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Running Head: POST 9/11 VETERAN STUDENT PARENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Perceptions of Post 9/11 Veteran Students Who are Parents Regarding the Role of  
Institutional Services in Bachelor Degree Completion

A Dissertation Presented

By

Alicia M. Reddin, M.Ed.

Submitted to the Graduate School of Education

Lesley University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Ph.D. Educational Studies

Adult Learning and Development Specialization

The Perceptions of Post 9/11 Veteran Students Who are Parents Regarding the Role of Institutional Services in Bachelor Degree Completion

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Graduate School of Education

Lesley University

Ph.D. Educational Studies

Adult Learning and Development Specialization

**Approvals**

*In the judgment of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.*

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**ABSTRACT**

Currently there is a dearth in the literature surrounding the experiences of Veterans and individuals with children within higher education. The goal of this dissertation was to understand Veteran student parents' perceptions of the ways in which their undergraduate institutions supported their completion of a bachelor's degree. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 individuals; this dissertation analyzes the findings of the 6 participants who were both Veteran students and parents concurrently. Narratives were constructed for each participant and resulted in the identification of four intersecting themes: relationships, institutional barriers, motivators, as well as barriers and threats. Special attention was paid to the ways in which students utilized institutional services and support structures within higher education and the ways in which those services contributed to student success. The research findings led way to the development of recommendations and applications for higher education institutions to better serve and support the graduation of Veteran student parents and other similar populations. Given the limited available research on Veteran student parents in higher education, this dissertation advances our understanding of the intersection of military status and parenthood within the educational context.

*Keywords: advising, degree completion, institutional services, non-traditional students, post 9/11 gi bill, student services, veterans, veteran student parents*

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Every dad is a superhero to his children, and I thank my dad, Carlos for being mine. My mother Robin, because it is only a mother who sacrifices and goes through a such a journey to see her children happy. Our brothers and sisters are there with us from the first day of our personal stories and remain with us until the inevitable end. Thank you, John, Tina, Matthew for being a part of my story. My brother Timothy - who I have only just met, we have 34 years of catchup to do and I can't wait. *I will never open an ancestry DNA email the same way again.* 😂

This research would not have been possible without my husband Michael, I've been yours since the moment we met. Throughout this process you have been my rock, my partner, my better half. A great relationship doesn't happen because of the love you had on day one, it is great because of how you build the love each and every day. Thank you for being by my side through many late nights, missed family gatherings, my lowest lows, my highest highs, and those time when I wasn't as good of a partner as I should have been.

To Rosalie & Gabriel, life is not easy, and you will have to face many challenges to achieve your dreams, I promise it is all worth it. A daughter is one of the most beautiful gifts this world has to give. Rosalie, I am so grateful for your love, kindness, and beauty both inside and out – never let anyone dim that shine you have. A wild child with enough char, can be a real danger. Gabriel, never lose the unwavering curiousit and excitement that you have. Of all the titles I have, being your Mom is by far the one I am most proud of, I love you both so much.

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They say it takes a village and while this village may be wacky, the villagers can be irrational, and semi unbalanced – and somehow, we have more village idiots than many surrounding villages... We remain resilient, brilliant, and strong. Thank you all for being part of my tribe, none of this would have been possible without each of you!

“It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then”

– Alice in Wonderland

## DEDICATION

In honor and recognition of all first-generation college students, our perseverance and resilience grant us the power to change the world. Although in this moment you may not see it, every accomplishment you go on to achieve will benefit those around you. We cannot make others strive for success, but we have the power to achieve it for ourselves. My challenge to each of you, and to myself, is to do all that you can do to support all “at-promise” individuals and let’s change the world together. I highly encourage all of you to use your voices, in the words of Shirley Chisholm (1972) “If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring in a folding chair”.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Statement of the Problem**

There has been a surge of military affiliated students in the U.S. education system from 500,000 in 2009 to over 1,000,000 in 2013 (ASDL, 2016; USDVA, 2014). Despite the increase there has been little research on the effect of targeted campus services and key personnel in creating a positive experience for those students. While current research has indicated a need for specifically targeted services (Smith, 2017), there is a lack of consistency in the research regarding what services are most effective in supporting degree completion for this population. Additionally, graduation and retention rates vary greatly in the Veteran community, leading to a need for additional research on the factors leading to the lack of completion (Fusch, 2012; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). Veteran students bring a different level of complexity to college campuses due to their military experiences. Educational programs designed to support transitioning Veterans are not beneficial when barriers and obstacles remain in place. By not properly addressing reported barriers the academic potential of the Veteran student population is being undermined (Adelman, 1999). This dissertation aims to identify the services that Veterans perceived as important to their successful graduations.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences that Veteran students perceived as contributing to their successful completion of a bachelor's degree while utilizing the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Special attention was paid to the institutional services and support structures established by institutions of higher education and how they were used to aid Veterans in the completion of their programs.

### Guiding Research Question

What role(s) do student Veterans report that institutions play in the successful completion of bachelor's degrees, and what services, if any, do Veteran students report contributed to their degree completion?

### Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout this study:

**Adult Learner** - “Delayed enrollment; attends part-time for at least part of the academic year; works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled; is considered financially independent for purposes of financial aid eligibility; has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others); is a single parent; and/or, does not have a high school diploma” (Powers, 2010, pp. 20-21).

**First Generation Student** - First-generation students are defined as undergraduate students whose parents had not a) participated in postsecondary education or b) completed a 4-year degree at the time of their 18th birthday (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018).

**LGBTQ+** - This term is used to identify members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning community (Pena-Talamantes, 2013). Although many iterations have been used and accepted over time depending on the social climate and the visibility/ prevalence of a community, this dissertation uses the term LGBTQ+ to honor the way the participant identifies.

**Operation Enduring Freedom OEF** - U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and other nations that began in 2001 as part of the search for al Qaeda leaders in response to the attacks on September 11, 2001 (Torreon, 2011).

**Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)** - U.S. military operations in Iraq that began in 2003 to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein. In 2010, OIF was renamed Operation New Dawn to signify the shift from military operations to one of support. The war in Iraq ended in 2011 (Torreon, 2011).

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** - PTSD develops after a terrifying ordeal that involved physical harm or the threat of physical harm. The person who develops PTSD may have been the one who was harmed, the harm may have happened to a loved one, or the person may have witnessed a harmful event that happened to loved ones or strangers (National Institute for Mental Health, n.d.).

**Post 9/11 GI Bill** - The Post 9/11 GI Bill provides financial support for education and housing to individuals with at least 90 days of aggregate service after September 10, 2001, or individuals discharged with a service-connected disability after 30 days. An individual must have received an honorable discharge to be eligible for the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Certain reservists who were

activated for at least 90 days after September 11, 2001, may be eligible for the benefit (Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, 2014).

**School Certifying Official** - The person(s) designated to sign enrollment certifications and other documents relating to VA educational benefits. The Certifying Official can also answer general questions about federal VA Education Benefits, assist students with completing VA Forms, submit forms to the VA, and contact the VA on behalf of a student with specific benefit-related issues (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013).

**Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)** - A TBI occurs when the brain has been damaged by a blow or injury to the head. Physical symptoms of brain injury may include clumsiness, dizziness, headaches, and fatigue. Behavioral symptoms of brain injury may include irritability, outbursts, and changes in behavior. “Other symptoms can include difficulty with finding the correct word, difficulty with memory and with learning new skills, reduced concentration, slowed thinking, slowed reading and slowed speaking” (NC Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

**Veteran-Friendly Campus** - The term refers to the marked effort by colleges and universities to identify and remove barriers to the educational goals of student Veterans and to create an atmosphere that promotes a smooth transition from military to college life (Lokken, et al., 2009).

**Joint Services Transcript (JST)** - According to the American Council on Education (2010), the Joint Services Transcript (JST) provides a description of military schooling and work history in language that is easily understood by civilians. It also saves time and money for student Veterans by awarding academic credits, which means less tuition to pay and less time spent in the classroom. The JST is accepted by more than 2,300 colleges and universities.

### **Anticipated Contributions**

Despite an increase in enrollments of Veterans in higher education, there has been sparse research focused on identifying which campus services and university personnel are influential in creating engagement and positive student experiences for this population (Southwell, Whiteman, MacDermid, & Barry, 2018). Completion rates for baccalaureate-seeking Veteran students have been consistently reported as lower in most cases than the four-year completion rates of their non-Veteran peers (USDVA, 2012b). Through the perspectives of Veteran students, this study aims to add to the existing literature on the relationship between undergraduate student Veterans, institutional services, and persistence.

## **Overview of Literature Review**

### **Baccalaureate Educational Opportunities for U.S. Veterans**

In 2016, more than 340,000 Veterans completed a 2- or 4-year post-secondary degree or certificate utilizing education benefits provided by the federal government (SVA, 2017). A “Veteran” is defined as a person who served in the active military, naval or air service, and was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable (USDVA, 2016). There are additional criteria at the state and local level that can influence the eligibility for specific programs. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the benefit is prorated based on the amount of time served on active duty. A military member is “considered full-time duty in the active military service of the United States. This includes members of the Reserve Component serving on active duty or full-time training duty” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2014, p. 4). Those who have served a minimum of 90 days of active duty service after September 10, 2001 and received an honorable discharge qualify for 40% of the benefit. To qualify for the full benefit, a Veteran must have served at least three years of active duty after September 10, 2001 (USDVA, 2016).

A number of media sources have published stories about the challenges that post-9/11 Veterans’ struggle face when adapting to the independent lifestyles of students, which is a stark difference from the highly authoritarian lifestyle in the military (Kim & Cole, 2013). Veterans face a variety of challenges when enrolling in higher education, such as cultural shifts, memory challenges, concentration issues, and for many, diagnosed clinical issues such as PTSD (Brito, Callahan, & Marks, 2008). Research findings have indicated that Veterans also encounter obstacles connecting with civilian students and faculty and that they become discouraged while navigating benefits and credit transfers (Bowl, 2001; SVA, 2017). Research has indicated

increased feelings of marginalization and ostracization within the Veteran population, leading to increased instances of reported anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Schlossberg, 1989). Lastly, a majority of Veterans on college campuses are considered to be adult learners, feelings of marginalization within the classroom a frequently reported when compared to their traditional aged counterparts (Schlossberg, 1989 & Young, 2012).

### **The Shifting State of Educational Success**

By not properly serving the Veteran student population or addressing their unique needs, educational institutions are stifling the academic potential of these students, as indicated by lower graduation rates among them (Adelman, 1999). The purpose of this study is to identify what services and resources Veterans perceive positively impacted their graduation. This research examines the nature of those experiences through the use of student perspectives. The design and execution of successful student-centered programming for Veterans requires time, commitment, and resources from the institution. This section will address GI Bill benefits, Veteran friendly institutions, as well as alternative college credits to provide an overview of the most common offerings to support Veteran students within higher education.

### **GI Bill Benefits**

Since the implementation of the post 9/11 GI bill, approximately 773,000 military Veterans and their dependents using benefits to obtain degrees and certificates at various institutions, aiding with the transition to civilian work (Shinseki, 2016a). The post 9/11 Montgomery GI bill was implemented in August of 2009, offering qualified Veterans with tuition coverage, books, and housing for qualified Veterans. As of 2015, over 40% of Veterans enrolled in post-secondary education were seeking a baccalaureate degree, and over 50% seeking associate degrees (ACE, 2015). The post 9/11 GI Bill was designed to provide students equal or

up to the amount of the most expensive state school's undergraduate and in-state tuition. Major features of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, in addition to providing tuition, include a living allowance, and aid to pay for books and supplies (USDVA, 2012a).

Additional services covered by the recent version includes tutoring up to \$100.00 per month, relocation allowance of \$500.00 if a student must move from a highly rural area to attend school, on the job training and apprenticeships, as well as the Yellow Ribbon Program. An eligible Veteran maintains eligibility to utilize the Post 9/11 GI Bill for fifteen years after military separation or retirement. In August of 2017, the "Forever G.I. Bill" was signed into law, abolishing the expiration date for anyone who left the military after January 1, 2013, as well as restructuring the housing allowance for new GI Bill recipients (USDVA, 2018). The Post 9/11 GI Bill serves as a benefit to Veteran students by providing them with substantial financial assistance as they seek to obtain post-secondary training and education. Table 1 demonstrates an example of the tuition costs to a student when attending a Yellow Ribbon participating school versus one who is not.

Table 1: Yellow Ribbon Tuition Example

<b>Yellow Ribbon School?</b>	<b>Sample Annual Tuition</b>	<b>GI Bill Tuition Cap</b>	<b>Balance</b>	<b>School Waived Amount</b>	<b>Yellow Ribbon Contribution</b>	<b>Student Balance</b>
<b>Yes</b>	\$28,000.00	\$21,084.89	\$6,915.11	\$3458.05	\$3458.06	\$0
<b>No</b>	\$28,000.00	\$21,084.89	\$6,915.11	\$0	\$0	\$6,915.11

Under the Post 9/11 GI bill, the maximum tuition covered annually is \$21,084.89 which may leave students responsible for the remaining balance, creating a potential hardship. Institutions may participate in the Yellow Ribbon program to alleviate the financial strain that



accompanies the tuition cap. Yellow Ribbon is a voluntary program that allows a school to waive the remaining tuition and the VA will match 50% of the waiver amount (USDVA, 2016). Even with numerous federally funded benefits designed to support this demographic, there are Veterans transitioning into college classrooms that are not successfully obtaining college degrees (Daly & Fox-Garrity, 2013).

Using an estimated tuition cost of \$28,000 a year, a Veteran student using the maximum benefit under the GI Bill, which is capped at \$21,084.89, would have a remaining balance of \$6915.11. A school that participates in the voluntary Yellow Ribbon program will waive 50% of the remaining balance and the VA would contribute the remaining 50%. In this example the Veteran student would not be held responsible for the \$6,915.11 balance. In a non-participating school that cost would be passed on to the Veteran, potentially creating a financial burden.

### **Veteran Friendliness**

Each year several publications are released that provide their readers lists of colleges and universities judged to be officially 'Veteran Friendly' (Minnis, 2014). These rankings have been released to depict the variety of resources and programs available and can be used as a navigation tool for potential Veteran students to compare schools. It is important to note the rankings are not always designed using research on resources proven to support Veterans socially or academically but instead are often driven by marketing (Prah, 2014 & Minnis, 2014). Institutional financial resources allow for institutions to participate in surveys as well as market to the military population. Increased participation is connected to the Veteran friendly designation, creating a pay to play situation that may leave colleges with robust services out of rankings. Regarding Veteran friendliness within higher education Captain Robert Prah, who

serves as the Director of the office of Military & Veteran affairs at the California University of Pennsylvania poses the following,

What if a college or university doesn't have the budget to advertise to military students in some of these publications? Does that make them any less military-friendly? What if a college or university spends thousands of dollars per month on lead-generating agencies, aggressive recruiting and marketing directed at military students? Does it make them more military-friendly than the competition (2014, para. 3)?

It is important to understand the origin of the "Veteran-friendly" designation as it may not be attainable for some institutions. Institutions who would otherwise have robust resources available to Veteran students may not have the financial resources to participate in the surveys and polls required. These rankings often serve as a starting point for many Veterans as they seek to return to post-secondary training or education, aiding them in discovering which schools will be able to accommodate their unique needs. In addition to the numerous benefits that can be offered by a school, it is very important that administrators work to foster a supportive, appreciative, and respectful culture that is inclusive of the Veterans they seek to educate (Kim & Cole, 2013). For an institution to be considered friendly, in addition to marketing, there would need to be benefits and resources tailored to the military community. There are a variety of ways that schools are able to support Veterans on campus, according to the VA toolkit (2014) academics, financial, and emotional support are fundamental.

### **Alternative College Credits**

Veterans enter higher education with a variety of experiences and skills, many of which can be equated to college credit. Defense Activity for Nontraditional Education Support, known as DANTES (USN, 2018), provides alternative tracks to earn a college degree or licensure using

the joint services transcript, commonly known as a “JST”. In a partnership with the Department of Education, the American Council on Education has standardized the practice of awarding college credit for military training. Members of the military are put through basic training where they are indoctrinated into the culture of their respective branch, taught the heritage of their service, and trained physically to enter the armed forces (Goldenberg, Hamaoka, Santiago, McCarroll (2012). Upon completion of their basic training, soldiers and sailors are then sent to be instructed on their specific job; these schools range from six weeks to three years depending on the field. ACE provides a guide to institutions that offers guidance and recommendations to assign college credits for formal courses and occupational training while in the military. As an example, three credits meeting a technology requirement may be awarded to a student who successfully completed the program specialist training in the U.S. Navy. ACE credits are evaluated using the joint services transcript (JST) which was instituted to provide a set standard across all branches of the military, this is similar to the college transcripts used in higher education.

While ACE credits offer equivalency from military courses to civilian courses, the DANTES program allows for military training activity to take the place of numerous elective courses. Military personnel serving on active duty are also eligible to have costs associated with alternative learning environments reimbursed, allowing them to continue to serve while making academic progress. Active duty military members may take examinations to earn a variety of credentials, including but not limited to a high school diploma or GED, college admissions testing such as SAT and GMAT, undergraduate or graduate credits, and professional certifications, such as real estate licensure (USN, 2018).

### **Veterans as Non-traditional Students**

In response to the increased numbers of military affiliated students, the Veteran Affairs Administration as well as colleges have been making improvements to communications and marketing the available resources and programs. In 2013, over 1,000,000 student Veterans were using their GI benefits to pursue advanced educational opportunities, and this number is estimated to increase by 20% within 6 years (USDVA, 2014). Unlike “traditional” students, many of whom can devote themselves to their classes full-time, GI bill recipients are often older and balancing external responsibilities along with their studies. Age, enrollment status, and risk for attrition are a few ways in which nontraditional students are defined (Wyatt, 2011). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), nontraditional students are identified using the following criteria: (a) they waited a year or more following high school to enroll, (b) they have children, (c) they work full time or are otherwise financially independent of their care takers, and (d) they did not receive a traditional high school diploma but instead earned an alternate form of completion such as the General Educational Development Test (GED) as a replacement. A majority of the literature uses age and enrollment status to define a traditional and nontraditional student; however, Toynton (2005) suggests that life experiences and prior knowledge are acceptable criteria. At the institutional level, tracking of nontraditional students has been inconsistent, specifically when referring to perseverance and graduations rates. The following sections will provide an overview of the challenges that Veteran non-traditional students face within education.

### **Challenges for Non-Traditional Students and for Veterans as Non-Traditional Students**

As non-traditional students, some Veterans face unique challenges that traditional students may not have experienced when entering college directly from high school. Veterans leave the

military and reengage in civilian life with several options: some transition directly to employment or entrepreneurship, while others may decide to further their education. Military and Veteran students represent a unique group of nontraditional students primarily due to their experiences being socialized into the military. Service members are trained to be emotionally and physically strong, disciplined, able to exceed high expectations, assume leadership positions, and work as a collective (Vacchi, 2012). Departure from the rigid military structure leaves many Veterans feeling anxious and lacking a sense of purpose (Kato, 2010).

A participant in Kato's 2010 study shared his experience of the "sink or swim" mentality in civilian life: "In the military, you take care of... the others around you. That's how we work, that's how we live" (p. 86). In the field, service members are taught the importance of never leaving a fellow servicemember behind and always striving toward a single goal. Being conditioned to work in highly regimented and group-focused environments prior to entering the highly independent nature of the university setting presents a variety of challenges for Veteran students (Vacchi, 2012; Warren, 2017). Within the military and Veteran community, there is a need for clear goals and motivators, leaving some Veterans feeling out of place without them. Pursuing higher education is as a tool that some Veterans use to reclaim structure in their day-to-day lives, similar to the structure offered by the military. Veterans are familiar with managing the major and often immediate life transitions associated with military culture, upon transition into civilian life it is key to develop strategies to adapt to a different pace (Adler and Sowden, 2018).

### **Overview of Theoretical Frameworks**

There are limited theories and models to describe and identify the experiential differences of Veteran students versus their civilian peers in a higher education setting. The theoretical

frameworks used for this qualitative research study are Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of non-traditional student attrition in conjunction with Tinto's (1993) model of student departure. For example, for traditional aged students, high academic achievement is found to influence undergraduate graduation rates (Adelman, 1999); however, these themes were not found throughout the limited literature associated with veteran specific institutional services and experiences within higher education. The following section will provide an overview of previous studies on undergraduate retention, influences and institutional factors on student retention, social perspectives of retention, as well as institutional engagement.

