why I have my ID out. And he's like, you mean to tell me you're an undergraduate? And I'm like, yeah. He's like, let me see that ID. Then he snatches it out of my hand. He looks at it then he says this looks fake to me. And I'm like, are you serious? He goes and gets his supervisor, and his supervisor comes over there and she says you mean to tell me that someone of your age is going to be an undergraduate? And I was like, yeah, because I'm



trying to better myself, I don't want to have to depend on money from checking tickets and IDs at a stadium to live! Then they let me through. That really pissed me off because academics should not be something that's only confined to people 18-21. If I'd been here getting my Master's or Ph.D. I could have been older...I would still have student tickets and go in through the student entrance. I was just flabbergasted. The very next Monday I told people...I told the student veteran office director this. She wrote a letter, a very stern letter to the athletic department and told them everything in vivid detail. The athletic department responded within two hours that we're going to retrain everyone, this just garbage; nobody should ever have to put up with this. That's the most negative experience that I've had at my college (Participant 2, 2017).

### **Acculturation**

An Army Reservist in the published literature said they forgot how to study when they came back from deployment, but another Army Reservist stated they were a better student when they came back from deployment. Many of this study's participants stated they wanted to connect with other veterans on campus because they can relate to them better. A veteran-only orientation session was brought up by several participants as a way to get used to university life with people that understand them and as a way to identify other veterans on campus. One veteran said it was difficult leaving such a structured and routine environment of the military to be released to a place where you make up your own schedule and had difficulty sitting still for long periods of time (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 10-12).

Since student veterans are different from traditional students, services designed to help traditional students are not ideal for student veterans (Kelley et al., 2013, p. 8). Every branch of

service has a boot camp to prepare civilians for their military service, but there is little training to assist military members in readjusting to civilian life or even higher education. They often feel isolated when they come to college because they left their tight support system behind in the military (Kelley et al., 2013, p. 11 & 19).

Survival skills used on the battlefield are not so useful as a civilian or student. Being constantly vigilant was useful to watch for danger while deployed, but it is exhausting doing that in a crowded school hallway where there is no danger. There is a trust built with other service members in a combat zone that makes them mostly trust other military members. The student veteran becomes suspicious of other people and students. The mission on the battlefield is clearly defined, but when the military veteran comes to college, there is no more mission and more things to take up your time such as school and family. The veteran has to learn how to prioritize new things. Since the military told the service member what to do all the time, when they are now in higher education, they do not know how to make decisions for themselves and become frustrated, sometimes losing control of their emotions (Kelley et al., 2013, pp. 23–24).

In the published literature interviews, the authors found that their student veterans had a difficult time transitioning from the military into academic life. They stated that the students were used to having structure and routine in the military and found it difficult to not have someone tell them what to do or to give them rules to live by. In this case, having freedom is actually a big challenge. These students stated that the military is its own little world where most people have the same perspective as you do. Having this much freedom made the student feel lost. They would make their own schedule, but felt like it was just them and then everyone else on campus (Arminio et al., 2015, p. 30-32). Consistent with the published research, my participants also had a difficult time transitioning out of the military and getting acclimated into

college and civilian life. They struggled with the difference of culture in the military versus higher education. There was a lack of assistance from the military to help the veteran prepare for this immense change. They describe the difficulties they had in leaving the military and getting acclimated to college:

Once I started to get to know my professors, it helped me get more involved. I started to feel not as alone as I did because when I first got here, the SVA [student veterans group] wasn't as solid as it is now, so there were, the people that I ran into were few and far between. Literally, I felt alone....There's plenty of help out there, but it just felt like I was all by myself (Participant 2, 2017).

I kinda felt lost, a little bit, because one of the challenges coming from military to college is your entire career was in a very structured environment. Whenever you work with somebody or a group of people for so long they kinda become like your second family almost. It's very team-based, very community based. You come out of that into college, and I guess one of the biggest things that hit me was here it's all about the individual and it's not very structured at all. So, I was kinda lost for a little bit (Participant 5, 2017).