### **Previous Studies on Undergraduate Retention**

Studies on undergraduate retention in the United States began in the 1930s and focused on the failure of students to graduate, which was then termed student mortality (Berger & Lyon, 2005). There is substantial persistence research on undergraduate students, yet Veterans remain an overlooked population within these bodies of literature. Bean and Metzner (1985) identified a gap within the literature, which led to the development of a model of non-traditional student attrition designed to better understand the increase in nontraditional student enrollments, as well as provide a definition to describe a nontraditional undergraduate student. The average age of a Veteran entering education is 25 to 40 years old, with only 15% of enrolled Veterans being categorized as 'traditional aged' of 18 – 23 (ACE, 2015).

### **Influences and Institutional Factors on Student Retention**

Bean and Metzner's (1985) model is focused on three areas believed to influence student persistence or attrition: academic performance, social-psychological factors, and environmental factors. Unlike the models developed using the traditional undergraduate population, Bean & Metzner's model stipulates that nontraditional students are primarily affected by environmental

factors and other external responsibilities. Although high school grade point average (GPA) is not directly linked to attrition for nontraditional students, the theory specifies that it may be an indicator of the intention to withdraw. Social factors such as faculty relationships in conjunction with psychological factors such as feelings of alienation, have an increased positive influence over a student's intent to withdraw than academic performance. Environmental factors have the greatest impact on student attrition; these aspects include finances, schedules, a positive support network, and family responsibilities.

While Tinto's (1993) model of student departure is based on traditional aged students, he was also able to identify numerous factors that influence the overall student retention at an institution. A core belief of Tinto's theory of student retention is that there are institutional factors, such as faculty and staff interactions and relationships, that play a key role in students' academic success. Historically, the focus of an institution has been to ensure quality instruction and curriculum; however, additional research has identified a connection between the academic learning process and social engagement that takes place in a college setting (Tinto, 1993). In Tinto's research, the students' perceptions of supportiveness within their schools had a positive influence on their graduation or attrition. He argues that the roots of an individual's departure from higher education may be related to both academic and social factors.

### **Social Perspectives of Student Mortality and Retention**

Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of non-traditional student attrition highlights challenges and obstacles nontraditional students face. For students balancing numerous outside obligations, the classroom may be the only connection held to an institution. Central to the student attrition model is the level of social and academic integration are predictors of

a student's success. Studies have found that adult students who reported receiving greater support from faculty and advisors were more likely to persist through their programs and graduate successfully (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Shelton, 2003).

Historically, models of student retention have focused primarily on the social perspectives and student mortality of traditional aged students (Manyanga, Sithole, Hanson, 2017). There remains a lack of theoretical models discussing the ways in which Veteran students differ from their civilian counterparts. In 1975, Tinto's student integration model shifted the academic research focus to a modern view of undergraduate student retention and attrition. The model suggests that students who are able to integrate into the campus community (e.g. academic clubs, student organizations, and intramural sports) increase their connection to the school and are more likely to successfully graduate (Tinto, 1975). While Tinto's model has been debated and seen numerous revisions over the last 40 years, it has had a profound impact on how researchers and administrators approach the undergraduate population (Swail, 2004).

A review of the research in higher education administration, retention and graduation has proven to be more significant when considering traditional populations as compared to Veteran-focused research. Research shows that there is a vast network of institutions that are adjusting their models to serve and recruit a global community (Eyring, 2011). Yet with an increase of choices across higher education, students are taking longer to graduate, and nearly 40% attend more than one institution prior to completing their degree (Tinto, 2002).

The NCES (2017) provided this data:

The 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in fall 2009 was 59



percent. That is, 59 percent had completed a bachelor's degree by 2015 at the same institution where they started in 2009 (para. 1).

A key difference of Bean and Metzner's model when compared to other research on student success and attrition is the focus on the external conditions surrounding students. Successful institutional policies supporting the retention of marginalized populations (e.g. Veterans, minorities, low socio-economic status) are both measurable and offer value. "But institutional commitment is more than just words, more than just mission statements issued in glossy brochures; commitment is the willingness to invest the resources and provide the incentives and rewards needed to enhance student retention" (Tinto, 2002 p. 2). Often, universities recruit military affiliated students and benefit from the \$10.2 billion in annual benefits (USDVA, 2017). According to the Department of Veteran Affairs, (2017) the benefits offered by institutions are not equitable for the amount of income they receive from student Veterans, and often a degree is not earned in the process.

### **Institutional Engagement and Student Success**

Bean and Metzner's model, along with Tinto's theory, also highlight the importance of institutional engagement. These include the level of academic work expected and rigor of the curriculum. "To borrow a commonly used phrase, no student rises to low expectations" (Tinto, 2002 p. 2). Student success is significantly affected by the level of academic and social support services available "in the form of developmental education courses, tutoring, study groups, and academic support programs" (Tinto, 2002 p. 3).

An additional implication discussed by Tinto (2012) is that students prefer frequent and detailed feedback on their performance. Veteran students are required to maintain a passing GPA to remain eligible for some educational benefits. Tinto's theory states that

employing methods to offer feedback would allow students to alter their approach to academics; similarly, if feedback is provided to faculty on a frequent basis, they are able to adjust teaching methods, thus encouraging a more successful learning environment (2012). Much like Tinto's (1993) earlier theories, his study on institutional engagement has shown that increased social and academic involvement is directly linked to persistence and graduation rates. Involvement during the first year in college serves as a foundation for which consequential membership and engagements are fostered. When an institution develops and implements a rigorous curriculum, incorporating flexibility and a variety of techniques, one is more likely to see increased persistence and graduation rates because "students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that foster learning" (Tinto, 2012 p. 3).

A common theme through the theoretical frameworks is that the ability of students to have a genuine connection to their institutions via a variety of engagement options leads to a positive outcome for those students as well as the institution. Veteran student experience remains overlooked and under-researched within the scope of persistence. Through the perspectives of Veteran students, this study aims to add to the existing literature on undergraduate student Veterans, institutional services, persistence, and student attrition.

## **Overview of Research Methods**

### **Participant Sampling and Recruitment**

Fifteen Participants were recruited for this study using multiple networks, starting initially with the Student Veteran of America (SVA) chapters locally and the Massachusetts Veteran services network. The SVA organization is an international non-profit coalition of campus-based student groups offering advocacy, scholarships, and leadership trainings (SVA, 2016). This

method of recruitment was chosen for the access to alumni across the state. SVA organization has a membership consisting of students as well as alumni at all 13 chapters in the state. An email was distributed to the faculty advisors and presidents of the 13 Massachusetts SVA chapters containing a brief explanation of the research and requesting that they share the information with their alumni students. Criteria for study participation was as follows; (a) the student must have used the Post 9/11 GI bill, (b) attended school full-time in Massachusetts (12 Credits or More), (c) completed his or her bachelor's degree between the years of 2016-2018, (d) currently residing in Massachusetts.

Meetings were offered to each of the chapters, and although not requested by any of the members, the offer remained throughout the research timeline. The recruitment documents included a detailed explanation of the criteria and purpose, followed by a request to share the information with alumni members of the chapter. Participants were alerted that they should contact the primary researcher directly to schedule a conversation; once a participant was found to be willing and eligible to participate, they would be contacted for scheduling. In addition to the SVA recruitment, the same request was also sent to the Massachusetts Veteran services networks to be shared throughout with participants.

At the beginning of the interviews, each student was provided with an informed consent to review and sign – they also received a copy. The consent provided participants with the assurance that their identity would remain protected, that they participated voluntarily, and that they may withdraw from this study at any time with no repercussion. In addition to the physical consent copy, each interview began with a short introduction and explanation of the informed consent. A verbal reconfirmation was completed along with a reminder that there are would be no incentives associated with participation. Although risk was not anticipated, each participant

was provided with the VA Mental Health Crisis number in the form of a handout. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

### **Methods for Data Collection and Analysis**

Narrative inquiry is the process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling. In this study, participants were Veterans who utilized the Post 9/11 GI Bill to obtain a bachelor's degree, in a full-time format. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note that, "Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world (p.6)." The focus is not only on the experience of the participating Veteran, but in the ways that students value the interactions they report. Using an analysis of narratives, the research sought to understand and identify key retention factors and events, to identify the interactions that students reported as being most important for the students' retention.

Within the armed forces there is a rank and hierarchical structure in order to maintain organization (USDVA, 2017), and individuals' placement within the hierarchy represents their level of authority (Conti & Raymond, 2011). It is considered bad form to question authority or challenge those in a senior position (Conti & Raymond, 2011). Therefore, it was important for the researcher to connect to Veteran students as a peer. Although not typically considered a marginalized population by many, it has become clear through research that this population feels separated and ostracized on college campuses (Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2014; DiRamiro et al., 2008). The purpose of narrative inquiry is to reveal the meanings of individuals' experiences through their own words as opposed to an objective presentation. For this reason, narrative research was leveraged to create a rapport and relationship, allowing the participants to share intimate stories about their experiences in degree attainment.

Using the semi-structured approach, Creswell (2014) states that, “narrative stories are gathered through many different forms of data, such as through interviews that may be the primary form of data collection, but also through observations, documents, pictures, and other sources of qualitative data” (p. 69). Interviews were utilized for data collection, specifically semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed using a semi-structured approach to provide structure but allow for flexibility within the conversations as needed. The protocol was tested to ensure clarity of questions and the order in which they are asked. Interviews lasted approximately 75 minutes and took place at a neutral location; participants chose the interview locations to ensure convenience. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and memo writing was used after each interview to ensure clarity of thoughts and reflections. Participants were given the opportunity to review their responses for precision and accuracy.

The Saldaña In Vivo (2009, 2016) method was employed for coding and analyzing the interview data as well as the memos. The In Vivo method consists of assigning a label to a section of data, such as an interview transcript, using a word or short phrase taken directly from the participant’s quote. Coding of the memos and transcripts was done using NVivo, a software analysis tool. As a first step, labels were assigned to each data sections using a word or phrase from the participant. The use of NVivo coding allowed the participants language to develop the codes, ensuring the perspectives remain authentic. At the completion of the first coding cycle, the memos were reviewed, and additional entries reflecting on the analysis process were added. This process was used to identify additional key terms and to check the initial memos for additional meaning or feelings. Second cycle coding was focused on identifying patterns; similarities, differences, and frequency across the participants.

### **Research Limitations**

A number of important limitations need to be considered. First, the participants were a small sample of Post 9/11 GI Bill recipients located specifically in Massachusetts. The benefits and available resources are varied across different geographic areas. Second, although not a goal of qualitative research, it is important to note that this work is not representative of the entirety of the Veteran student parent population. Additionally, the reflections relied on the participants' abilities to recall and articulate events and emotions over the period of their education, which some may find challenging (Anderson & Kirkpatrick 2016, Moen, 2006). A disadvantage to using a semi-structured approach is the need for the researcher to develop and expand questions with little preparation dependent on the direction of the conversation (Agee, 2008).

### **Research Delimitations**

A delimitation of this study is that the participants are a subset of the initial population. Participants were selected based on four primary criteria of 1) used the Post 9/11 GI bill, 2) attended school full time in Massachusetts, 3) completed his or her bachelor's degree between the years of 2016-2018, and 4) currently residing in Massachusetts. The purpose of the criteria was to identify participants who had experienced degree completion under similar circumstances. Although 15 participants were recruited and interviewed, this study focused specifically on the student parents and their experiences within the college setting. Veteran student parents represent just under 50% of the Post 9/11 GI Bill recipients in the US, and the trend is expected to continue based on research by the Center on Labor (2016) which found that 42 percent of all active duty service members have children and about 89 percent of those service members are married. Within higher education, over 4 million students have children, and Veteran students represent approximately 25% of those students; yet some institutions do not directly address the needs of

this growing population. The experiences and challenges of the student Veteran parents are unique and not well represented within academic research or theoretical models. Due to the inclusion of only Veterans with dependent children during their education, this study does not serve as a representation for all 15 initial participants.

### **Researcher Positionality**

It is important to note that a researcher's positionality both shapes their research and influences interpretation of data (Bloom, 1996). My identity as a researcher is determined and guided by the multiple identities that I hold: mother, daughter, wife, Veteran, adult learner, and first-generation college student are all part of who I am and how I approached this study. I began my journey in higher education similar to each of the participants, new to civilian life and with a young child. My educational journey took me from a community college, to a private 4-year institution for my baccalaureate degree and then on to a private institution for graduate school. I have also worked in both 2- and 4-year schools as well as in both public and private, witnessing first-hand the variance in the quality of services for Veteran students on college campuses.

### **Personal Background**

My connection to this research is guided by the multiple identities I encompass and represent; mother, veteran, first generation college student, caucasian, and cisgender. Within each of these identities falls a set of experiences that inform each other as well as how I view myself and those around me. In 2009 I began my college career at a large community college on the North Shore after just returning to Boston; I was a single mom to my infant daughter who is now 11, newly transitioned from the military, working full time, and the first in my family to go to college. From the very beginning my venture into higher education was complex and worth every step and misstep. My passion for researching degree seeking veteran parents has been

driven by my own experiences as a Veteran parent balancing family and work during my undergraduate and graduate education.

I was fortunate to serve in the US Navy at a time when it was not only encouraged but expected for Veterans to enroll in college after their service concluded. I, and some of my peers, were the first in our families to go to college, and many of us did so with young children at home. I have seen the political, social and cultural changes surrounding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and lived through the struggle of transitioning back to civilian life and into the college classroom. My identity, my sense of self, is strongly connected with the essence of this research, not only as a Veteran, but also as a parent and first-generation college student. This research grows from my commitment to equitable access to higher education and an abiding concern at the cavalier manner in which support for Veteran students is proclaimed across college campuses while a substantial percentage of Veterans do not successfully complete their degree.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters, with each addressing a key component of the research. Chapter 1 provides an introduction into the research topic and the purpose of the proposed research. Chapter 2 examines the existing literature within the context of this research study. Chapter 3 outlines the chosen methodology and the steps entailed in the analysis process. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the findings, and, lastly, Chapter 5 provides the discussion of findings and recommendations for future research based on the analyses from the preceding chapter.



### **Summary**

Due to the increase in Veteran students in higher education combined with a lack of data specifically related to institutional services supporting their completion, this research examines the nature of their experiences and perceptions of their institutions. Through the Veteran student perspectives, I investigated what services Veteran student parents perceived as contributing to their successful completion of a bachelor's degree. Through the theories pioneered by John Bean, Barbara Metzner, and Vincent Tinto, along with the use of the narrative methodology, insight was gained into the experiences of student Veterans, enriching best practices in order to increase the graduation rates of veteran students. The next chapter focuses on a review of the existing literature relevant to the key elements of this research study.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

Current research indicates Veterans are entering both higher education and vocational training programs at an increased rate, which is expected to continue year after year (Hamrick & Rumann, 2013; McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). Since the addition of the Montgomery GI Bill, there are approximately 884,000 military Veterans and their dependents using benefits to obtain degrees and certificates at various higher education institutions; the largest resurgence of Veteran students since the conclusion of World War II (Cook and Kim 2009, Shinseki, 2016, Queen & Lewis, 2012). Although there is a documented increase in military-affiliated students in the U.S. education system (USDLE, 2016), there has been little research on the effect of campus services and key personnel in creating a positive academic experience (Morreale, 2011). With faculty and staff at higher education institutions frequently interacting with these populations, there is a continuous need to conduct targeted research that will grant insight into the specific needs of Veteran students (McBain et al, 2012) and ultimately expand the student affairs and Veteran services field as a whole. This chapter offers an exploration of the growth of community college education, the evolution of Veteran benefits, social norms and the rise of both student affairs and non-traditional students.

### **Growth of Post-Secondary Community Education**

The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 were fundamental in the creation of an accessible American education system, and modern community colleges were heavily based on the land grant model. These acts allowed states to build universities dedicated to agricultural, mechanical, and military education (Abrams, 1989). The Morrill Act of 1862 granted 30,000 acres per congressional seat to individual states to create and fund the creation of colleges to specialize in

agriculture and mechanics (Duemer, 2007). While some states chose to open new schools, other states put the funding into opening new programs at existing schools. Per the legislation, all of the land grant schools were required to support Military training in their curriculum which led to the establishment of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) (Duemer, 2007, Britannica, 2014, & Morrill 2017). The Second Morrill Act of 1890 provided the legal allowance for federal funding to be withheld from any institution that would deny admittance based on race, unless the states provided an institution specifically to serve minority students. “This Act again allowed for the expansion of minorities being admitted into land grant colleges” (Drury, 2003 p. 1). This was a major step toward increased education access for students of all backgrounds.

As a result of the funding increase, and to meet the legislative requirements of the land grant act, additional institutions were developed around the country. William Rainey Harper who served as the president of the University of Chicago, along with Superintendent J. Stanley Brown, of Joliet Township High School founded and created the first junior college (Drudy, 2003). Joliet Junior College in Illinois opened its doors in 1901 with five students and is still in operation today (Joliet Junior College, 2019). Although growth remained slow in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, several external factors contributed to the expansion of the community college network. Cohen and Brawer (1996) stated that the highest profile influences behind the expansion of the local colleges was the need for workers to be trained to operate within expanding industries. The societal viewpoint was that post-secondary schooling was a means of upward mobility and thought to be beneficial to society as a whole. The following sections will cover Post WWII education, the evolution of student Veteran benefits, career re-integration, the modernization of the GI Bill, and an overview of the post 9/11 GI bill.

### **Post WWII and the Public Support of Education**

The post-World War II increase in government support for higher education, led to a large growth in college attendance, and with that, a need for more institutions to serve non-traditional students (Bean & Mertzner, 1985). According to the Veterans Affairs Administration (2012b), the Service Members Readjustment Act passed Congress in 1944, and this legislation created a path to scholarship for returning Veterans and allowed for over 2.2 million Veterans to attend colleges (USDVA, 2012b, & Cohen, 1996). College was not always accessible for those with social and/or economic barriers, many of whom were Veterans. The passing of the GI Bill provided the basis for the social shift that no Veteran should be denied access to higher education due to financial challenges.

In 1946, the Higher Education for American Democracy report, popularly known as the Truman Commission, was released. The report called for the founding of a network of publicly funded community colleges. These schools were to charge little or no tuition, serve as cultural centers for their surrounding neighborhoods, be inclusive in their offerings and do this with an emphasis on community responsibilities where they were located. Community colleges possess a unique ability to respond to the needs of their students, making it an ideal environment for Veterans enrolling in higher education. Work conducted by Monroe (2006) suggests that community colleges are starting points for many non-traditional students, and that more work needs to be done to support the transition between community college and four-year institutions. In his 2006 research Monroe also indicated a need for additional research that is focused on the unique experiences and needs of Veterans.

The Higher Education Act of 1965 encouraged college attendance, marketing education as a benefit to the nation (Bean & Mertzner, 1985), and the open admissions policy of 1970

enacted a non-competitive admissions process that promoted education in underprivileged communities, a change that made education accessible to Veterans living in those neighborhoods (Brock, 2010). Schools that leverage the open admissions policy are primarily junior and community colleges. The availability of open admission institutions increased as a result of the need for affordable tuition and financial aid packages. The American societal norm was shifting, and with it, there was an increase in accommodation for non-traditional students in academia (Bean & Mertzner, 1985), along with hopes that providing more resources for non-traditional students would decrease attrition rates (Brock, 2010). Accommodations like later class times, weekend programs, and courses taught in other locations besides the university allowed for a rise in non-traditional student enrollment. However, while there was a rise in nontraditional student enrollment in college (Bean & Mertzner, 1985), the rate at which they were graduating was much lower than that of traditional college students, leading to the realization that increasing access to higher education does not equate to successful graduation for non-traditional students, including Veterans.

### **The Evolution of Student-Veteran Benefits**

The history and evolution of the GI Bill has been widely summarized and discussed in the literature on Veteran students (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; McGrevey & Kehrer, 2009; Naphan & Elliott, 2015, Warren 2017). During the 75-year span, the GI Bill has seen numerous small revisions, as well as major changes to the eligibility and programs offered. The following is a brief overview of the history of the GI Bill with a focus on the most recent Post-9/11 GI Bill.

The Veterans Bill of Rights, since its conception, has consisted of three main benefits: education (GI Bill), housing (home loan), and income (unemployment insurance). The first key provision included four years of education or training with a payment of up to \$500 per school

year for tuition, fees, books and supplies, plus a monthly allowance to assist with housing. The second benefit provided Veterans with guaranteed loans for a home, farm, and business finance options with no down payment. The third feature was unemployment insurance (UI), which provided Veterans who had served a minimum of 90 days active duty with a weekly \$20 stipend that was allowed for a maximum of one year while Veterans reintegrated and sought out employment (USDVA, 2018b).

### **Career Re-Integration Post WWII**

In World War II, over 16 million Americans were sent to war, leaving careers and education to serve overseas. As a result, Veterans were returning to an economy for which they were unprepared. To assist with addressing this disadvantage, the federal government established an educational benefit that would help change the landscape of higher education in America (Cohen, 1998). On June 4, 1944, Congress signed into law the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, known as the GI Bill of Rights (GI Bill), which enticed over 33% of eligible Veterans to enter higher education to pursue a degree (DiRamio et al., 2008). By 1957, approximately 7.8 million Veterans had used the G.I. Bill, 2.2 million Veterans attended a traditional college, and an additional 5.6 million chose vocational training, such as apprenticeships and training certifications (Bound & Turner 2002). Economical changes paired with the continued benefit utilization in higher education eventually led to programs being redesigned and modernized.

### **Modernization of the GI Bill**

Since its initial implementation in 1944, components of the World War II GI Bill have undergone both minor and major revisions. In 1952, the Veterans' Readjustment Act, often referred to as the "Korean GI Bill," was passed; this legislation made changes to the World War II era law. While the Korean GI Bill also provided unemployment insurance, job placement, and

home loan benefits, additional restrictions were imposed on the education benefit (“GI Bill extended”, 1953). This meant that Veterans under the Korean GI Bill were eligible for a total of 36 months (3 years) of education entitlement, but tuition payments were no longer paid to institutions. Veterans were awarded a monthly subsistence stipend – intended to cover all college expenses – yet, given the varying costs of attendance at different institutions, the GI Bill was no longer covering the complete cost of education for all Veterans who used it due to a tuition cap (USDVA, 2018b).

Following the changes of the Korean Era Montgomery GI Bill, further changes came following the Vietnam War. As a result of the negative public opinions surrounding the Vietnam War, the benefits available to Veterans were limited through an act of Congress. The changes negatively affected over 6 million service members from August 5, 1964, to February 7, 1975 (“GI Bill extended”, 1953). Partly due to the strong anti-war climate in the U.S., Vietnam Veterans experienced increased adjustment problems and isolation. The conclusion of the war left the U.S. in a recession, with a large number of Veterans unemployed. Congress took steps to rectify the benefit cuts in 1966 through the passing of the Veterans’ Readjustment Benefits Act. Based on the post-war US economic state; this adaptation was called the Vietnam GI Bill (USDVA, 2018). Veterans who had been on active duty for more than 180 days were entitled to one-and-a-half months of education benefits for each month of active military service. The Veterans’ Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966 had trained 5.5 million Veterans from 1966 to 1980, educating 76% of eligible Veterans (USDVA, 2018b).

Post-Vietnam, the U.S. returned to an all-volunteer force (AVF), relying only on volunteer enlistments to keep the military ranks filled. Proponents of a legislative change argued that the soldiers drafted into war involuntarily were owed a greater debt by society and therefore

deserved enhanced benefits than those who volunteered for service. To boost recruitment and retain soldiers, the Post-Vietnam Era Veterans' Educational Assistance Act of 1977 was passed. This program, called VEAP, allowed any servicemember to contribute up to \$2,700 to an educational fund. The attraction was that the federal government would match the amount two to one, which resulted in a potential federal match of up to \$5,400 (USDVA, 2019). The GI Bill existed in its Vietnam era state until 2008, when legislation was filed to update and expand the program.

### **The Modern Era GI Bill: Post 9/11**

No major revisions took place to the GI Bill from the Post-Vietnam era version in 1977 until the 2008 iteration of the GI Bill (H.R. 2642, 2008). Under the 2008 revision, educational benefits were enhanced for qualifying Veterans who served on or after, September 11, 2001. This act was coined the "Post 9/11 GI Bill" and included coverage of additional educational expenses, basic allowance for housing, a stipend to cover textbooks and supplies, and the ability to transfer unused benefits to dependents. The Post 9/11 GI Bill will typically provide students equal or up to the amount of the most expensive state school's undergraduate and in-state tuition. An eligible Veteran maintains his/her qualifications to utilize the Post 9/11 GI Bill for up to 15 years after military separation or retirement (USDVA, 2013).

The Post 9/11 GI Bill was developed with the needs of the Veteran students in mind, ensuring financial support for housing, food, tuition, and supplies during the school year. With the GI Bill in effect, and many of the financial aspects of higher education addressed, the graduation and attrition rates for Veteran students did not change substantially as originally believed. Based on data from the National Student Clearinghouse, over 53% of the Veterans enrolled in 2009 took 6 years to complete their bachelor's degree (SVA, 2017). When surveyed,



30 percent of Veteran students cited challenges of managing their commitments such as work and family as their reason for departing their institutions. Of the 250,000 students surveyed, 26 percent reported financial challenges as their reason for dropping out of school.

In August of 2017, the “Forever G.I. Bill” was signed into law, abolishing the expiration date for anyone who left the military after January 1, 2013, as well as restructuring the housing allowance for new GI Bill recipients (USDVA, 2018a). Additional services covered by the post 9/11 GI Bill for eligible individuals include tutoring up to \$100.00 per month, relocation allowance of \$500.00 if a student must move to an urban area to attend school, on the job training and apprenticeships, as well as the Yellow Ribbon Program—a voluntary program that allows a school to waive the remaining tuition and receive a 50% dollar for dollar match (USDVA, 2016).

The GI Bill is intended for Veterans to successfully transition into the civilian job market by attending school full time, while covering the costs of living. The bill offers full tuition to alleviate the debt students face, as well as a monthly housing stipend equivalent to the median military rank in the geographic area with additional allowances for children, along with a stipend for books and supplies. Though the housing allowance and stipend have not grown as fast as the housing costs, they are intended to allow students the opportunity to be full time in school without having to balance full-time employment and face financial challenges (USDVA, 2018b).

The United States has been at war continuously for more than 18 years in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Millions of service members have returned home and transitioned to civilian life from locations around the world. Due to the enhancements to the Post 9/11 GI Bill, there are approximately 773,000 military Veterans and their dependents using benefits to obtain degrees and certificates at various higher education institutions (Shinseki, 2016). This study on Veterans

students and institutional services may contribute to increased graduation rates by considering the unique ways in which their experience varies from other student populations.

### **Changing Social Norms, the Rise of Student Affairs, and the Emergence of Non-Traditional Students**

The roots of the student affairs profession date back to the 1600's when the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, meaning in place of parent was used in colleges and universities (Long, 2012b). Because students were viewed as immature and needing close supervision at colleges and universities, *in loco parentis* provided schools with legal responsibility over their students in a parental sense (Long, 2012b). The creation of the student affairs profession was focused on making sure that students adapted to college, and that the colleges would adapt to the student body. The 19<sup>th</sup> century brought heavy German influence into the American higher education system, with faculty spending less time mentoring undergraduates and instead focusing on graduate education and specialized fields of study (Brubacher & Rudy, 2017). On campuses across the nation, social norms began to shift as well, student began seeking development opportunities to address intellect, spirit, and body. "Literary societies, fraternal organizations, campus publications, sports teams, and debate and student clubs emerged as informal but integral aspects of college and university life" (Long, 2012b, p. 3). This shift in higher education administration began the development of the modern student affairs offices. This section offers a brief history of student affairs and the student-centered model alongside a comparison of traditional and non-traditional students which include Veteran students.

#### **Evolution of Student Affairs**

Functions that we now recognize as standard on modern campuses, including health services, advising, and career placement, were developed as faculty members joined universities throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Positions to serve students were developed based off professional

backgrounds of faculty members, example: when a nurse joined the faculty, the position also served as the contact for health services (ACE, 1983). Brubacher and Rudy reported, “in the years following World War I, the student personnel movement gained national recognition and professional stature” (p. 439). These changing demographics alongside other factors led to the creation of an administrator in higher education whose primary duties were focused on students and their successful college journeys. As the student affairs field developed and continued to grow, an interdisciplinary body of literature and theory emerged to guide administrators in their daily work and professional associations were chartered to support and advocate for student affairs professionals. The American Council on Education’s 1938 publication of the landmark *Student Personnel Point of View report legitimized* the core values and mission of student affairs and highlighted the importance of serving a holistic view of the student body (ACE, 1938).

The 1960’s brought sweeping changes to the university setting through the US Supreme court ruling on Dixon versus the Alabama state board of education (5th Cir. 1961). This ruling along with successive cases changed the relationship of students and their universities. The US Supreme court ruled that at 18 years of age students are legal adults, following cases awarded due process to the student body (5th Cir. 1961). Relationships between students and institutions were viewed in the court decisions as contractual and transactional, meaning that if students paid their tuition and met the school’s requirements, they were entitled to receive degree credentials (5th Cir. 1961, 7th Cir 1978 & Long, 2012b). The 60’s and 70’s brought increased student activism due largely to the political climate surrounding the Vietnam war, the civil rights movement, and the rise of second wave feminism. Student affairs professionals took an active role on campuses managing conflict resolution, interpersonal relations, diversity, and social justice (Long, 2012b, Chambers & Phelps 1993). The student affairs profession continued to

advance through the 1980's and 1990's with much of the theoretical work being focused on student development of the traditional undergraduate population. In addition to the advances of student affairs, the idea of creating a global education community was starting to emerge.

The globalized model of education came to fruition during the late 1990's and into the 2000's focusing on the development of students' multicultural intelligence and current events faced in various parts of the world (Grossman, 2017). This shift from a local focus to a global model brought about a need for student affairs professionals to reevaluate their methods of engagement with students. William Flanagan's Student Life and Retention Model (2006) identified principles that could be used to build an inclusive student affairs program based off of Vincent Tinto's student engagement theory (1987). Flanagan highlighted the importance of time, as it may take years for some students to accomplish integration into academic and social life. When developing policies, programs, and services within the institution, the needs as well as the challenges of the student population must be considered. Administrators must remain flexible and pragmatic in order to meet the fluidity of the student experience, as students may change during the progression toward graduation (McBain et. al., 2012).

### **Student Centered Approach**

The term student-centered refers to a wide variety of programs, experiences, approaches, and support strategies that are intended to address the distinct needs of individual students. Recent findings from Barry, Whiteman, and Wadsworth (2014) identified the need for student affairs officials to invest in the examination of unique issues facing Veteran students. The success of a student-centered model relies on the collaboration of the academic and services departments within the university to enrich and support the students and faculty. When developing services, it is critical for institutions to possess accurate data on the Veteran

population. More than 62% of Veteran students identify as first-generation students; it would be fitting to serve those students by developing additional advising supports to address deficiencies from a lack of academic guidance (Demetriou & Mann, 2012). Fundamental to the success of a student-centered model is the continued partnership between academic and student-service departments to increase the student's connection to their institution. Affiliation to an institution is achieved through a combination of academic supports alongside social integration through the development of meaningful friendships, cultural enrichment, and the availability of appropriate services (Colwell, 2006). When academic and social needs of the Veteran students are met, they are more likely to persist and graduate. Creating meaningful programs using a student-centered approach is key as Veterans reported that they were less likely than non-Veteran students to invest time outside of the classroom on activities not essential to the completion of their program as a result of external factors (ACE, 2015).

Across higher education the standard services offered by colleges and universities for students are admissions, orientation, academic advising, financial aid, and academic support activities. These services are found to be underutilized leading to many schools developing initiatives to guide students to successful completion according to Kleinglass (2005). In 2013 a study at Miami Dade College found that the development of a "roadmap" alongside faculty partnership to monitor student progress increased the rates in which students accessed services (Harrison & Rodriguez-Dehmer, 2013). There are many studies focused on attrition, but these studies lack consideration for the differences between traditional and non-traditional students. In the 1980's there was no comprehensive guiding theory to address attrition of non-traditional students, combined with institutional, curricular, political, economic, and social changes. The need for a separate model to understand the non-traditional population of students gave rise to

Bean and Mentzer's (1985) non-traditional student attrition model (1985). Today there are a variety of education-based models addressing traditional students and non-traditional students, yet the student Veteran population remains under researched (Granger, 2016).

### **Non-Traditional Students**

The majority of the literature uses age and enrollment status to define a traditional and nontraditional student; however, Toynton (2005) suggests that life experiences and prior knowledge are also appropriate criteria. Military and Veteran students are a unique group of nontraditional students primarily due to their experiences being socialized into military culture. The significant differences between Veteran and civilian students is in their socialization. The culture differences between academic settings and the military results in the need for institutions to use an inclusive and accepting approach. By their nature, service members are trained to be emotionally and physically strong, disciplined, able to exceed high expectations, assume leadership positions, and work as a collective which result in increased frustration when adjusting to the individualism of higher education (Vacchi, 2012).

Another major difference after civilian transition is the lack of a proper and official chain of command. A chain of command is the structure of seniors and subordinates within the military and is used across all branches (Conti & Raymond, 2011). The concept of senior and subordinate is not unique to the military and can be found across law enforcement as well, a major difference being that the structure is written and granted by law. This structure provides an increased accountability and a sense of security, and a lack of clear hierarchy may leave Veterans feeling as if they lack direction. A study by Sherry Miller Brown (2002) addressed numerous persistence and attrition patterns and offered a variety of strategies to increase completion rates. Brown suggests developing cultural perspective and communities on campus, establishing

services to meet the variable needs of nontraditional students, and career counseling (2002). By attempting to address each variable set from Bean and Metzner's model, resources that are effective can be developed to lower attrition rates (Brock, 2010; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). A majority of the research on this model indicates a lack of focus on the needs and circumstances of the non-traditional Veteran students.

### **A Lack of Data on the Academic Attrition of Veteran Students**

There has been a lack of accurate data on the academic attrition of Veteran students due to the variety of ways in which students are tracked and coded. National postsecondary databases exclude a portion of the student Veteran population while including other military populations, which makes accurately analyzing postsecondary academic outcomes difficult at best (Sponsier, Wesaw & Jarrat, 2011). Federal level data on student Veterans continues to be challenging to collect, analyze, and interpret because of collection methods, inclusion criteria, and errors in identifying student Veterans in schools (SVA, 2016). School databases do not always properly identify and track Veteran students, and some students choose to not self-identify for a variety of reasons. Challenges with the databases include the inability to differentiate between Veterans, active duty service members, reservists, and dependents (Vacchi, 2012).

### **Veterans in Academic Institutions**

Although Veterans are non-traditional students, they remain a minority within that population. Within the non-traditional student population – which makes up approximately 40% of the national undergraduate student body - Veterans account for about 5% (CLASP, 2018). A typical non-traditional student is determined using a variety of benchmarks including age, enrollment status, and risk for attrition (Wyatt, 2011). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), nontraditional students are identified using the following criteria: (a)

students who waited a year or more following high school to enroll, (b) students who have children, (c) those who work full time or are otherwise financially independent of their care takers, and (d) students who did not receive a traditional high school diploma but instead earned an alternate form of completion such as the General Educational Development Test (GED) as a replacement. The term “Veteran” implies multiple definitions and criteria dependent upon the source; definitions may change from academic, municipal, state, and federal agencies. Student Veterans, like non-traditional students, are more likely to have family and professional responsibilities that may have a negative impact on their ability to pursue and successfully compete their education goals (Langrehr, Phillips, Melville, & Eum, 2015; Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, Liu, 2013). The following section covers Veterans as student parents, mental health for student Veterans, and institutional Veteran friendliness to an understanding of the various challenges that Veterans face in college.

### **Veterans as Student Parents**

Parenthood is central to the college experience for over 4 million students across the U.S. with over 25% of all non-traditional students and nearly 50% of Veteran students are attending college while raising children (Miller & Thorman, 2011; USDVA, 2014). Regionally, within New England about 18% of undergraduate students are parents, yet some postsecondary institutions do not directly address their needs or experiences as student-parents (IWPR, 2013). In the current economy, earning a degree or professional licensure is critical to obtaining adequate employment with sustainable growth opportunities and wages that will allow student debt payments (Gault, Noll, and Reichlin, 2017). For student parents, leaving school without credentials can be detrimental to the welfare of the household.



The Institute for Women's Policy discovered that childcare access on college campuses has been declining, with only 47% of 2-year institutions having a childcare center on campus which shows a 10% decline over 10 years (2013). According to the American Council on education, over 45% of Veterans enrolling in college have dependent children that they are caring for (2013). In a report filed by the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population, it was determined that over 300,000 post-9/11-era Veteran households have a parent who attended “some college” but did not earn a degree. In addition, it was reported that approximately 99,000 of these households have a parent currently enrolled in a post-secondary program (Sherman, Gress-Smith, Straits-Troster, Larsen, & Gewirtz, 2016). Between the years of 2004 and 2012 enrollment of student parents grew almost 10% in public community colleges, four-year institutions had an increase of nearly 20% (IWPR, 2013).

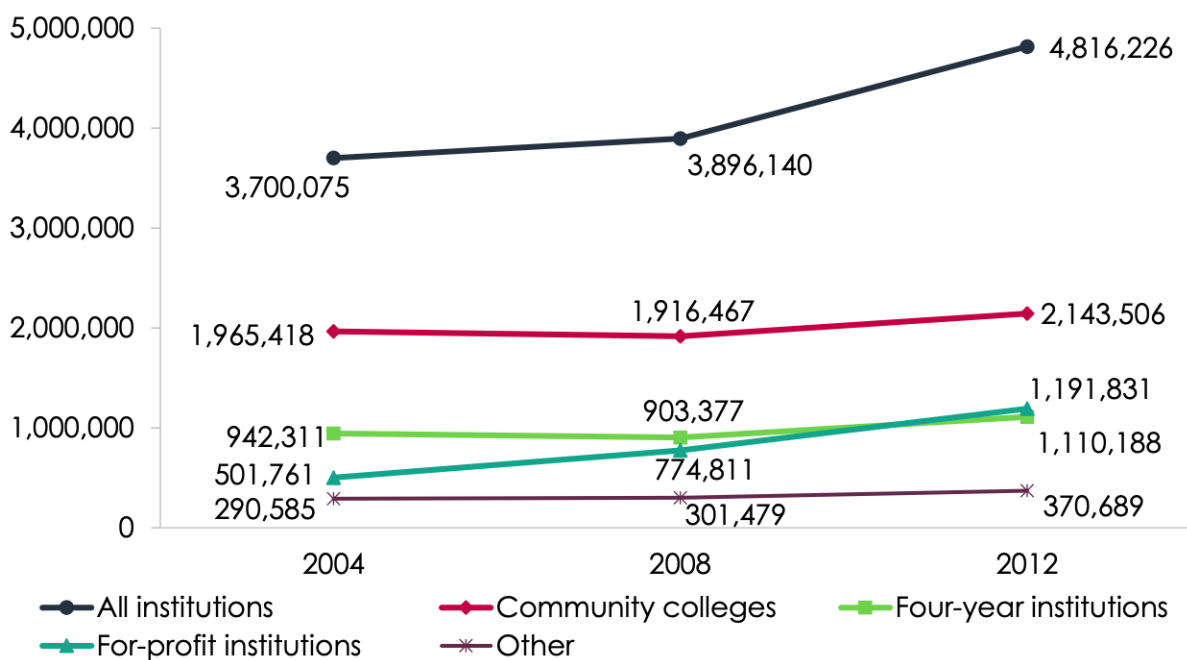


Figure 1, Increase in the Number of Student Parents by Institution type, 2004-2012 Reprinted from Institute for Women's Policy Report: College Students with Children: National and Regional Profiles (p.4)

With the lack of affordable and accessible childcare, it is clear that not only are Veteran student parents seeking post-secondary degrees underserved, so are student parents across higher education. Veterans who are student parents encounter challenges that are different from their civilian counterparts, as well as traditional college students. Over 600,000 post 9/11 families have children under 5 years old; in addition, they may be working full time, and may be managing diagnosed or undiagnosed mental illnesses such as PTSD (Hanson & Woods, 2016, Sherman et al 2016). This mental health component is another critical aspect to consider regarding when developing strategies and programming to benefit Veteran students.