Pretty much my whole college history, my funest [most fun] and best classes were classes where I found veteran friends. And we sit together, talk together, and have group projects with. Those are the classes that I had the most fun in and did the best in, the ones I had with veterans (Participant 6, 2017).

Participants 1 and 7 did not try to connect with their fellow veterans while attending undergraduate college:

There was a veterans' office, yup. For me, the military was not...I enlisted early, I was an early enlistee. I was interested in the military as a teenager, but as an adult and as an organization, I did not love it. As I got older, I did seek out more veterans, but those experiences haven't been great (Participant 7, 2017).

When I first got to my undergraduate college, I took a military science class. Mostly because I wanted an easy A, but also because I wanted to get a little bit more connected. I didn't actively seek out, I mean, you hang out in the veterans' center, there's going to be other vets that are there but...I love those guys and girls but I think they're fantastic. But sometimes it's like I did more things, like a pissing contest. I respect them, of course, also since I wasn't in a combat situation, didn't have a deployment, I felt like I didn't really connect with some of those guys (Participant 1, 2016).

Participant 7 goes on to talk about the lack of help she had when exiting the military:

I remember getting a packet [when leaving the military]; I don't remember much of the information being helpful...I think they need to do more before we leave to help us when we get there. Especially if you're not going home (Participant 7, 2017).

## **Results Conclusion**

How do the experiences of prior service enlisted active duty military veterans compare to the literature that combines all types of service veterans together? After conducting my own research on prior service active duty military veterans and then comparing them to what my interviewees said to what Reservists and National Guardsmen have said in the published literature, the types of service have more in common than I had previously hypothesized.

All forms of service while attending college have the same problems in relating to their traditional-aged student peers, they all have trouble navigating the unpredictable university bureaucracy, difficulty getting the educational GI Bill benefits in order, and feel most comfortable with other military veterans like themselves. The only main difference that a Reservist would go through that an active duty veteran would not experience is to be called up right in the middle of the semester and have to drop out, causing complications with their GI Bill paperwork and class work. But, if the Reservist was no longer in service or if the active duty service member was still on active duty service while attending school, then both types of service would be on the same level playing field. My research on only prior service active duty enlisted service members reflects the same problematic situations that the published literature has also discovered, regardless of service type.

Even though the two types of service are so different due to the amount of time they spent in the total institution of the military, they all have the same types of difficulties in college. Any time spent being indoctrinated into such tightly-controlled environment as the military will leave the service member having difficulty dealing with an unstructured environment, such as college, when they get out of service. The culture of the full-time military and lack of time around civilians does not affect the active duty service member when entering college any more

than the part-time service member like a Reservist, especially if that Reservist that has served in a warzone. Once both types of service enter college after their time in the military, they all have very similar experiences.

## **Discussion**

### **Summary of Results**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences that active duty enlisted military veterans undergo when they enter higher education as undergraduates after their time in service. How do the experiences of active duty military veterans compare to the literature that combines all types of service veterans together? Most research conducted and literature available on military veterans is on Reserve military veterans or the research combines Reservists, National Guard, and active duty service together. This study addresses the situations facing only prior service active duty enlisted military veterans who have already completed their military service and are entering higher education as first-time undergraduates. Active duty enlisted military veterans are reentering the civilian and entering the academic world almost at the same time. How does the college experience of a full-time controlled military environment differ for the active duty military veteran than the Reservist, who is in that controlled environment only part-time? To answer this question, I compared the outcome of my research on prior service active duty enlisted veterans to the literature that blends active duty, Reservist, and National Guard.