### **Mental Health**

While institutions strive to better serve Veteran students, higher levels of psychological problems paired with difficulty relating to peers leave Veteran students at a higher risk of attrition (DiRamio, Akerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Understanding the mental health challenges for Veteran students further speaks to a primary component that differentiates them within the non-traditional population. Mental health issues are widespread across college campuses, 11% of college students have been diagnosed or treated for a mental health condition (Pedrelli, Myer, Yeung, Zulauf, and Wilens, 2014). A study done on undergraduate student Veterans revealed that between 7% and 8% of student Veterans reported a past suicide attempt, and approximately 35% reported having suicidal thoughts on a day-to-day basis (Borsari et al., 2017). Research indicates a number of reasons that student Veterans may experience increased reported mental health challenges. DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) completed a study with 25 student Veterans and found that Veterans experienced challenges relating with peers and developing relationships, often because of differences in age, outlook, and political views. Mental health conditions are prevalent among combat and non-combat Veterans, and research indicates that

student Veterans have increased manifestations of psychological disorders. As reported by Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan (2011) approximately 35% of student Veterans report severe anxiety, and 24% report severe depression; this is in comparison to the 20% of OEF/OIF Veterans who report mental health issues (Tanielan et al., 2008). Among reported mental health illnesses, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was reported by over 45% of student Veterans surveyed as opposed to 10-18% of Veterans not enrolled in college (Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan 2011). Based on this data it is apparent that institutions must take a more active approach to serving Veterans with mental health conditions.

### **Veteran Friendly Schools**

The continued influx of Veterans in higher education has led to the term “Veteran friendly” becoming a widely used term to identify schools that support this population. “Each year several publications are released that provide their readers lists of colleges and universities judged to be officially ‘Veteran Friendly’ by the publication” (Minnis, 2014, p. 1). These rankings have been released to depict the variety of programs that schools offer and can be used as a navigation tool for potential students to compare schools. It is important to note that the rankings are not always designed using research on resources proven to support Veterans socially or academically but instead are often driven by marketing (Prah, 2014 & Minnis, 2014). Schools with financial means are in a better position to participate in surveys, as well as market to the military population. Although the ‘Veteran friendly’ designation was an effort by institutions and administrators to remove the barriers recognized in previous research such as benefits navigation, application, scheduling flexibility, and course formatting, it is often driven by solely by marketing (Prah, 2014, Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley, & Strong, 2009).

As Veteran enrollments continue to increase, colleges and universities have supported the creation and growth of Student Veterans of America (SVA) organizations to act as an additional service to Veteran students. The SVA is a national organization founded in 2008 with the primary purpose of providing peer-to-peer networks, connecting student Veterans to resources, and advocating on their behalf (Student Veterans of America, 2016). The SVA not only coordinates campus activities for the student Veterans but also provides networking at each student Veteran's specific institution, creating a Veteran friendly environment. SVA's mission is "To provide military veterans with the resources, support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education and following graduation" (SVA, 2017). In addition to independent organizations like SVA supporting Veterans, it is important to leverage the models and theories surrounding attrition to develop institutional initiatives.

### **Theoretical Models of Student Attrition and Departure**

With the first formal academic institutions came student attrition, a continued issue that has plagued researchers and professionals in the post-secondary field. In the literature, the non-continuation of an academic program is called attrition (Johnson, 2012). This concept is not only a financial challenge for schools, but a financial burden on the students who are left with increased debt and no degree following their departure from the institution. Research shows that nontraditional students have an increased rate of attrition during their first year of college when compared to their traditional college student counterparts (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015). Most alarmingly, Veteran students have been reported to have approximately 28.4% of students not completing their programs (SVA, 2017).

Retaining a threshold of students is necessary for an institution to carry out its stated mission. A review of 1,669 colleges and universities by Neal Raisman (2013) revealed a

combined loss of institutional revenue totaling \$16,451,945,426.00, just under 16.5 billion dollars due to students dropping out prior to completion of their programs.

Regarding the cost of student attrition Raisman explained:

The largest single school [in the study] losing \$102,533,338, the smallest single loss being \$10,584, and the average school losing \$9,910,811. The publicly assisted colleges and universities averaged a \$13,267,214 loss from attrition; the average private college or university lost revenue of \$8,331,593; and for-profit schools lost an average of \$7,921,228. (2013 p. 4)

To identify ways to retain students, institutions must first understand more about why they depart post-secondary education. For the purpose of this research, a college drop is defined as a student who enters college but leaves before graduating and never returns to any institution. For the purpose of this research a transfer student is defined as students who have completed at minimum of one credit hour post high school and enter a new institution. Data for transfer students contains gaps due to inconsistency in reporting; while the student may view the transfer as a move of progression in their education, the departing institution may report the student as a drop (NCES, 2014). To properly develop models of attrition and departure focused on Veteran students there is a need to explore who these students are, where they are going, and why they are discontinuing enrollment at the initial institution. The following sections covers Tinto's model of student departure, the benefits of social engagement, and Bean and Metzner's model of non-traditional student attrition.

### **Tinto's Framework: 'Model of Student Departure'**

Based on the anthropological model of cultural rites and passage by Van Gennep (1960) and influenced by William Spady's (1971) research connecting social departure and suicide,

Vincent Tinto introduced his interactionalist retention concept in 1975. Tinto theorized that students who integrate socially into their campus form a greater sense of commitment and therefore are more likely to graduate (Tinto 1975, 1993). Tinto (1999) identified three major reasons for student departure: (1) academic challenges, (2) failure to establish an academic and/or professional path, and (3) failure to socially integrate with the institution. According to Tinto, the process of developing commitment consists of both academic integration as well as social integration, which are complimentary but remain separate domains.

The core of Tinto's (1987) model leveraged the work done by Spady (1971) and Durkheim (1897) on mortality in relation to the concepts of academic and social integration. In Tinto's model, a student who does not achieve some level of academic or social integration is likely to leave school. Academic integration consists of compliance with the implied norms of the collegiate experience, academic standing, following institutional policy, and adhering to the various rules and standards set forth (Davidson & Wilson, 2014). Social integration is successful when an institution's values are aligned with the student's values, backgrounds, and inspirations (Southwell et al. 2018). Interactions with peers, administrators, and faculty have been identified as major factors in successful social integration. Recent research has expanded on Tinto's frameworks to show the need for group-specific services and policies for a variety of student populations, including low income students, adult students, racial minority students, as well as students with unique experiences such as military Veterans (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

**Student Engagement and the Benefits of Social Opportunities.** Despite an increase in enrollments of Veterans in higher education, there has been sparse research focused on identifying which campus services and university personnel are influential in creating

engagement and positive student experiences for this populations (Southwell, Whiteman, MacDermid, & Barry, 2018). Tinto's recommendations to institutions regarding attrition focused around creating academic and intellectual experiences that engaged the students. Offering the students a connection to the values of the institution and creating opportunities for students to socially interact with peers, faculty, and administrators was believed to decrease the likelihood of a student departing prior to graduation.

**Criticisms of Tinto's Model.** Since his initial work in 1973, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1988, 1993) has broadened and expanded upon his initial theory of student departure. In addition, numerous studies have been completed by researchers to further discern the intricacies of the student departure experience. Supplementary studies have been completed by Bean and Metzner (1985) Pascarella (1982, 1985), and, more recently, Braxton (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton, Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000, Hirschy, & McClendon 2004; Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley III, 2008; Braxton, 2019).

Most studies of Tinto's model on integration and departure have been predominantly supportive; however, the model has been disputed with a claim that it is globally flawed and fails to clarify attrition of the majority (Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin, & Bracken, 2000). For example, a study performed in 2000 (Brunsden, et al.) used quantitative methods to assess the features of Tinto's model with 264 students. The researchers tracked the 264 participants' enrollment one year later, taking note of voluntary dropouts, involuntary dropouts and students who continued their tracks. Using statistically validated tests—the Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)—the research team developed its own tool and re-evaluated each participant (Brunsden et al, 2000). The research showed the Tinto model did not fit or explain the data they collected. They did admit,

however, that the study had limitations given that they did not directly assess social or academic integration. An additional study done by the Office of Institutional Retention at Bowling Green State University (2018) found that institutional commitment, grade point average, and social integration were amongst the most important variables effecting the successful graduation of on campus traditional and non-traditional students (Draper, 2002). However, this team of researchers did not find academic integration to be a significant factor in departure from a higher education institution (Draper, 2002).

Pascarella (1982) argued that a majority of research validating Tinto's theory was focused on individual institutions, primarily residential four-year institutions. The study indicated a significant fluctuation of social and academic commitment between institutional types, students at residential schools having more opportunities for involvement compared to the community college and commuter students. Pascarella's research also indicated that social involvement in extracurricular activities had little applicability on the commuter students' persistence. However, like many nontraditional students, Veterans do not typically become involved in campus activities as compared to traditional, on-campus students.

One of the widest known criticisms of Tinto's model is that it is only applicable to the traditional student. In 2002, Alfred Rovai published a paper on the applicability of Tinto's model to the online learning population. His article found, like previous work, that Tinto's model was also not applicable to his population. This model has been shown to not be applicable beyond students who are living on campus, near campus, and who enter university or college directly after leaving school (Rovai, 2002). Regarding non-traditional students, including Veterans who are the focus of this dissertation, Tinto's model alone fails to provide an accurate means to make



sense of their experiences. But overall, his model provides a foundation from which to begin to analyze and interpret potential issues that may arise and lead to increased attrition.

### **Bean and Metzner: ‘Model of Non-Traditional of Student Attrition’**

The non-traditional student attrition model (Bean & Mertzner, 1985) is an attempt at filling in the gap Tinto had left in his student interactionist model. Bean and Metzner (1985) recognized Tinto’s conceptual model was focused solely on traditional students; they then completed an in-depth literature review to develop an understanding of non-traditional student attrition. Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 198, 1993) theory considered both social and academic factors while Bean and Metzner included environmental factors in their model, such as family and employment.

Demographic characteristics like gender, socioeconomic status (SES) and ethnicity, are also addressed within this model, as they are important to the experience of the non-traditional student and differentiate the student from other populations (Bean & Mertzner, 1985). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), a non-traditional student is primarily defined as “being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying post-secondary enrollment, attending school part time, and being employed full time” (p.1). Non-traditional students are also defined as having less interaction with faculty and staff and are less likely influenced by the social environment of the institution and are more interested in what the institution can offer them academically: job prospects, courses, degrees, certifications, etc. (Bean & Mertzner, 1985). Bean and Mertzner (1985) also operationalize dropout as being any student who enrolls at an institution one semester but does not enroll the next and has not completed their program of study.

**Bean and Metzner's Four Primary Academic Outcome Variables.** The model suggests that dropout decisions are based primarily on four sets of variables: academic performance, background and defining variables, intent [to leave] influenced by psychological outcomes, and environmental variables (Bean & Mertzner, 1985). Academic performance includes grade-point average (GPA), study habits, and academic advising. Background and defining variables refer to previous performance in educational settings and educational goals, such as degree completion, while also considering enrollment status (full-time versus part-time), residence status (on-campus versus commuter), ethnicity, and gender. Environment speaks to finances, hours of employment, family responsibilities, outside encouragement, and opportunity to transfer. These four sets of variables have a direct effect on dropout rate, but the variables also have interaction effects between each other, ultimately playing a role in increasing or decreasing likelihood of dropout/attrition (Bean & Mertzner, 1985).

This model effectively describes how behavioral intentions are shaped by processes whereby beliefs shape attitudes, and attitudes, in turn, influence behavioral intent. This acknowledges outside factors that play a major role in affecting both attitudes and decisions (Cabrera et al., 1993). This model is increasingly important due to societal history and social change, and both Bean and Metzner's 1985 model and Tinto's 1975 student interactionist model play a role in better understanding the area of student persistence. These theories attempt to reveal not only why a student may choose to dropout, but how to take those factors and create strategies for increasing completion rates in various student populations (Cabrera et al., 1993). Tinto identifies the main predictive factor as the level of integration a student has achieved in the social and institutional context, and while there is some empirical support to suggest this model works to understand attrition, it was created in the mold of the traditional student: high school

graduates straight to a four-year university, age 18-24, full-time, on campus (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

From the development of the non-traditional student attrition model (Bean & Mertzner, 1985), much work has been completed to understand its importance and validity. Two years after publishing this model, Mertzner and Bean published an empirical study using their model to attempt to show its efficacy and effectiveness within non-traditional populations (1987). The researchers suggest that many other models are based on socialization, and their theory indicates that dropout decisions for nontraditional students are based on the four sets of variables: academic performance, background and defining variables, intent, and environmental variables. (Bean & Mertzner, 1985). While the researchers did find empirical support for their model, they believed that it still needed to be researched further and broken down by type of non-traditional student, for example: Veterans, commuter, older than 24, or part-time (Bean & Mertzner, 1987). Since then, this model has been used most often to understand adult learners and transfer students.

### **Summary**

There have been numerous policy and program shifts throughout the evolution of educational benefits for Veterans. The enrollment of military-affiliated students has continued to increase; these Veterans have some shared and some unique characteristics, making this population challenging to serve. Research continues to show that Veteran nontraditional students have an increased rate of attrition during their first year of college, compared to traditional aged counterparts (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015). Institutional supports have been shown to reduce the dropout rates in both civilian and Veteran student populations (Colwell, 2006; Flanagan, 2016; Barry, Whiteman, &

Wadsworth, 2014). Until 1985, there had been no guiding theory to address attrition of non-traditional students; from this came a need for a separate model to understand other populations, leading to Bean and Metzner's (1985) non-traditional student attrition model.

A common theme through the literature is the ability of students to have a genuine connection to their institution via engagement, believed to lead to a positive outcome for those students, as well as the institution. Collectively, these theories present a framework to address traditional students, however, there continues to be a lack of research focused on the undergraduate Veteran student population. Research exists that supports focused services to better advise students on their path to graduation, yet the literature also reinforces the need for Veterans to have additional assistance in navigating the transition into the classroom (Barry et al., 2014; Kleinglass, 2005; Vacchi, 2012; Zarecky, 2014). Parenthood is a central part of the experience for over 4 million college students across the United States, currently there is no theory or model addressing this subset of adult learners (Miller & Thorman, 2011). Veteran college students are parents at over twice the rate of civilian nontraditional students, the VA had indicated continued growth in enrollment of this population (USDVA, 2014, Sherman et. al 2016). There remains a dearth of knowledge surrounding what specific services should be targeted to best serve Veteran populations as well as how to support student parents. Through the perspectives of Veteran student parents, this study aims to add to the existing literature on undergraduate student Veterans, institutional services, persistence, and student parents to support the increase of Veteran graduation rates.

## **CHAPTER 3: DESIGN AND METHOD**

### **Introduction**

Chapter two reviewed of the body of literature used to design and guide this dissertation study. Chapter three provides a comprehensive description of the design and execution of this research. Specifically, this chapter will address the rationale of method selection, participant recruitment, the design of the interview protocol, data collection, analysis process, and issues of trustworthiness.

### **Overview and Rationale for Method Selection**

Qualitative research methods were used to examine the following research question: What role(s) do students report that institutions play in the successful completion of bachelor's degrees and what services, if any, do Veteran students report contributed to their degree completion? A narrative approach was used to make sense of participant data. This allowed for a full engagement in exploratory inquiry which allows the participants to tell and form their own stories (Alpine, 2016).

The narrative design is a qualitative method used to deliver an understanding of the lived experience of a person or group (Creswell, 2014), in this case, Veteran students. Creswell states, "Narrative research originated from literature, history, anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and education, and yet different fields have adopted their own approaches" (p. 67). The roots of narrative research have extended across numerous disciplines and schools of thought, including postmodernism, social construction, constructivism, and feminist inquiry (Heckman, 1997 & Krosnell 2005). Heynick and Tymsta (1993) provided five reasons to use qualitative methods when completing academic inquiry:

1. In the first stage of research, qualitative techniques are often applied in order to explore the subject of research: variables are identified, and provisional hypotheses are formulated.
2. Qualitative research is pre-eminently appropriate if one is interested in the respondents' own interpretation and wording with respect to their behavior, their motives, emotions and experiences in the past and the present.
3. Qualitative interviews are also appropriate, in the case of delicate topics or situations that are very emotional for the respondent.
4. Qualitative research is also indicated when a research group is so small, that quantification does not make sense.
5. Practical considerations may also lead to the preference for qualitative research methods (p. 301)

Narrative research is one of the five foundational approaches to qualitative inquiry, focused on a chain of experiences and how they are woven into a participant's narrative (Creswell, 2014). The focus is not only on the experience of the participating Veteran, but in the ways that students value the interactions they report. Polkinghorne (1995) categorizes narrative inquiry into two distinct components: "analysis of narratives" (explanatory) and "narrative analysis" (descriptive). For the purposes of this research, I have aligned my methodology with Polkinghorne's (1995) "analysis of narratives" which, "[uses] paradigm thinking to create descriptions of themes that hold across stories or taxonomies of types of stories" (p. 54). Using an analysis of narratives, this research was designed to understand and identify key retention

factors and events to identify the interactions that are most important and how they have impacted the students' retention. A semi structured interview approach was leveraged to allow the Veteran participants to use their own words when describing specific obstacles and challenges. Participants each articulated unique connection to their respective institutions; whether through the classroom environment, participation in extra-curricular activities, and/or interactions with staff and faculty.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

This dissertation makes use of Tinto's (1993) model of student departure, in conjunction with Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of student attrition. There are limited theories and models to describe and identify the learning differences of Veteran students versus their civilian peers in a higher education setting. For example, for traditional aged students, high academic achievement has been found to influence baccalaureate graduation rates (Adelman, 1999); however, there is no indication of this throughout the limited Veteran's literature associated with higher education.

A common theme through the theoretical frameworks is that the ability for students to have a genuine connection to their institution via a variety of engagement options leads to a positive outcome for those students as well as the institution. Collectively, these theories indicate that there are few retention theories about Veteran students; this segment of this population is missing in the literature. Through the perspectives of Veteran students, this study aims to add to the existing literature on undergraduate student Veterans, institutional services, persistence, and student attrition. The chosen theories are illuminated through the use of narrative inquiry which will be discussed in the following sections.

**Tinto's Framework: 'Model of Student Departure**

In 1975, Vincent Tinto's student integration model shifted the academic research focus to a modern view of traditional undergraduate student retention and attrition. The model suggests that students who are able to integrate into the campus community (e.g. academic clubs, student organizations, and intramural sports) increase their connection to the school and are more likely to successfully graduate (Tinto, 1975). Considering the vast landscape of institutional services and Veteran-specific resources, narrative inquiry allowed participants to describe the unique offerings within their individual institutions. This method also allows for the exploration and analysis of diverse institutional student-driven services and how they are leveraged to impact student experiences on campus.

While Tinto's (1993) model of student departure is based on traditional aged students, he was also able to identify numerous factors that influence the overall student retention at an institution. A core belief of Tinto's theory of student retention is that there are institutional factors, such as faculty and staff interactions and relationships, that play a key role in students' academic success. Historically the focus of an institution has been to ensure quality instruction and curriculum which is evident in some of the participant stories; however, additional research has identified a connection between the academic learning process and social engagement that takes place in a college setting (Tinto, 1993).

Research has determined that a high number of military Veterans have reported feeling isolated from their peers on campus and uncomfortable in social and academic situations with traditional aged students- (Cook, Francis & Kraus, 2012, p. 11; Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009, p. 8). In Tinto's research, the students' perceptions of supportiveness within their schools influenced their graduation or attrition; students, in their own words, were able



to describe significant interactions during their matriculation. Tinto (1993) argues that the roots of an individual's departure from higher education may be related to both academic and social factors within the institution, which is supported through the perceptions described in the participants narratives.

### **Bean and Metzner: 'Model of Non-Traditional of Student Attrition'**

Bean and Metzner (1985) identified a gap within the literature, which led to the development of the model of student attrition designed to better understand the increase in nontraditional student enrollments, as well as provide a definition to describe a nontraditional undergraduate student. The model is focused on three areas believed to influence student persistence or attrition: academic performance, social-psychological influences, and environmental factors. Unlike the models developed using the traditional undergraduate population, Bean and Metzner's model (1985) stipulates that nontraditional students are primarily affected by environmental factors and other external responsibilities. Through narrative inquiry, Bean and Metzners (1985) theory of student attrition is highlighted by the individualized stories and experiences of the participants.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) model also highlight challenges and obstacles nontraditional students face. For students balancing numerous outside obligations, the classroom may be the only connection held to an institution. The central idea is that the levels of social and academic integration are predictors of a student's success. Studies have found that adult students who reported receiving greater support from faculty and advisors were more likely to persist through their programs and graduate successfully (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Shelton, 2003).

### **Recruitment and Participants**

To recruit participants, an initial email was sent that contained an overview of the research goals, the criteria for participation, as well as contact information for the researcher. The emails were distributed to the faculty advisors and chapter presidents of the Student Veterans of America (SVA) as well as the Massachusetts Veteran services network. The goal was to inform each service provider so that they could serve as a source of referral if they were to come across eligible candidates. The SVA organization is an international non-profit coalition of campus-based student groups offering advocacy, scholarships, and leadership trainings (SVA, 2016). This method of recruitment was chosen for the access to alumni across the state.

To be eligible to participate in the study, all participants had to meet the following criteria

- (a) the student must have used the Post 9/11 GI bill;
- (b) attended school full-time in Massachusetts (12 Credits or More);
- (c) completed his or her bachelor's degree between the years of 2016-2018; and
- (d) be currently residing in Massachusetts.

During an initial screening, potential candidates spoke to the researcher and answered a series of questions pertaining to the above criteria to ensure they are eligible to participate. Participants were asked if they would be interested in participating in the study. If all criteria were met and the participants were interested in continuing their participation, a digital version of the informed consent was provided for their review, and an in-depth interview was scheduled. The interview was intended to allow participants to share their experiences with their undergraduate institutions and focused on several key areas, including personal responsibilities, social and academic interactions, and benefit availability.

### **Interview Consent Procedures**

At the beginning of the interviews, each participant was provided with an informed consent to review and sign – with a copy provided to them (Appendix C). This consent provided participants with assurance that their identity would remain protected, their institution would remain confidential, and that they may withdraw from this study at any time with no repercussion. A verbal reconfirmation was completed to remind the participants that there were no incentives associated with this doctoral study.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of the initial 15 participants of this study, participants who were also parents are marked with an asterisk. In analyzing the overarching themes, numerous commonalities reported by the participants involved their unique challenges as parents. As these patterns continued to emerge, along with the lack of literature on this growing population, I decided to focus this study on the subset of participants who were also student parents. The experiences and challenges of the student Veteran parents are unique and not well represented within academic research or theoretical models which led to the decision to limit the data analysis to focus on the 6 student parents.

Table 2 *Participant Details*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Military Affiliation</b>	<b>Graduation Year</b>
<b>Regina *</b>	28	Female	U.S. Army	2016
<b>Veronica</b>	35	Female	U.S. Army	2016
<b>David *</b>	31	Male	U.S. Navy	2017
<b>Lynda</b>	57	Female	U.S. Army	2016
<b>Madeline *</b>	42	Female	U.S. US Army	2016
<b>James</b>	40	Male	U.S. Army	2018
<b>Amal</b>	45	Female	U.S. Air Force	2016
<b>Charles</b>	30	Male	U.S. Navy	2016
<b>Duncan *</b>	38	Male	U.S. Air Force	2016
<b>Bob</b>	46	Male	U.S. Air Force	2017
<b>Michael</b>	30	Male	U.S. Navy	2017
<b>Alice *</b>	35	Female	U.S. Marine Corp	2018
<b>Fred</b>	28	Male	U.S. Coast Guard	2016
<b>Rita *</b>	35	Female	U.S. Coast Guard	2018
<b>Joshua</b>	42	Male	U.S. Navy	2017

### **Development of the Instrument**

Creswell (2014) states that, “narrative stories are gathered through many different forms of data, such as interviews that may be the primary form of data collection, but also through observations, documents, pictures, and other sources of qualitative data” (p. 69). For the

purposes of this dissertation, I utilized interviews for data collection, specifically semi-structured interviews. Galletta (2012) states,

The semi-structured interview, valued for its accommodation to range of research goals, typically reflects variation in its use of questions, prompts, and accompanying tools and resources to draw the participant more fully into the topic under study. Semi-structured interviews incorporate both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions, eliciting data grounded in the experience of the participant as well as data guided by existing constructs in the particular discipline within one is conducting research (p. 45).

As mentioned in the previous section, participants were recruited using a combination of referrals from Student Veterans of America alumni and the Massachusetts Veteran Services network. As seen in the interview protocol (Appendix F), the questions were outlined and organized to provide for a smooth flow of interviewing, as well as fluidity to allow the participants to share their experiences. During the construction of the interview protocol, a structure was maintained in order to ensure the interview was on topic yet remained unguided. Both the flow and content of the questions have been structured to provide deeper insight into who the participant is, what their journey has looked like continuing into education, and what other Veterans could learn from their experience. Each participant was asked foundational questions (e.g. Tell me about yourself) which allowed participants to share, in their own words, background and details about themselves while creating a rapport and establishing trust. Additionally, the following questions were geared towards their academic and social experiences (e.g. Who or what do you feel supported your educational goals?) which allowed me to understand their individualized experiences. Finally, the last few questions provided an

opportunity for closure and final insights from the participant, (e.g. If you were able to give advice to school faculty on how to better support you, what would that be?).

The design of the questions was derived through a combination of Tinto's (1993) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) theories to demonstrate the application of these concepts within the student Veteran population. The flexibility of the questions allowed for the participants to build upon each question to expand their stories, allowing for a better understanding of the significance of the theories. The instrument was piloted with three participants who were not post 9/11 era Veterans but were military-affiliated students within higher education. Testing the interview protocol allowed for students to provide feedback regarding the clarity of my inquiry, as well as the time scheduled for each of the interviews. During the pilot interviews, I realized that the wording of some of the initial questions caused confusion for the participants and resulted in responses about the Veterans Affairs Administration and not within higher education institutions as intended. Based on the pilot responses, I chose to probe the participants further when they provided their answers and continued to ask for clarity relating to their experiences in college. This allowed me to keep the questionnaire unchanged but provide participants enough information to accurately describe the interactions and experiences at the core of this study. The initial pilot interviews were scheduled for 70 minutes, one hour for the interview and 10 minutes for follow-up questions. The Initial questions and discussion went longer than the allotted time. As a result of the pilot interviews, participants were asked to a lot two hours be engaged in the interview process.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

At the start of each interview, participants were provided with a physical copy of the informed consent for review and signature. Once the consent form was signed, a copy was

provided to each participant and confidentiality was reiterated. Each interviewee was reminded that they reserved the right to stop the interview at any time and remove themselves from the study. Once understanding was confirmed, the interview process moved forward. Each interview began with an open-ended question, “tell me a little about yourself.” The use of open-ended questions allowed the conversation to open and provide a better understanding of each participants background.

Interviews were held in various locations chosen by the participant, with the majority held in private study rooms at local public libraries. I allowed the participants to choose the locations because I felt that this was necessary in achieving comfort for the participant to speak freely about their experiences. Interviews lasted approximately 75 minutes, including time for follow-up questions at the conclusion of the interview, with some going longer. Interviews were each recorded using an iPhone audio app, with the participants’ consent, to provide for an ease of transcription and analysis. The data was saved only to the physical device, ensuring that the only access would be with the researcher’s fingerprint and face ID. Following the interviews, participants were once again reminded of the purpose of the study, the privacy, and also how the data collected would be maintained and subsequently destroyed after a specified period of time.

At the conclusion of each interview, after the recording ended, the participants were offered the chance to read through my notes to ensure accuracy. Offers were also extended to my participants to listen to the recording of the interview prior to the transcription process.

Participants 2 and 11 choose to listen to the recordings and were able to offer correction and clarity on their responses. This was done to ensure full transparency and mutual respect between the participant and researcher. Following the interviews, the researcher listened to the recording in preparation for transcription. In places where the audio was muddy, or additional clarification

was needed, the participants were contacted to make sense of the missing or inaudible content. The audio data was stored in a password-secured digital folder for 60 days after the transcription. The audio interviews were transcribed in verbatim style, ensuring that each spoken word, laugh, emotion, background noise, and mumble are transcribed and time coded. All additional data was secured using password-protected files on the researcher's computer which is kept locked via fingerprint technology and maintained for five years.

### **Data Analysis Process**

Following the interview transcription, I employed Saldaña's (2009, 2016) In Vivo methods for coding and memo writing to analyze the interview data. The Saldana method is used across many areas of qualitative research and ideal for maintaining the voices of the participants within the data collected. I engaged in reflective memo writing immediately following each interview to capture any details that would aid in establishing validity. Files were uploaded to the secure web-based software, NVivo, which is used for qualitative and mixed methods data management.

I utilized Saldana's (2009, 2016) In Vivo method to complete the first cycle of coding, which entails assigning a code to a section of data that stems from the participants' own words. As a first step, I used In Vivo coding to allow me to use the participants' language to develop the codes, and ensure their perspectives remain authentic. At the completion of the first coding cycle, I returned to my memos, adding additional entries reflecting on the coding process – identifying key words and comparing my initial memos for additional meaning or feelings. Saldana (2013) states, “a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 12). Leveraging the words of the participants



ensures the codes were clear and reflective of the experiences they described. Finding myself with over 125 individual codes, I began the second cycle of coding, pattern coding to condense and develop themes.

### **Identifying Patterns in Participant Experiences**

Second cycle coding was focused on identifying patterns – similarities, differences, and frequency across the 15 participants. Research and coding memos were again used to make notes identifying the coding structure and coding rationale. My repetitive coding cycles helped me recognize and build themes to answer my main research question. Saldana (2013) stated, “the primary goal during the Second Cycle coding, if needed, is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of First Cycle codes” (p. 149). When considering the options for second cycle coding methods, I chose to move forward with Pattern Coding, primarily because my research sought to identify commonalities across numerous participants. I noticed that there was an abundance of codes within six of the participants’ accounts and the commonality that each of them had a dependent child during their post-secondary studies, sample of the codes can be found in appendix F. After first and second cycle coding were completed and the categories identified, I began to determine a series of themes that represented the constitution of the accounts. Within the participant pool, it became clear that for the six individuals who were also parents, distinct patterns were identified, it was at this point that the decision to delimitate the participant data was made. Through this analysis, I continued to write memos, making additional notes on how I determined codes, identifying the rationale, as well as their importance towards answering my research questions pertaining to the six participants.

Once the transcripts were successfully coded and the themes identified, a secondary reading was completed of the memos to strengthen my analysis. The use of memos proved crucial in the understanding of the data and the assurance of validity. Various themes emerged through the coding and analysis of the transcripts; I then considered the overarching themes and analytical memos alongside each other to begin constructing the findings. My focus remained on the exploratory nature of the narrative approach, aiming to maintain the integrity of the stories of my participants. In analyzing the overarching themes, a commonality that was reported by the participants was feeling that their roles as parents were not addressed or considered by their institutions. As these patterns continued to emerge, along with the lack of literature on this growing population, I decided to focus this study on the subset of participants who were also student parents. As a result, non-parent participants were excluded from this analysis and the presentation of the findings. Stories shared by the participants were intimate and the participants willingness to share their vulnerability provided an opportunity to expand knowledge where the literature was previously lacking. The data collected from the removed non-parent participant interviews has been securely archived and will be maintained for future research articles as stated in the informed consent in Appendix C.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

For qualitative research to be considered valid it must be determined to be credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable. The nature of qualitative data makes it impossible for a researcher to separate oneself from the data. The design of the questions was derived through a combination of Tinto's (1993) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) theories to demonstrate the application of these concepts within the student Veteran population. The flexibility of the questions allowed for the participants to build upon each question to expand their stories,

allowing for a better understanding of the significance of the theories. The order of the questions was evaluated by the Lesley University Doctoral committee and discussed to prevent question-order bias during the interviews. Steps were taken however, to try to maintain objectivity and avoid bias during the design, collection, and analysis of this dissertation study. In order to remove bias from this research all interviews were transcribed, and the resulting narratives were returned to the participants for review and clarification to ensure that the story that was told was the one they intended.

The instrument was piloted with three participants who were military-affiliated students that did not meet the GI Bill requirement. Testing the interview protocol allowed for students to provide feedback regarding the clarity of my inquiry, as well allot for time to discuss the context of the questions. During the data analysis phase, after the transcripts were completed each participant was given a narrative summary of the interview. Participants were given 10 days to review and if they felt it was necessary, they could clarify, edit, or expand upon the content. This was done to ensure that my interpretation was in line and representative of their described experiences.

### **Summary**

I have focused my presentation of findings on allowing the participant responses to tell the stories of the Veterans I interviewed. This chapter has focused on the method and design of the research study. The next chapter focuses on the presentation of data, presentation of analysis, and a theoretical analysis of the findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the nature of experiences that contribute to the successful completion of a bachelor's degree by Veteran student parents utilizing the Post 9/11 GI Bill in order to provide information to best inform higher education practices. This chapter focuses on presenting the findings from the interviews of six military Veteran student parents that utilized the Post 9/11 GI Bill to complete an undergraduate degree. The chapter presents the participants' personal experiences through their individual voices; the goal was to assure that all stories and accounts remained intact, and that the analysis was based on an accurate reporting of the retelling of their experiences.

As indicated in Chapter 3, the results of the study were acquired through the analysis of the transcripts of interviews with each of the participants. During first cycle coding, there was a clear prevalence of quotes speaking to students' feeling lost with navigating benefits, noting a lack of readily available resources for non-traditional students, and feeling uncomfortable in the traditional classroom. Upon completion of the second cycle coding, it was evident that some of these identifiers were representative of larger categories such as "university services targeting traditional students" or "campus inclusivity." The results were derived from the use of semi-structured interviewing, allowing the participants to guide the conversation and retelling of their experiences. The analysis will show topics concerning support, identity, relationships and adaptability informed the process of arriving at the findings of the study.

Chapter 4 is organized into three sections: narratives of participants' individual testimonies, discussion of the narratives through emerging themes and patterns and a theoretical discussion. In Part I, I provide each individual's story that was reported through the interview

process including details elicited by questions from the interview protocol. These sections are indicated by the title “narrative” to begin the retelling of their story. Woven into the stories constructed from the participants’ interviews are descriptions of behaviors and nonverbal cues acquired from the notes taken during the interviews. Additionally, as the focus of my study is on the narratives of these students, an essential part of the analysis process involves the researcher providing an understanding and interpretation of their accounts prior to delving into the themes and meaning made from the analysis. This section under Part I is indicated by the title, “Researcher Reflection,” immediately following each participant’s narrative.

In Part II, I explain the codes used in the analysis process and the themes that emerged from my inquiry of how these individuals narrate their experiences. This portion of the chapter provides a deeper understanding of the collective and distinct voices of the participants. It showcases the cross-cutting thematic patterns found throughout the various narratives. This section derives details, quotes, and wording from the narratives found in Part I. Additionally, Part II delves into specifics of how the four themes were developed and their corresponding patterned codes. In Part III, I discuss the theoretical analysis of the participant narratives.

### **Part I: Presentation of Data Collected**

Below are the individual stories constructed from how the six Veteran student parent participants presented and described their experiences. This study focuses on a specific subset of the initial participant population as a result of the compelling similarities across their challenges and triumphs. This section is an analysis of those six transcripts, which used the interview protocol from Appendix C. Each participant is designated by a self-chosen pseudonym to protect their identities; children and spouses were assigned a pseudonym during transcription. Although their specific experiences varied from one to another, there were similar themes that emerged

from their narratives. A total of 15 Veterans were interviewed as part of this study; however, after analysis all non-parent student participants were eliminated. In order to better understand the research findings and the discussion that will unfold, it is most important to get a sense of who each participant is. The following section consists of the participants' narrative, including background information and direct quotations, along with researcher reflections, which were constructed through the use of reflective memos.

### **Regina**

*Regina is a US Army Veteran who graduated in 2016 with a bachelor's degree in psychology, from a public four-year institution. Regina is a single mother to Jake and working in the education field as an administrative assistant.*

**Narrative.** Regina served in the US Army from 2001-2006, completing three overseas deployments and two in combat zones. Regina mentioned that she was born in Western Massachusetts and raised by her mother who had not completed high school. Regina's father left when she was four years old and offered no support to the household. Her mother worked two jobs, sometimes three, to provide for Regina and her younger brother. The family could be considered a poor working family, which sometimes struggled with frequent hunger and potential homelessness. Regina understood the importance of education and steady employment at a very young age. She stated that the "poverty cycle" in her family was the reason she enlisted in the Army, and while in the service, she had an income, medical care, and access to housing, as well as GI Bill eligibility once her contract was complete. Regina wanted to take care of her mother: "I watched her struggle; she was sad and stressed all the time; when we had no food, she would go hungry... I knew that if I could take the burden off her, she would be so much happier, and she deserved it for all she did for us."

Once Regina graduated high school and enlisted in the Army, she was stationed in South Carolina, and her mother joined her there. Regina went on to explain that the basic housing allowance she was given along with her regular pay was enough to cover a one-bedroom apartment that they shared throughout her enlistment. During the final months of Regina's contract, she became pregnant with her son [Jake]. They then moved back to Massachusetts when her enlistment was over, and three generations shared a one-bedroom apartment. Regina stated that they were struggling financially. Her mother was not able to find suitable employment and the cost of living was much higher than in South Carolina. Regina enrolled in a public four-year institution in Massachusetts when her son was five years old. Regina stated that her motivation came primarily from her son, wanting to offer him a better living situation.

With no high school credentials and no experience with higher education, Regina's mother was unable to advise and guide her daughter through the college application process. Regina described her enrollment and application procedure as "simple and streamlined." She stated, "the website provided a full checklist of each step to applying and getting my GI Bill benefits squared away; it was great." It took a few weeks to get a response from the admissions office regarding her application status, but then on a Friday afternoon, she received the email. Describing the moment, Regina smiled and looked down, and provided, "I wanted to scream, no one in my family had gone to college and I was accepted!" Her first call was to her mother and son. She teared up as she described that later that evening, they celebrated with dinner at a local pizza place—a luxury that did not often happen.

Regina acknowledged that, after being accepted to the university, she became anxious about the prospect of balancing her family, work, and school. "My sons needs are first, and I need to keep my job, school is important but not the first priority for me." By the conclusion of

the Fall 2012 semester, Regina's mother had enrolled at the local community college to complete her GED and Regina's son was happily enthralled in the excitement of first grade. After school, all three generations would set portable tv dinner tables in the living room area and study together. "You would have laughed! Three of us sitting side-by-side in the parlor with our little tables. Me, Jake, and my mom... like an old little red schoolhouse." Both adults-maintained part-time employment and engaged in school while sharing the responsibilities of caring for Jake and the household. Regina described those four years as being the hardest and most rewarding to date: "I was a role model for Jake and my mom... what an honor it is to accomplish something that encourages your parent to make a life changing decision like returning to school. I am as proud of her as she is of me." As a college student, Regina stated that she had many positive experiences and supports over her four years. The institution had a Veteran center on the main campus which she explained had a great impact on her academic and social success. "When I had a bad day or I didn't understand an assignment, I would go to the center; [the director] would work with me until I felt ok."

Having other Veterans to connect with made her feel connected to something larger than herself. Although she did not flaunt her Veteran status, she felt a connection to those who also served. Regina communicated that she felt very strongly about trying to fit in with her classmates, and she actively avoided discussion of her military service with anyone outside of the Veteran center. She explained the following: "female Veterans are the new trend. We are treated like a dog and pony show." Regina recounted an admissions event where she mentioned her Army service and immediately felt as if the entire conversation was fixed on her. It triggered her anxiety and she had been very hesitant to discuss her service in that atmosphere. Regina shared her desire to maintain a student identity separate from her Veteran identity when on



campus. “I just want to blend in and do my work like everyone else.” In a distraught tone, she described her PTSD symptoms and stated that if she wanted to talk about her military history, she has other Veterans to do that with, people who would not judge and could relate to her. She described days of high agitation, anxiety, absent mindedness, and general feelings of panic, feelings that she did not feel comfortable sharing with her classmates.