I conducted in-person interviews with seven prior service active duty military veterans regarding their time as an undergraduate college student. I was able to code the findings into four categories: Maneuvering Bureaucracy, Students, Staff/Professors, and Acculturation. Maneuvering Bureaucracy covered registering for classes, choosing a major, or talking to

advisors. The Student category is open to include any interaction with other college students. Staff/Professors describe interactions with professors, military related staff at the college, or dealing with GI Bill paperwork as it has to go through a person and is not technically a university bureaucracy. The Acculturation section discussed the process of leaving the military and getting adjusted to civilian and university life. Their responses were either distinctly stated or could be inferred by enough examples given.

I was expecting to see a great difference in college experiences between my active duty military veterans compared to the literature that combines active duty, Reservist, and National Guard. I thought that being in the military culture full-time would produce a different college student than someone who was only in the military culture part-time. The participants interviewed in my own research and the published literature gave such similar responses that there is not much difference in their college experience. Any time spent in the total institution of the military changes a person. Active duty and Reservists have such similar experiences in college that there is no reason to separate them out in the research or literature.

### **Application of Findings**

My findings on the experiences of active duty military veterans as undergraduates are similar to the published literature on Reserve, National Guard, and active duty veterans in college. These findings suggest that it is unnecessary for universities to create programs specifically for just active duty enlisted military veterans. Universities can create programs that encompass all military veterans, rather than having to make tedious and expensive adjustments depending on the type of military service.

From a business point of view, universities need to make their school more welcoming to student veterans because of the guarantee of federal funding. Since most student veterans attend school using their GI Bill benefits, the schools are guaranteed tuition payments from these students. In 2011, more than \$7.7 billion was paid out in educational benefits for 555,000 veterans (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012, p. 2). In this age of tight budgets and restricted spending, colleges should welcome these students who are bringing in guaranteed forms of payment.

Not all military veterans can be easily identified, especially if they are not using GI Bill benefits. Universities and colleges should be more willing to identify and reach out to help student veterans acclimate to academic life. Schools are missing a big opportunity to take advantage of the training these students received in the military that makes them very focused and great leaders. As Participant 5 mentioned, veterans spoke up more in their classes and helped get the other students involved in the conversation (Participant 5, 2017). Their leadership and life experiences could help broaden the academic experience of other students and become great alumni for the university.

Several sources also agree that having a veteran-only orientation for incoming and transferring students would help the students feel at ease in their new university and give them assistance with their unique situations. A session such as this could more fully address veteran-specific questions such as VA paperwork assistance and where to receive post-traumatic stress disorder counseling (Herrmann, Raybeck, & Wilson, 2008; Kirchner, 2015, p. 116; Kelley et al., 2013, p. 76). Having one office to assist the student veterans with all of their affairs would show them the campus cares about their success, in turn making the student veteran more comfortable on campus. Participant 5 expresses the need for a knowledgeable VA representative to process the student veterans' paperwork quickly and accurately:



I'm not going to give any names, but one of my good friends I work with, also a vet, wife, kids, you know, middle-aged, eating Ramen every night because he had no money. That really affected a lot of us (Participant 5, 2017).

### **Questions for Future Research**

This thesis examines just a small aspect of veterans' experience in college. Future research could help illuminate a number of related issues. I was not able to interview any student veterans who had dropped out of college; my participants were either current students or had graduated. It would be interesting to find out what led those student veterans to abandon their educational pursuits. Could changes in university policies or practices help veteran dropouts get back into school? There are also many questions concerning the experiences of students who are officers rather than enlisted. Officers already possess a Bachelor's degree and return to school to pursue a graduate degree. What special challenges, if any, do these students face? These are just a few of the questions pertaining to student veterans in higher education.

### **Conclusion**

The culture of the enlisted military is set up to keep its members safe during combat, but does not help them fit into the civilian or academic world. Being in this culture, either full or part time, will affect the veteran in some way. Goffman's total institution theory indicates that any time in a controlled environment goes against the social arrangement of modern society of a separation of activities, people, and places (Goffman, 1961, p. 6). John W. Berry's theory of acculturation suggests there are cultural and psychological changes that occur when different

cultures collide (Berry, 2005, p. 698). This theory of acculturation can be applied when prior service enlisted active duty military veterans leave the controlled and group-reliant environment of the military and encounter the laid back and self-reliant culture of academia.