The faculty and staff were primarily supportive of Regina and often offered additional assistance or extensions when needed. “When my PTSD would kick up in high stress times, they were very understanding.” At the conclusion of her program, the school issued specific Veteran stoles with their graduation regalia, which Regina described as “a very tasteful way to honor our service.” Regina spoke openly and positively about the friends and connections she made both in and out of the classroom. The Veteran lounge provided a space and opportunity for Regina to connect with other Veterans as well as resources, when she needed emergency oil or food in the winter months, she knew she had a network to rely on. She reported with great pride that she successfully graduated with a 3.8 GPA and credited it to her “cheerleaders” that made sure she kept pushing even when she was ready to walk away.

There were some instances that Regina reported that had negative effects on her student experience. A particular instance that she described was during a sociology course in her junior year where she had to complete a group assignment with three of her peers. “We had five weeks to complete the project and each of us took a piece and agreed to reconnect in a week, but they never did their share of the work.” Regina met with the professor after week three, feeling very stressed and overwhelmed. She was met with aloof and short responses that centered around her need to “figure it out” as the group work was part of the process. She described her day-to-day schedule between work and school. She looked down and articulated the following: “I am an

adult, I have a child, I didn't want special treatment but to be expected to neglect my REAL life for a project that no one was helping with is not right. I was angry and resentful of the group and the professor, I ended up turning the project in myself, with only my name after chasing them down for 5 weeks and getting nothing but excuses." Regina reported that this class created an "enormous" amount of stress: "I didn't even need it for my program. I took it because it was the only class that I could fit in my schedule and maintain full-time classes. I couldn't have my housing allowance pro-rated." Regina recounted the following as items she would have liked to see as changes at her alma matter (*bulleted quotes are used to represent participant recommendations*):

- "Curriculum should be adjusted for adults, we do not have the time to work around the schedules of teenagers, I had a job and my son who took precedent and they did not have to manage nearly as much... The class schedules were very difficult to manage, either you needed to be on campus all 5 days which did not work for me, or you were here two or three days but for very long days, it was very difficult to manage and get the credits I needed."

**Researcher reflection.** As evident in the preceding story, Regina has been enthusiastic about education since a young age and she was delighted to share her story and experiences. Even as we were in the depths of the interview, based on her body language, facial expressions, and vocal cues, it was apparent that she was open and willing to share her story. Especially as she spoke about her family, you could see her entire demeanor brighten as she recalled their late nights doing homework together and the impact that had on the entire household. Regina's choice of words, exuberant tone and non-verbal communication all indicated that she had, and still has, a close relationship with both her son and mother. After examining Regina's narrative,

it can be seen that she spoke in great lengths about the importance of her support systems. Even prior to the direct questions regarding social supports and family involvement, she touched upon the significant contribution of those networks. Her focus on family and the role they played in her decision to enlist and return to college following her contract are evident throughout the narrative.

When considering the institutional services within this narrative, Regina spoke at length about her utilization of the campus resources. As said earlier in her narrative, Regina was an academic-focused student, with no family history of higher education. She entered college with no prior desire or forethought of connecting with other Veterans or the role of the University in her success outside of the classroom. Her perceived role of the University was solely transactional, a notion that she was happy to see was untrue once she became an active member of the student body. With the inspiration and motivation from her fellow Veterans, in addition to instilling this concept of accountability, Regina was able to take on challenges and overcome them to successfully graduate and continue her studies at the graduate level.

### **David**

*David is a US Navy Veteran and graduated in 2017 with a bachelor's degree in Human Services and is currently working with Veteran families to access benefits. David and his wife have twin boys Alexander & Robert.*

**Narrative.** David is a Veteran of the U.S. Navy and a native of Southern Michigan who relocated to Massachusetts to be closer to his wife's family once his enlistment had concluded. David served from 1998 to 2008 as a mechanic and saw five deployments on ships in the Pacific as well as a dozen combat support missions. David was one of six siblings; they grew up with little money and his parents worked in a local medical manufacturing production factory. Among

his siblings, are three Veterans: two Army and one Coast Guard. “We were left with two options, get a job or go to the military”; the family did not have the financial option to send them to college. A major attraction to the Navy was David’s ability to travel and have new experiences that he didn’t see as options in the other branches. David spent a majority of his overseas time in Asia and Europe; he smiled lightheartedly and recalled his first time in Japan. David’s wife went into labor with their twin boys while he was on his second deployment; he was able to make it back with about four hours to spare before delivery. He paused and smiled, recalling all of the joy he felt that day. David spoke of his wife and sons often throughout the interview.

David described himself as always having been a “decent student,” achieving low *As* and high *Bs* through secondary school. For him, college was challenging because, initially, he did not know what he wanted to do in terms of a career plan. David was sure that he wanted to work with other Veterans but unsure of the correct path to do that and unclear on the degree most applicable. David’s decision to return to school was twofold; he wanted to change careers and genuinely enjoyed learning. He decided on a private institution due to its liberal policies on accepting military credits and transfers from other schools. During David’s time underway (on deployment), he took correspondence courses with various colleges and wanted to make sure they would be counted toward his degree. At the time that David enrolled in school, his children were 15 years old and entering high school. David described having experienced some anxiety when he was preparing for enrollment; he had been out of a traditional classroom environment for 20 years and was concerned about relating to the other students.

David described challenges with the initial application and enrollment process once he decided on a school. He provided the following: “the website was very confusing and hard to navigate; every time I thought I was going down the right path, I was redirected.” According to

David, the checklists that the schools used were not useful, and they didn't include any information on Veterans or benefits. David also spoke about navigating the social scene; "at first I felt very out of place, and never really felt that I belonged, until I started getting to know the faculty and some of the other vets." The financial aid process was a challenge and for the first few months he was made to pay his own tuition bill until his GI Bill benefits came through. His wife was very stressed when the finances continued to get tighter, a plight that the school was not very considerate of. Once the GI Bill benefits came through, they were given a refund on the tuition; David maintained that the school should have processes in place to ensure that this type of situation is managed.

David considered himself to be a people-person so when coming to the college, he was excited to meet new people and engage in new relationships. His goal was to work with the other Veterans on campus, he quickly engaged with the Veteran support office. He recalled with delight the feeling of being back home he had. "The office was family, we all met there to do work together, share stories, and talk about whatever." He described the office as being similar to a USO (United Service Organizations) lounge with comfortable furniture, televisions, and food. David is very boisterous and maintained a large social group. He described his time at the school in a positive manner and smiled while he recalled various stories from his interactions over the years.

During his first year, he was a business major, with a GPA lower than 3.0. "I was really having trouble and it was very stressful; I wasn't sure where to go at first but the folks at the tutoring center were great." When describing his wife's reaction to his low GPA, he looked down and shook his head in disappointment, then stated that she was the one that suggested he seek additional help. David reported that he was initially uncomfortable accepting assistance

from the tutors; the adult students were assigned faculty tutors which David explained made him feel much more comfortable. After that summer, David's grades came up, but he was not enjoying his work. "I met with the advisor and we spent an hour and a half taking through my likes and dislikes. He suggested I try a social work type program since I really wanted to work with people and help them, but I wasn't sure how." After some thought, he moved forward with the idea, and graduated with his human services degree, and is working as a service provider for Veterans, focused on public advocacy.

David had overwhelmingly positive recollections of his time at the school; he described actively engaged faculty, a growing Veteran population, and resources that supported him. David shared repeatedly how the policies and procedures of the school seemed to work against Veteran students. "At the beginning, the financial burden could have cost us our apartment, so I don't understand how that didn't faze them." David offered numerous systematic instances where he felt there were barriers to his success, including the lack of academic support and advising at the beginning of his enrollment, a long and complicated schedule, and unnecessary or irrelevant courses. David had stated he felt as if he wasted a large part of his first year taking classes that he did not enjoy. David recounted the following as items he would have liked to see as changes at his alma matter:

- "The marketing materials are all plastered with their support for Veterans and servicemembers, but in actuality there is no clear path to enrollment. There should be a clear and concise map from application to graduation."
- "I do wish the classes were more available. I didn't like the online classes and there was a limited selection."

- “The financial aid office should waive late fees and tuition until the benefits can come through. I have no control over the VA and should not pay for their delay.”

**Researcher reflection.** David was very relaxed and happy through his interview; he remained proud of his accomplishments but not in an arrogant manner. He has so much pride in his children and his work within the Veteran network, which is evident through his narrative. Especially when he spoke of the connections he made with his fellow students, he maintained consistent eye contact with a stern expression to convey the deep-rooted impact each has had on him. After serving for 20 years and coming from a disadvantaged background, he was determined to use his life experience to make a difference. Additionally, the large social network he created and maintained had a major role in his career path.

Within David’s narrative, one can see how significant the relationships and interactions with others were for him. He not only has deemed himself as a “people-person,” but he clearly articulated how meaningfully he has been influenced by others: classmates, Veteran peers, his academic advisor, and his family all had significant impacts on him and many of the decisions that he has made thus far. Even after graduating and moving into his Veteran services position, he has maintained his relationships at his university and continues to work with the on-campus student Veteran organization as a mentor.

When considering David’s experience utilizing Veteran specific institutional services, he made it abundantly clear that his social connections to the university had a profound impact on his success. David recalled numerous situations where his interactions with offices around campus were made better by the involvement of the Veteran liaison who had an understanding of the Veteran population and benefits associated. In addition, I draw particular focus to David’s repeated references to his financial challenges when utilizing the GI Bill, situations that appear to

have been easily avoidable. David's use of campus services ranged from academic, social, and financial with the most mentioned being the student Veteran organization and lounge. His body language remained open and positive throughout.

### **Madeline**

*Madeline is a US Army Veteran and graduated in 2016 with a bachelor's degree in General Studies from a public 4-year institution. Madeline is a married mother of one child, Adam, and is currently a stay at home parent.*

**Narrative.** Madeline served a four-year enlistment from 2003-2007 in the US Army and is married with one child. Madeline grew up in a two-parent lower middle-class home. She "felt a need to serve" and described her years in the military as "a chance to explore" her identity and long-term goals. Madeline's son [Adam] was three years old when she enrolled full time at the local state college. She was unable to secure gainful employment after transitioning from the Army and returned to school for the basic housing allowance, commonly called BAH. "I knew that the BAH wouldn't cover everything, but it did help along with my part-time job." At the time of enrollment Madeline was a single mother and the sole caregiver for Adam until she met her husband two years later.

As a student, Madeline said that she maintained "average" grades, maintaining a 3.34 GPA. She described her first year as the most challenging: "adjusting to school was hard; I found that managing the deadlines alongside Adam was super stressful." During her first semester Madeline failed two of her four classes, primarily due to a lack of affordable childcare. The university had an early childhood program and the senior students managed a day care facility on campus; Adam was able to get a spot in the Spring semester. "It was a life changer; I could drop him on the way to class and know he was close by and safe." The childcare center being on



campus was a large relief to Madeline, and she went on to describe her fear of having Adam at a distance. “I would get nervous and couldn’t concentrate if he wasn’t with me; it felt illogical, but I had this impulse to be close to him all the time. I think maybe it was because it was just us for three years.” The onsite childcare was credited numerous times as being a factor in her ability to complete her classes and calm her anxiety.

Madeline provided insight into her social interactions, primarily with faculty and staff at the school. “I had respect for the professors, but once in a while, I would get upset with the lack of focus and control of some of the discussions.” In classes where debate would get acrimonious, Madeline would get agitated. “I don’t think that conversation should be censored, but the number of people that spoke a lot about things they don’t know about was ridiculous.” In one instance the discussion surrounded PTSD, and a classmate made a snark comment regarding the rampancy of the diagnosis. “I was put on the defensive immediately.”

When recollecting how the interaction went and how she felt, Madeline paused, she took a breath and stated

The conversation started as a discussion on the American health care system, how the poor are chronically ignored when in the prevention phase and become a financial burden. Someone made a comment that the ‘burden comes from those who claim PTSD when they are just weak.’ I thought for sure that I would hit this guy; I felt the anger in my stomach, I could taste it. I didn’t say anything, I listened to the argument between a few of them, festering.

While describing this particular interaction and recalling her feelings, she was more expressively distressed, increasing her speech pace, a heightened tone, decrease in hand gestures and body language that indicated negativity and closed off emotions.

The professor allowed the debate to go on and the discussion continued to get more aggressive. “I was so mad, I slammed my hand on the desk and the class got quiet, I was so upset”; tears began to well in her eyes and her tone changed. “How can anyone offer opinions on things they can’t even understand?” She provided, “I went through so much in the Army. I came here for a fresh start and did not like my mental health to be a joke to people.” Madeline went on to explain that she had not proactively shared her status as a Veteran, but when asked specifically, she did speak about it.

This moment provided a turning point in Madeline’s interview; what started as a positive discussion was now focused on the barriers she felt during her time in school. When Madeline was asked directly about her understanding of the role of her University, she became visibly uncomfortable; she shifted in her chair and became restless. We sat in silence for over 30 seconds; Madeline cleared her throat, adjusted her skirt and said one word.... “fear.” This was significant because in that moment, Madeline became vulnerable and described more of her own history. “My mother arrived in this country with me when I was a few weeks old. I enlisted to create a path to citizenship; my family status followed me my whole life.” She noted that when she went to school, she was working on her status, and her recruiter promised her that if she did deployments, she would be able to be a citizen, “but it took a long time.” She described the fear of having immigration and customs come for her and her mother; although her son was born here, she worried that if she was picked up, they would take him. Madeline recounted her fears repeatedly, feeling the need to lay low and not create waves so no one would have a reason to notice her.

Madeline had referenced her anxiety in the classroom as well as her discomfort being far from her son, and she described additional instances where she managed mental health

symptoms alongside her studies. “Occasionally, I would catch myself scanning a room for egress points (exits) and potential threats; sometimes it would take me half of class to re-orient and realize where I was.” Moments like these were discussed in great lengths with Madeline.

Madeline was very involved in the local Veterans’ organizations outside of school; she mentioned very little interaction with the on-campus group. “I really only came to campus to go to class, and other than the day care for Adam and the cafeteria, I really wasn’t involved in much; I just did my work and went home.” Attending classes became a problem again during her senior year when her son was enrolled in public school fulltime; “many of the available classes were in the morning or evening... or online, and it was hard to shift things around Adam’s schedule. I needed classes in the middle of the school day.” Madeline recounted the following as items she would have liked to see as changes at her alma matter:

- “I was fortunate to have available care for Adam at the beginning; if all campuses offered this, it could be a game changer for students like me. I do wish there were more options for fitting my classes into condensed days.”
- “The faculty were great, but sometimes ignorance was allowed to run rampant in the classroom, which pissed me off.”

**Researcher reflection.** Madeline was very eager to for the interview and provide her story for my research. Before the interview began, I could sense through her demeanor and tone that she was happy, charismatic, and open for a conversation. She spoke with passion and with detail; her stories evoked emotion. Something that was unique to this interview was the challenge I had listening to her articulation of her symptoms. The images she described were vivid, and her emotions were at times contagious. When she described her vigilance episodes, her tone was that of true fear, and when she spoke of Adam, she spoke softly and with pride.

Madeline logically expressed her journey of self-exploration, and the impact that college had on her. As she had previously stated, she was not a high academic achiever but had a passion for learning and carried this through her career. The culture shock of higher education required her to remain amenable, as did her family situation. The lengths that Madeline went through to keep her student and Veteran identities separate truly spoke to her desire to fit in with her classmates during her education.

When considering the institutional services within this narrative, Madeline spoke at length about her connections to the institution by way of the childcare center and academic supports. Madeline described her relationship to the University as primarily transactional, although she described her time there as a period of growth socially, morally, and academically; however, her immigration status created a situation where she was unable to truly engage in a meaningful manner. Initially when Madeline described her disconnection from the University along with self-reported anxiety, it appeared to be related to military service; within the context of the interview, however, we come to find out that her family immigration status was also a main factor in those feelings. Madeline's desire to see a more tailored program of study for adults with classes being offered in various time blocks and formats was in line with statements made by the previous participants.

### **Duncan**

*Duncan is a US Air Force Veteran who graduated in 2016 with a bachelor's degree in public policy, from a public four-year institution. Duncan is unmarried and is raising his daughters Madison & Cyenna with his long-term partner Max. Duncan is currently employed with the Federal VA.*

**Narrative.** Duncan and his partner are co-parenting their two daughters, Madison (8) and Cyenna (12). Duncan served in the US Airforce from 2001-2006 as a radar technician; upon returning home, he struggled to successfully reintegrate. Duncan is the middle of three children; both of his brothers completed college and hold graduate level degrees. His family grew up on Cape Cod, and while they came from moderate means, struggled with near homelessness multiple times over the years. Duncan described his desire to enlist and provided “I didn’t want to go to college yet; I wanted to travel and experience life outside of Massachusetts.” Duncan described his time in the Air Force as positive but stressful; he made the decision to return to Massachusetts once his enlistment had concluded. Duncan struggled financially upon his return. His profession in the Airforce was not easily transferable to civilian work, leaving him underemployed.

Duncan sought to return back to school in hopes of locating more employment opportunities. Upon returning to school, Duncan struggled in acclimating to the culture of higher education. “I just wasn’t as good at school as my brothers,” but he was determined to be successful and complete his degree. He went into school full-time and struggled to maintain satisfactory grades, but that was when he sought out assistance from tutors and advisors. “It was great because the professors were really nice and helpful.” He described how the student success center housed not only student tutors but also faculty members who also assisted in tutoring students within their respective disciplines. In the final year of Duncan’s degree program, he struggled to maintain a full-time status due to the fact that the available classes did not align with his childcare needs or his Veteran appointments. “The end was the hardest. Many of the classes that were required in that final year were offered during the day: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The other option was with a different class I needed; I asked for online options, but they

didn't offer many of what I needed online." This delayed his graduation by one semester, which was very difficult for him to come to terms with.

Outside of classes, Duncan found himself involved with student organizations that supported the LGBTQ+ community. Even as a Veteran, he provided that he felt more accepted by individuals in those organizations than by the Veteran community. "It was hard for me to justify working on behalf of and with people who I felt didn't see me as equal." He continued to describe how as a service member and Veteran, he felt that he had to suppress a significant part of himself. "It was like I couldn't be my full self at times; my boyfriend could never attend family events at the base. I was living two lives." On campus, he felt that he was able to be his authentic self and even support others who may have been struggling with their own sexuality; he met one other Veteran who identified as LGBTQ and found that shared experience to be very valuable as he progressed through his time in the Air Force. "She was in the Marine Corp; don't get me wrong—it is not the same as being a gay man in the military. Straight men fetishize lesbians, so she dealt with a different type of harassment but was able to understand why I chose to self-separate from the Veteran community and felt some of the same animosity against the toxic culture." Duncan recounted the following as items he would have liked to see as changes at his alma matter:

- "The programs were well laid out; you knew exactly what classes you needed to take and in what semesters they were offered. It would have made more sense for classes to not be scheduled against each other. I consider myself very tech savvy; instead of cramming in all of these required classes in similar or competing time blocks, it would have made more sense to have different formats. My cousin had short intensive classes and hybrid classes at her school; that would have been life changing."

- “I did not use the facilities for Veterans. I chose to stay away because I didn’t feel welcome among the students there. I was so stressed out and didn’t want to go back to living two lives, but I know they would have treated me like shit, so I decided to give up half of me to preserve the other half. If I could make a change, it would be to ensure that ALL Veterans FEEL they are welcome.... There isn’t a policy against LGBTQ Veterans at the school, but look at our national culture; how could we feel safe?”
- “The cafeteria food was awful; I mean honestly, when you miss military chow, that’s bad.”

**Researcher reflection.** Duncan was very articulate during this interview; the longest of the 15 interviews, Duncan chronicled his experiences at the University with detail and emotion. Duncan recounted his challenges with relating to other Veterans and feeling as if he had no place in the military community, and he spoke in great length about the effects that had on him. His appreciation for the LGBTQ community was apparent, and he described embracing a part of himself fully that he was always afraid to show. Duncan expressed his journey of self-exploration; and the impact that the college environment had on him. When he spoke of the choice between a Veteran and a homosexual man, he spoke as if he had to give up a part of himself; by the end of the discussion, he spoke differently. He went on to describe the ability to finally be at peace with both.

When considering Duncan’s experience with Veteran specific institutional services, he made it clear that he chose not to utilize them. Duncan credited the social connections he made as having a profound impact on his success and acceptance of his true identity. He spoke fondly of the academic supports in place; being treated as a peer and having the opportunity to work

alongside the faculty were discussed in great length. Scheduling was an obstacle that Duncan referenced numerous times, as his family time and school time often conflicted. Duncan was able to successfully complete his degree with a 3.76 GPA and since then has been working at the Veterans Affairs office as a case manager which allows for a work/life balance.

### **Alice**

*Alice is a US Marine Corp Veteran who graduated in 2016 with a bachelor's degree in applied sciences with a focus on criminal investigation, from a private four-year institution. Alice is a married mother to three biological and three adopted children and is currently working in municipal government.*

**Narrative.** Alice is a Marine Corp Veteran who served 20 years active duty, retiring in 2002 with a full pension and service-connected disability. Alice came from a large Italian family on the North Shore, enlisting at the age of 18. Alice enlisted in the Marine Corp to escape an arranged marriage that her father had set up in Italy. On the day she turned 17, she met with a recruiter to begin the process of enlisting and left on her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday to boot camp. Alice described her whirlwind enlistment with humor and a smile on her face, her cheeks-red from laughing. "So, my dad had no idea; he had set up for me to marry some guy in Italy, and my family knew his, but we had never met. This was commonplace back then! I snuck around for a whole year, and then the day before I turned 18 and was scheduled to leave, I told my mother."

Alice described a very close relationship with her parents; the oldest of four daughters, she was more of a second mother to her sisters and a confidant to her parents. "My mother was scared and upset that I was keeping this for so long. She wanted me to get married and be taken care of. I said... I can take care of me." She described a tense departure from her father, and they did not communicate through her training; she passed well wishes through her mother. Alice



paused and described the day she graduated training: “I saw my mom, and I was really sad; I didn’t expect my dad to come, but I was hopeful. As I was heading outside to where they release you to see your family, I saw him smoking a cigarette and looking down.” She paused and her eyes got teary while she recounted, “He saw me in my uniform and was so proud; he hugged me so tight I couldn’t breathe. I thought he hated me, but he was scared for me, and I see that now. I miss him every day.”

Alice met another Marine while serving, and they wed in 1985; they had three biological children over the course of their 20-year military careers. She described the challenges they faced. “We would still deploy, and because we were criminal investigators, it was often and for 3-5 days at a time; we would sometimes not even get 24 hours’ notice.” The balance of children with an unpredictable lifestyle was a challenge, but she noted, “my parents were a huge support. I could never have stayed in if they were not there to help.” Alice decided in 2012 after 10 years of being out of the service to return to school. She had a job she loved, but after Union negotiations, it was decided that all employees in that field needed to hold a bachelor’s degree. She enrolled at a small private institution after being out of school over 20 years and pursued a degree in sciences with a focus on criminal investigation. “I was an investigator, so I figured it would be an easy degree; to be honest, the HR department didn’t care what the degree was. It just needed to be documented, so I admit I took the easy route.” Alice described her choice of school as being based primarily on the culture; it was a school for adult learners, and she felt that it would be manageable if the school was designed for working adults.

Alice stated that she was initially not very fond of the school; a few weeks into her semester, she discovered her benefits were not correctly applied, and that created a bill that she was responsible for. “I had mouths to feed; I can’t pay for something because of their mistake.”

Alice described being referred to the VA website and the national 1-800 number on numerous occasions, which she found frustrating: “I just wanted to speak to someone directly. I never got calls back.” Alice ended up paying a \$1500 invoice for a class that should have been covered by her benefits: “I was out of fight; I just gave in and moved forward.” Alice maintained close contact with the financial aid office and her benefits administrator moving forward; she described her anger and feelings of helplessness during the entire ordeal.

As a criminal investigator Alice had previously reported that she felt the degree would be easy because of her life experience; however, she faced some unexpected complications: “The material was similar enough, nothing major that I didn’t know, but having to write in APA formats and formulate these long papers was out of my comfort zone.” As she discussed her academic experiences, she explained that the military had given her very different training: “it was about short and to the point; no one wanted five pages on anything unless it was a major event, so I had no idea how to do all the fluffy stuff that made the papers and reports long.” The school had a writing center that was used primarily for editing, but Alice formed a relationship with a member of the English department who worked with her individually. Alice credited much of her success to the “dedication and patience” of this faculty mentor.

During her college years, her children were all young adults, making the balance of school versus personal slightly less challenging. “I was able to attend classes without stressing over the kids, but I saw other parents really struggle, especially with little ones.” Her overall use of facilities within the institution was limited: “they did not have anything specifically for Veterans, but the school was modeled for adults which was good.” Alice successfully completed her degree in 3.5 years, attending classes full time and with the advisement of her faculty mentor, a relationship she described fondly. “I know there is a difference between faculty and students,

but I loved that I was treated as a peer and not a subordinate to them. It made me feel valid, like I belonged there.” Alice recounted the following as items she would have liked to see as changes at her alma matter:

- “There was no one who was familiar with Veteran benefits with the exception of the certifying official. If problems came up, we didn’t have an advocate in the school to work with; I would like to see a position in the school for that, a Veteran advocate.”
- “The relationship I formed with my mentor was unofficial. There was no real program for mentoring; this was just someone who saw my potential, and I relied on her a lot for direction and academic support. Everyone should be fortunate to have someone like her in their corner. I felt connected and like someone at [redacted] really had a stake in my success.”

**Researcher reflection.** Alice’s story is fascinating; her background and reasons for military service are unique and nothing like the other stories. Alice was very eager to do the interview and provide her story for my research. Even before the interview had begun, I could tell by her demeanor and tone, and even our pre-interview dialogue, that she had a positive demeanor; she appeared confident, and forthcoming. She shared her story with a smile so large, you could see it in her eyes, and she laughed frequently. The love and respect Alice had for her family was evident in her ability to articulate her experiences and connections over the years. When considering the institutional services within this narrative, Alice spoke at length about encounters with the financial aid and representatives who managed Veteran specific benefits across the administrative offices. Since Alice was an investigator, she did not expect the program to be as complicated but spoke openly about how she felt. She entered college to obtain a degree in order to maintain her job, but she was articulate in describing how the experience changed her.

Her perceived role of the University was transactional, a notion that she was happy to see was untrue once she connected with members of the faculty. With the mentorship and support from her faculty members, in addition to her family support, Alice was able to take on her academic challenges and overcome them to successfully graduate with a 3.9 GPA.

### **Rita**

*Rita is a US Coast Guard Veteran who graduated in 2017 with a bachelor's degree in hospitality management, from a private four-year institution. Rita is a mother of two children, Emily and Benjamin, and is employed as a full-time restaurant manager.*

**Narrative.** Rita met her husband Zachary in the US Coast Guard while they were on a mission off the coast of Cuba. They were stationed together and started dating shortly after meeting; they married in 2010 and welcomed their daughter Emily in 2011, and their son Benjamin followed in 2013. Zachary passed away in 2014 in a motorcycle accident, leaving her as a sole caretaker of their young children. Rita remained silent for a moment, and her eyes drifted down to the table; her voice became shaky as she described their relationship: "I just feel like I didn't get enough time with him. It isn't fair. The kids need him; I need him." That year she enrolled in college. "I needed to be able to support the household on my own, and I knew that a degree would make me more hireable." Rita was unclear of her path but knew that gaming was a hot topic in MA, spell out so she decided to major in Hospitality management with a focus on hotels and casinos: "There is a lot of growth in the hospitality industry. I knew if gaming was passed, then I would be set, and if it didn't, there's always hotels hiring; school became a wonderful distraction. For Rita returning to school was about survival, it was about maintaining, and it became a method for her to move on.

Although Rita's initial reasoning for going back to school was rooted in her need to support her children, she stated that she felt differently as time went on. "I really enjoyed my time at school; it became a place where I could be a little selfish." School was a large time investment for Rita, and her local family members and friends assisted with childcare and helped her to maintain a schedule. Rita described her on-campus experience with detail; she spoke of the numerous on campus connections she made along with the support systems that were available to her. "The Veteran group on campus was great; many of them knew Zach. He went there before I did. It was surreal but gave me yet another connection to him." Much of the faculty had been aware of Zachary's death. They knew him as a student and were very supportive of Rita as she attended classes, and her love for learning continued to grow: "What started as a chore became my escape, a place where I was a student and nothing else. At home I have the kids and a million things to do, but there I just had to listen; it was great."

Rita reported that the administration at the school was very supportive; she had no complaints about how they managed her account or the admissions and advising process. She reported that she had all positive experiences with fellow students and staff; she leveraged the library and the student Veteran center regularly and overall was very happy. Rita credited much of her success to the emotional support given by the staff at the Veteran center: "I really don't know where I would be without them; it was great to share stories and just be around people who didn't look at me with pity." Rita completed her degree in just under three years, and she was able to skip about one year of classes once she was awarded all of her transfer credits from the military.

Rita recounted the following as items she would have liked to see as changes at her alma matter:

- “I was well-supported, but I know it was because of Zach. Not everyone had the same leniency I did. It would have been good to see the same care and compassion for all of the Veterans at the school; that was unfortunately not the case.”
- “I think that the teachers should consult; there were times when I had no assignments due and then others with 5 or 6 back to back. It was too much.”

**Researcher reflection.** Rita was a quieter and more reserved interviewee and required a few more follow-ups and supplemental questions to encourage more dialogue. At the time of the interview, I was unaware of Rita’s loss, but her initial reluctance gave way once she got comfortable. Rita wanted to support her children, as they needed her to play the role of mother and father which motivated her in the darkest of times. Each question led back to her children; regardless of the topic, every answer ended up talking about them. Her dedication and strength were evident in the way she spoke and the confidence she exuded when she spoke of her family. Rita utilized the on-campus resources more than the other study participants, mentioning that she met with academic support, counseling services, the Veteran lounge, and the financial aid office. Her interactions were positive; she had many inspiring stories and was very satisfied with her college experience. Rita was well-aware that Zach’s passing may have changed the ways in which other people had related to her, perhaps perceiving that she was mentally fragile. Rita stated numerous times that she wished all Veterans had the level of support that she did, but she had numerous classmates that slipped through the cracks. Her level of caring for the other students was clear, and she took great pride in her relationships and support systems.

## **Part II: Presentation of Analysis**

Part I provided a look into the individual narratives of each of the participants, allowing for the study to stay true to the individual voices of these six Veterans. In addition, it provided a reflection on each of their accounts, highlighting key elements of their interviews. In Part II, I begin briefly with an overview of the coding and theme developing process and then I expand on the analysis of the narratives by examining common themes. As provided in Chapter 3, In Vivo and Pattern coding were used as the methods for First and Second Cycle coding respectively. “In Vivo codes help us to preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55). Additionally, “pattern codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material from First Cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 1994, p. 67).

Through the first cycle coding process, approximately forty codes were developed. These codes were derived after multiple reviews of the transcripts and reduced the substantially high number of first round codes that were developed. Moving into the second cycle of coding, I was able to take the different codes resultant from Saldana’s In Vivo process and look for patterns across the transcripts, which resulted in seventeen distinctive patterned codes. After reviewing these for accuracy, I was able to further group these into four themes presented below. Narratives from the participants provided in Part I were used, describing the importance of each theme, how it was developed, and its connection to the central question of the research study. Additionally, table three, organized by theme, indicates the number of participants as well as the specific code applied to and how many mentioned it directly.

Through the coding and analysis processes, four core themes were developed. The terms listed below are categorical expressions which represent the four themes:

- Relationships: Participants descriptions of meaningful relationships effecting their higher education experience.
- Institutional Services: participants' use of the available institutional services, as well as desires for services not offered.
- Motivation: both internal and external drivers contributed to the participants' decision to seek post-secondary education and their persistence during their education.
- Barriers and Threats: both physical and policy-based barriers and threats perceived by the participants.

### **Thematic Category 1—Relationships**

When the participants recounted their experiences as they attended post-secondary programs, each recalled the importance of their relationships. The relationships included family, teachers, staff, and peers at the school. Table 3 provides the types of relationships mentioned by participants, the number of references, as well as examples and direct quotes from participants.

When providing the total number of references made about each of the relationships, this was not factored by how many times the participant said the individual's name, but instead was referred to as part of their response during the interview.



Table 3  
*Thematic Category 1—Relationships*

Types of Relationships	Number of Participants Who Made References	Total Number of References Made	Characteristic Responses
Family	6	54	My mom gave up so much for us, she was so proud (Regina) The people I served with are like family to me, some are closer than the family I have. (Madeline) They would never admit it, but I knew my they were disappointed in my decision to delay college (Duncan)
Children	6	106	I am his role model, I need him to see that even though it wasn't easy, it was worth it (Madeline) They look up to me, and they come first (Duncan) They are older and my role to them is different now, I am not teaching them to read, I am teaching manhood. (David)
Peers	6	32	Having the Veterans group gave me an outlet, a sense of accountability, like it was before (Rita) The LGBTQ group was great, they gave me a connection that I had been missing for a long time and a reason to keep showing up when I didn't want too (Duncan)
Faculty/Staff	5	23	[Professor A] had an open-door policy through my entire program, even if I want taking any classes with him, he made sure I was ok (Rita) I had a true mentor while I was at [University X] and he pushed me to succeed, I did. (Alice)

As reported above, all of the participants mentioned the importance of relationships—family, peers, faculty and staff. Each of the participants spoke about their parents and upbringing, and this was elicited by the first core question, “tell me a little about yourself.” Consistent across each of the participants was the tendency to discuss their family structure and backgrounds while describing their military and school choices. Understanding each

participant's family background and dynamic was critical when addressing the concept of family and relationships and in understanding the ways in which they describe their own identities.

Additionally, all of the participants frequently mentioned the relationships they have with not only their parents and children but specifically their brothers and sisters. The participants were aware of my military background, so they did not explicitly need to state the difference between their siblings and their military kin; it was implied through their distinct descriptions. Madeline stated, "I had [military] brothers not make it back, I push to succeed to honor them because they can't." While the experience was not as positive, Duncan stated with a sarcastic tone, "I don't hang out with other Veterans as much; they consider me more of a sister than brother". These exemplify the varied feelings that the participants felt in relation to their military relationships but also how their relationships affected their motivations.

The impact that various relationships have on the participants could have been characterized as outcome-focused, involving change and growth from their previous selves. As Madeline provided in her statement, "I was lucky to come home; I owe it to them to make the best of my life." Similarly, Rita reported that she felt the loss of her husband made her want to grow and make the most of her time "in his memory." All six of the participants described the encouragement they received from their spouses and children when making the decision to return to school. Each of the Veterans interviewed also mentioned being a positive role model for their children, as well as fellow service members. Each of these participants were able to articulate how relationships were linked to their change and growth through education.

When further considering the implications of this theme on their perception of institutional services, all of the participants alluded to the idea that these significant individuals in their lives influenced their pursuing and completing a college degree. As previously stated,

Regina described in detail how her mother and son had a direct impact on her decision to pursue and persevere through post-secondary education. Similarly, Duncan, while dealing with academic challenges, found his inspiration and the will to succeed through the relationship with his daughters. These narratives highlight the linkage and importance between relationships and success in higher education for these Veteran participants.

Through the analysis, it is clear that the concept of relationships and how they impact educational experiences is pronounced within each story. It can be seen that these relationships are multifaceted, complex, and highly influential for the participants. It is imperative to understand not only the significance of these relationships, but also to delve deeper to understand what makes these relationships so meaningful and noteworthy. As seen within Regina's narrative, the "mother-daughter" dynamic, which most people would regard as important, was described as a much stronger bond than most; she described that not only was the household comprised of solely her and her mother, this close relationship had a direct impact on Regina's decision to enlist, her choice of academic pursuits, and even her professional endeavors. Regina discussed how she personally believes that the bond she and her mother share is strong and unwavering, but she has also witnessed a very different relationship dynamics between others and their mothers. Regina described the "mother-son" relationship she shares with Jake as being equally close and influential in her decision making. While many maternal relationships within her circle were described as "distant," and some "can't wait to get away from [their moms]," it is clear that Regina has built her own relationship with her son to model the one with her mother. The fabric of these relationships maintained the power and influence to guide the direction of the family's future. The essence of the maternal relationship and its influence lie in the capacity of

Regina alongside her mother, each persevering through different situations, striving to provide for their home, while achieving their own goals and aspirations.

Similarly, Madeline recounted her own family structure, and its substantial influence on who she is. Although different than a traditional household, she described the intricacies of their family dynamic and the impact that their immigration status had. The prominence of her family's love and adoration was unambiguous throughout the narrative, clearly a factor in her successful graduation. Enduring the consistent uncertainty of her status in the United States and being on guard when engaging with government entities enhanced the connection with her parents as well as her son. Each of the participant's accounts honor the significance of these relationships, showcasing how profound they are and how they were perceived as being integral to their bachelor's degree experience. Analysis of the data concerning the importance of relationships, therefore, indicates paying homage to specific individual relationships is an intrinsic element in the retelling and understanding of their education experience.

### **Thematic Category 2— Institutional Services**

With institutional services being a primary focus of this research, it was expected that the topic would appear throughout the participants' responses across all interviews. Across all six participant institutions, the services and facilities were diverse. It was possible, therefore, for the analysis to consider some of the shared and distinct ways that they viewed their organizations and available services. Table 3 depicts the different aspects associated with institutional services, the number of participants who mentioned them, the total number of references made, and examples of direct quotes from participants. The total number of references made to the respective service is comprised of the number of times the participants referred to it within the context of education. Additionally, if the participant made a reference to another variation of the

term, it was included in the total number of references made (i.e. advisor in lieu of academic achievement office).

Table 4  
*Thematic Category 2— Institutional Services*

Services	Number of Participants Who Made References	Total Number of References Made	Characteristic Responses
Financial	6	47	We rely on the BAH to cover many of our day to day expenses, when it was late, we were late paying bills (David) The GI Bill made college accessible for me, I could never have afforded to pay tuition (Regina)
Space	5	39	It’s nice to have a place to connect with other people (Rita) I didn’t use the Veteran lounge, but I like the idea, I can see why it would be hard to hang with a bunch of kids, I’m Dad at home, not at school (Duncan)
Advising	6	20	It was hard to graduate late because of a class; he didn’t tell me I needed it so how would I know? (Duncan) He was so helpful, we planned every class I needed, I knew what semester and what format I was taking it (Rita)
Academic Support	4	16	I walked in there and saw these kids that could be my own and just couldn’t bring myself to ask, it’s embarrassing (Alice) The professors took time to make sure we understood, without singling anyone out. (Duncan)

Each of the participant’s responses provided a glimpse of the way’s participants viewed the available services as well as their own identities with in that setting. As stated previously in his narrative, Duncan provided, “I was comfortable there” and this same sentiment could be

witnessed across the other participants whose schools had an available Veteran-only space. Each of them expressed, in their own ways, what they believed the role of their schools to be in their path to graduation. Within these university roles, each of the participants seemed to implicitly provide details surrounding interactions and systems they found significant. For example, Madeline mentioned her use of the provided childcare frequently in our discussion, while Regina and Rita expressed their challenges with the lack of childcare options. David and Alice focused more on the term “balance,” or some variation, when describing the need to manage a variety of responsibilities.

Each of the participants was able to discuss what they needed, wanted, liked, and disliked through very different lenses. All participants were post- 9/11 era Veterans, and each had children that they cared for during the period of enrollment; other than these commonalities, each participant had very different backgrounds and experiences. Within each of their narratives, the participants revealed a varied level of understanding of what they needed from the university as well as what the institution’s responsibilities are. Each of the participants showed there were many contributing factors and experiences associated with success and perseverance. For example, Rita spoke in great detail about her positive relationships and described the social network that she leveraged to successfully graduate. Rita was able to connect and grow her social network as a direct result of the university creating and maintaining a Veteran-specific space where she could feel comfortable. Comparably, David was also someone who utilized the social aspects of campus life, although his social role was more of a mentor; his presence within the university-supported Veteran community supported his growth and success. Duncan shared his internal struggle fitting in with the Veteran group, thus not partaking in any of its events or social

opportunities. Even with his negative feelings, Duncan revealed the value that exclusive communities can have for ostracized populations and community building.