Entering college after serving in the enlisted military is difficult for the student who does not know what to expect. Student development theory posits the importance of acceptance and the impact of the first semester in regards to the student's opportunity to graduate or drop out of college. It also illuminates important ways in which students differ from one another and that university staff and faculty need to offer support geared toward students' particular needs.

Modern undergraduate cohorts are now gravitating towards being considered non-traditional. No longer are the 18-to 24 year-olds the norm of college life: 58% are older than 24 and are married with dependents and a majority of students must work while attending college (Wolf-Wendel & Ruel, 1999, p. 40). Since most student development theory focuses on traditional-aged students, staff and faculty must change their perceptions and knowledge of what they consider college students are. A majority of my interview participants are first generation college students so they do not have the cultural capital of already knowing how to navigate college and need extra assistance to succeed in graduating.

Culture shock occurs when an individual is met with an entirely new environment from which they know (Berry, 2005, p. 708). The time in college when this is most likely to occur is in the student's first semester. Tinto refers to the first semester as the separation stage, the time when the student has to deal with the influence of separation, transition, and incorporation into this new life (Elkins et al., 2000, p. 252). They are leaving the culture they know behind and are striking out on a new path not knowing what to expect. Before the first semester starts is the perfect time to have a veteran-only orientation so the student veteran knows what to expect from

college and will not be hit so hard by culture shock. Feeling accepted at college can make the difference between graduating and dropping out.

I had originally hypothesized that prior service enlisted active duty military veterans have a different experience in the military than Reservists or National Guard. But, after comparing the experiences that my active duty interview participants had to the literature that combines active duty, Reserve, and National Guard, their experiences in acclimating to undergraduate higher education are similar enough that there is no need to separate the service types out in the literature.

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## Appendices

### HSCL Consent Form

Dear Military Veteran,

This study aims to shed light on the experiences of enlisted active duty military veterans as they leave the military and enter higher education. Bringing these experiences to light will entail interviewing current and past college students who are also military veterans.

I am contacting you to ask if you would be willing to be interviewed to share your personal experiences about the transition from active duty enlisted military veteran to college student. It would be a one-time interview, lasting around one hour at a location of your choice. Participation is completely voluntary and you can withdraw from the study or refuse to answer any questions at any time without any negative effects. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for use in a Master's research thesis paper. All data will be stored on a USB memory stick held at the interviewer's home in a locked file cabinet. Anything shared during the interview will be kept confidential and any identifiable information will not be shared unless a) it is required by law or university policy or b) you give written permission.

I appreciate the time you have given me and look forward to hearing your experiences as a student veteran, should you choose to volunteer for this study. I plan on using this information to write a thesis paper to complete a requirement for my Master's degree. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact Nina Berg (913-486-XXXX, [ninaberg@ku.edu](mailto:ninaberg@ku.edu)) or my thesis advisor Dr. Suzanne Rice (785-864-XXXX, [srice@ku.edu](mailto:srice@ku.edu)).

Sincerely,

Nina Berg

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I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding this study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL) at 785-864-7429 or email [irb@ku.edu](mailto:irb@ku.edu).

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

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Printed Name of Subject

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Signature of Subject

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Date

## Interview Protocol

In which branch of the military did you serve?

Years active?

What years did you attend college?

Which college?

How would you rank your overall experience in college? 1 being very positive and 5 being very negative.

1

2

3

4

5

What experiences/interactions within the first six months of beginning college stand out in your memory? Please describe.

What did you find helpful/positive during your first six months of college?

What did you find obstructive/negative during your first six months?

What support did you have to help you through college?

Did you seek out other military veterans on campus? Why or why not?

Looking back, what do you wish you'd known when you started your higher education career?