Interactions with numerous offices were mentioned by the participants, primarily the offices that manage the GI Bill and financial aid. These references were made across all six participants, offering both positive as well as negative perspectives. Regina reported that her benefits office was frequently late in submitting her enrollment verifications to the VA, as a majority of schools send the documentation following the ‘add/drop’ period. Delays from the administration cause the housing allowance that many Veteran students depend on to be delayed, placing families like Regina’s in potentially dire financial circumstance. Additionally, David and Alice shared similar experiences with the benefit administrators at their respective institutions which led to increased stress. In most cases, the participants were able to communicate their experiences to administrators, with the exception of Madeline who did not feel comfortable. David used the negative financial interactions as a speaking point when working with other Veterans as a mentor and leveraged his position within the Veteran services center to encourage systematic change.

As can be seen by the narratives in Part I, each participant’s school had a variety of available services, some robust and some deficient. Each of the participants discussed their experiences and within them, and the diversity of what they needed and wanted. As described in Alice’s account, her initial feelings toward the administration were not positive, but once she got her administrative challenges managed, her feelings shifted, and she graduated with overall positive feelings. Additionally, Duncan felt that his university provided substantial services for Veterans and was supportive of the majority of its policies. Again, this helps in showing that although each of the participants had different backgrounds and experiences during their time in

school, each needed support from their institution. Consequently, after analyzing each of the participants' stories it became clear that although they had varied background and experiences, there were numerous commonalities across the items they reported as obstacles.

### **Thematic Category 3— Motivation**

The participants' recollections of their college journeys often included reflections revealing how they characterized their motivation and identified the sources of their motivation. Through the conversations with all of the participants, it was evident to see where much of their motivation resulted from: themselves, their family, fellow servicemembers/Veterans, and occasionally finances. Table 4 displays the types of contributing factors associated with motivation, the number of participants who mentioned the type, the total number of times it was mentioned across the six interviews, and examples of quotes from the participants.

Per the conversations with each of the participants, there appeared to be many different contributing factors that added to their understanding of their motivation; from intrinsic motivation to external factors, the participants were very outspoken about their individual reasons for returning to school. For example, Regina delved deep into her family history and described in great detail the ways her mother struggled. She articulated the importance placed upon education by her mother, the doors that a proper education could open and the financial security that they did not have. The motivation that Regina received from consistently seeing her mother's determination, she maintained in her story, had a long-lasting impact on her own motivations, in addition to adding to her confidence. Duncan spoke in great length about his daughters and how proud it made them to see him at school and pursuing his degree; he wanted to be a good example for others. Madeline did not seek out many connections during her time on the college campus, a constant motivation for her was her son. She spoke in detail of the



importance of finishing her degree in order to get a better paying job to support him. All six of the participants spoke about how influential and supportive their families were and continued to be through their degrees, and while the support systems were diverse across each story, the importance remained that they were each motivated to succeed.

Table 5  
*Thematic Category 3—Motivation*

Factors Contributing to Motivation	Number of Participants Who Made References	Total Number of References Made	Characteristic Responses
Self-Motivation	4	9	I always knew I would go; I didn't know when (Duncan)
Family	6	41	Seeing how hard my mom worked was motivation enough for me (Regina) I wanted to be a good role model (David) My parents played a big role in me even considering college (Duncan)
Peers	5	29	I had a few friends use theirs [GI Bill] and they were very encouraging, they helped (Rita) It was good to be able to talk through stuff (Alice)
Finances	6	20	At first, I just needed the BAH but out worked out in the end (Madeline) We depended on that money, it was rent and food for us (David)

There is an illustrious connection between motivation and inter-personal relationships, made apparent throughout this section (Ebata, 2008). Motivation provides the rationale behind actions of an individual or group and understanding motivational factors can offer enlightenment on a situation (Weiner, 2013). As discussed in this section, there are strong influences within familial relationships; for some the relationship was with people no longer present in their daily

lives. Madeline noted that she felt supported and motivated by the servicemembers that she served with; “being in the service is unique. We pass ways for a short time but leave a lasting imprint on each other.” Similarly, Alice described feeling motivated by the loss of two friends, because while deployed, there was an accident; she stated that they were often her reason for pushing through. “Knowing that they had dreams and goals that can never be met breaks my heart, and I don’t want to take my opportunities for granted.” Understanding the root of these motivations is critical in the retelling and presentation of their influences, leading to enrollment in college and graduating. Emerging are internal and external factors contributing to the participants’ decisions to return for post-secondary education.

#### **Thematic Category 4—Barriers & Threats**

The participants exhibited many negative feelings when reflecting on the policies and procedures at their respective schools. Alice experienced difficulty with her school’s policies described her overall time as a student as positive. Additionally, Regina chronicled her repeated problems with the financial aid process and the policies that left her with holds on her account, effectively blocking her ability to register for classes and creating a situation where she was unable to access the classes that fit her schedule. Furthermore, Rita had experienced complications with the admissions process, delaying her enrollment by a semester. Lastly, Duncan also noted numerous challenges with the policies of his school, which did delay his graduation by a semester. It was through a series of interactions that these Veterans were able to address the challenges; unfortunately for situations like Regina’s, the same financial aid hold happened every semester and created many scheduling errors. For example, Regina stated “I would end up waitlisted for the classes and fighting with the registrar; it’s not right.”

Table 6  
*Thematic Category 4—Barriers & Threats*

Terms Associated with the Participants' Perceived Barriers & Threats	Number of Participants Who Made References	Total Number of References Made	Characteristic Responses
Physical	3	12	I scanned every room for at least two options for exit, I ran through scenarios (Madeline)  I didn't think I alone was in danger, but campuses are not as safe as people think. More people get killed in shootings here than Iraq (David)
Emotional	6	38	It took months for me to really settle in on Campus. Walking those halls was trying (Rita)  Living a split life was exhausting, I didn't want to go back to that (Duncan)
Policy	5	27	The VA is not very flexible, their rules almost caused me to not finish! It became a lot to deal with. (Regina)  Books almost bankrupted me, the school wouldn't work with me and the VA doesn't pay ahead for that. It's not even enough (Alice)

Participants experienced some physical insecurity, especially when taking classes on campus. Madeline, though struggling with her family's immigration status, spoke about her own physical safety numerous times. The openness of the campus did not provide her with a sense of security. She maintained that in every room, she would seek exits and, if bored, she would daydream active shooter scenarios and how she would survive. Rita shared similar sentiments regarding her safety on campus, and her situation was primarily emotional, after the loss of her

husband. Rita attended the same school that her late husband did, she described heightened emotion; however, she valued the ability to be vulnerable. Additionally, Duncan spoke a great deal about feeling that he did not belong among the Veterans on campus; he specified that he felt unsafe around them. Years of emotional torment while in the Air Force led to his fear of continuing to be around other military personnel. Lack of control, over-active imagination, and general dread were all named in this category by the participants as having a negative effect on their confidence to continue.

### **Part III: Theoretical Analysis of Findings**

This study sought to answer the research question: What role(s) do students report that institutions play in the successful completion of bachelor's degrees, and what services, if any, do Veteran students report contributed to their degree completion? Through the analysis of the data collected the individual experiences were diverse and unique; there were many compelling factors within the narratives. Within the narratives it became apparent that relationships, institutional services, motivation, and barriers & threats were all connected to the challenges and triumphs experiences by the Veteran student parents. The four identified themes manifested across the six participants in ways specific to each individual story; these aligned with each of the theories as presented below.

#### **Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure**

Pertaining to both academic and social systems, "a student's persistence or departure is a reflection of his or her success or failure in navigating the stages towards incorporation into the community of the institution" (Tinto, 1993, p.6). Through a study of non-traditional students, Tinto (1993) identified three primary sources leading to student departure: academic difficulties, an inability to resolve their academic goals, and their failure to become and/or remain integrated

in the academic and social life of the institution. Primary focus within this research utilized the integration model of Tinto's theory of student departure (1993). Within the narratives, it was clear that participants managed to successfully overcome academic challenges, resolve their academic goals, and integrate into their schools, through a variety of different methods, leading to a successful graduation.

**University Integration.** Multiple participants described the ways in which they connected with their universities: strong academic support tools, active faculty/staff advisors, relatable peers with similar backgrounds, and engaging on-campus mentors. Although considered separate processes, the integration into both academics and social communities on campus are considered complementary to each other, leading to greater commitment to the institution and graduation (Tinto, 1993). Under Tinto's model academic integration diverges into two branches: formal and informal. Formal academic integration includes compliance with institutional policy and maintaining adequate academic standards set by the institution. Informal academic integration includes positive interactions with both professors and various student services staff members. Similarly, social integration also deviates into both formal and informal interactions. Formal social interactions take place within established school sponsored student led group—for example, Veteran, Greek life, LGBTQ+, and student government organizations. Informal social integration consists of peer-to-peer interactions which can be found on campus as well as off campus. Examples include study groups, class projects, and daily interactions surrounding similar interests.

**Academic Integration.** One participant provided that she was not a strong high school student but was able to maintain a 3.9 grade point average through her college academic career. Her collegiate academic performance served as a motivator and catalyst for persistence. Another

participant provided that his initial academic challenges and detachment, leaving him to consider withdrawing and potentially giving up on his academic pursuits. He described how critical the academic supports and the engaged faculty were in making his goals a reality. Regarding informal academic aspects of integration, the participants shared their many exchanges with both faculty members and staff throughout the university. One participant in particular described a faculty member who allowed what she called disrespectful and offensive discourse to take place in the classroom with little regard for the feelings of those in the room. After approaching the faculty member and having a discussion, it became clear that the professor was attempting to create an environment for healthy debate but did not appear to facilitate it properly. In contrast, another participant described her relationship to one faculty member who shared a military background; he became a mentor to her through her collegiate career and they remain in contact. The college had no formal mentoring program, leading faculty member taking on an ancillary duty to work with her through her program and assist with graduate school applications. This additional support was pivotal—an experience she described as validating. Multiple participants reported that they had access to and utilized both formal and informal Veteran-specific resources to assist with navigation of admissions, financial benefits, registration, academic tutoring, as well as mental health. Conclusively, colleges and universities where Veteran students were deliberately academically integrated created opportunities for meaningful and memorable faculty and staff interactions.

**Social Integration.** Narratives of all participants highlighted the importance of creating formal and informal social connections within the institutions. Military service, cultural similarities, sexuality, and familial roles are just a few of the ways in which connections were made for these participants. One participant described his formal involvement with an on-

campus student organization as essential to his academic and social success. Having a group of like-minded individuals who shared a central part of his identity gave him a safe outlet to work through any challenges he faced, both personal and academic. Another participant became actively involved with fellow Veterans through a mentoring program on the campus as soon as he enrolled. Starting as a mentee and continuing on to become a mentor provided him with valuable experience, as well as personal fulfillment. An example of informal social integration would be the participant who describes the relationship with her school as “transactional” yet also found a support system within the on-campus day-care facility. Her connection to the center created the opportunity to form bonds with other parents who were managing a similar balance of home and school responsibilities. Similarly, another participant spoke about starting a study group, consisting of both Veterans and non-Veterans. This weekly meeting group provided stability and discipline regardless of any challenges she was managing outside of the classroom, affording her a sense of balance and consistency. The participants in this study provided insight into the critical role that social integration played throughout their college programs, which aligns with numerous student departure theoretical models.

### **Bean and Metzner’s Theory of Student Attrition**

The findings in this narrative inquiry reflect both individual and collective voices of the Veteran participants of the study. With the exception of one participant who viewed her relationship to the institution as purely transactional, this study found significant similarities across the participant accounts of their post-secondary experience. While the six participants came from different backgrounds, had no prior knowledge of each other, and were enrolled at separate institutions, their stories mirrored one another and their experiences aligned with the variables of Bean and Metzner’s Theory of Student Attrition (1985): (1) academic, (2) social, (3)

environmental, and (4) background variables. Each of the participants disclosed information about their family history and upbringing, and all of them provided anecdotes and encounters that they felt were worth sharing as a means to demonstrate key components of their identity both on and off campus.

**Academic Variables.** The findings of this inquiry illuminated the main variables identified by Bean and Metzner's (1987) theory of student attrition. Numerous participants spoke about their experiences and expectations regarding academic support and success. One participant spoke about his relationship and interactions with the advising and registrar's offices and described numerous instances of conflict where "the likelihood of completing [his] educational goal at the present institution" (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 495) was challenged. Another participant discussed the positive synergy he had with his academic advisor: he emphasized "the amount of importance ascribed to obtaining a college education" (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 495) which aligned with this participant's long-term goals. As participants described their expectations versus their experiences, it became clear that although each had individualized goals and varied life circumstances, the importance of academic advisement and support was paramount to their educational journeys. Although this study found that some students reported adequate advisement, and others discussed superior interactions, the "evaluation of the quality of the academic advising they have received" (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 500) was significant across the narratives.

**Environmental Variables.** Participants spoke about the importance of both internal and external influences associated with their enrollment and continuation in college. Specifically looking at external factors, participants reported individuals and/or services as being critical for their success. Bean and Metzner (1985) identify "such persons [as] a student's parent or spouse,



close friend, [or] an off-campus employer” (p. 504). One participant spoke about how the absence of a significant person from her life had a unique impact on her experiences socially and academically. This provided an extraordinary perspective on how a noteworthy influencer can continue to motivate and impact through presence or absence. Further, another participant described being afraid of utilizing institutional services due to the risk of her immigration status exposure. Contrary to this fear, as a single parent she did make the decision to enroll her son in the on-campus daycare to ensure her ability to continue her classes. Ultimately, the participants showed “that external encouragement [in any form] is important for nontraditional student” (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 506).

Environmental factors also include family responsibilities and obligations which can be seen across all participants responses. One participant in particular described her experiences as the main provider for a multi-generational household and the guilt she felt when school needed to be prioritized over her family obligations. This finding is supported by Bean and Metzner’s (1985) discussion of the impacts of familial obligations and “conflicts between time and priority” (p. 495). Conversely, this participant described her mother and son as main motivators in attaining her degree. Another participant reported that there were considerable financial challenges during her enrollment, specifically, delays of tuition payments, extended waits for housing allowance, and the inability to purchase required textbooks. This created numerous situations when family money had to be used to cover large account balances and resulted in a constant reevaluation of her dedication to continue. Although the financial burden of tuition and housing were believed to be covered utilizing the GI Bill, it remained clear in the participant narratives that policies and procedures created situations where “inadequate finances” (Bean and Metzner, 1985, p. 503) remained.

**Background Variables.** As with most models of student attrition, Bean and Metzner (1985) include the student's background as a variable when considering the longitudinal process of attrition. Background variables consist of, but are not limited to, enrollment status, parent's educational history, and residence on or off campus. Multiple participants described a lack of enrollment status changes as a result of hold placed on their accounts, triggered by financial aid blocks on their accounts as a result of delayed benefits. On multiple occasions, the participants would enroll in courses that were not required, due to a requirement that the Veterans must maintain full time enrollment status to receive full benefits. Bean and Metzner (1985) provided "that parents' level of formal education was [a] powerful predictor" (p. 498) to persistence. Each of the six participants self-identified as first-generation college students, meaning their parents had not completed undergraduate degrees yet the participants went on to persist throughout their programs. One particular participant described her role as "maternal" within her peer group at the university, which included leading study groups and organizing many of the group projects in order to share her own positive study habits with others. This model, although based on the non-traditional student, does not have complete applicability within the veteran or student parent.

### **Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to understand and examine the services and resources that veteran students perceived as contributing to their graduation. I accomplished this by conducting semi-structured interviews with six student Veteran parents who utilized the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The goal of this dissertation was to get a clear depiction of the institutional interactions and services that the participants perceived as noteworthy and/or impactful. Each institution had a variety of services available to Veterans and some were customized specifically for Veterans. The overarching themes highlighted by the participants were Relationships,

Institutional Services, Motivations, and Barriers & Threats. Table 7 provides the connections of the findings and the overarching themes they were derived from.

Table 7  
*Themes and Findings*

	Theme 1: Relationships	Theme 2: Institutional Services	Theme 3: Motivations	Theme 4: Barriers & Threats
Finding 1: Academic & Financial Advising	X	X		X
Finding 2: Faculty Mentoring	X	X		
Finding 3: Dedicated Space	X	X	X	
Finding 4: Benefits Assistance		X		X

The four key themes, in addition to participant narratives and interview data, led to the development of specific recommendations and implications for further research expanded upon in the next chapter.

### Summary

In Part I, the individual narratives of the participants painted a clear understanding of their journey and experiences during their post-secondary programs. Through these six narratives, key elements and features were highlighted to draw attention to particular parts of their stories. This moved the discussion to Part II which provided an analysis of the cross-cutting themes and illuminated fundamental components in answering the central question of this research study. Part III connected the participant experiences to the specific theoretical frameworks that guided this research. Through the analysis, the study found that paying homage

to relationships was central in the retelling of the participants' stories; an understanding of the various aspects of the Veteran's needs and identities; along with internal and external motivators; and their overall experience with institutional services at their schools could be described as a positive one. Although the details of the narratives varied according to individual circumstances, the stories had remarkable similarities evident in the themes explained in the previous section.

For example, even with five out of the six students commenting directly on the financial implications of the financial aid policies, it could be seen that the overall shared educational experience between the participants was a positive one, and one that they valued. Although each of the Veterans maintained very different paths to their bachelor's degree, they each were able to share their experiences for the purpose of this research, and their responses showed commonalities across the ways in which they utilized and desired various institutional services. Chapter 5 provides further discussion pertaining to my recommendations for higher education, the study's limitations, suggestions for future research, conclusions, and my personal reflection on this research.

**CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND FINAL REFLECTIONS****Introduction**

As evidenced in the literature review, a sizable gap exists in the student literature regarding the experiences of student Veterans with children. As a result, this study was guided by existing research on the history and development of student affairs as well as services devoted specifically to Veterans in higher education. Chapter two provided a historical examination of student affairs, subsequently leading to industry professionals taking a pragmatic approach to be better aligned with student needs (Barry et. al., 2014, McBain et. al., 2012). An overview of the student-centered approach through collaboration across disciplines and departments provided the background and mechanics that led to the growth of the student affairs field. The expansion of community college education allowed for increased access for non-traditional students through industry-driven, skills-based curriculum. Within the non-traditional student population – which makes up approximately 40% of the national undergraduate student body – 26% are also parents concurrently (Ridley and Kenefik, 2011). A subset of the non-traditional student parent population are Veterans whom account for approximately 5% of student parents, with an estimate of 20% in that number over five years (ACE, 2015, CLASP, 2018). Veterans not only encounter the same challenges and obstacles as other non-traditional students, but also have internal and external factors associated with their military service that differentiates them. Campuses are beginning to consider the wellness of student Veterans by providing resources and/or referrals targeting mental health. Despite the increase in enrollments of Veterans in higher education and the increased focus on the non-traditional student, there remains a gap surrounding Veteran student parents and how campus services and university personnel can support them to graduation.

Through the narrative approach outlined in Chapter 3, six military-affiliated college graduates were interviewed about their degree attainment and perspectives regarding their institutional services. The initial recruitment goal was 15 Veterans; the recruitment process took place through two mediums: the Massachusetts Student Veterans of America and the Massachusetts Veteran Services network. Semi-structured interviews using the protocol outlined in Appendix C was developed using Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993) as well as Bean and Metzner's Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition (1985). NVivo data management software was used to collect, store, and transcribe the audio recordings. Additionally, Saldana's first cycle In Vivo Coding and Pattern Coding for second cycle was used to begin the analysis. During the analysis it became clear that many of the experiences of the Veterans with children were very similar. In addition, through a review of the literature, it was clear that Veteran student parents were underrepresented in research. Thus, this project shifted to focus on the unique experiences of Veteran student parents. Narratives were constructed for each participant and intersecting themes were identified: relationships, institutional barriers, motivators, as well as barriers and threats. These can be found in chapter 4 along with a short reflection based on post interview memos. The use of Bean and Metzner's Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition (1985) addressed the various academic and social variables while Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993) addressed the formal and informal systems within higher education. This dissertation provides unique insight into the lived experiences of six student Veterans and how they perceived.

### **Discussion**

Based on the research findings and the opportunity to provide readers with an insight into the experiences of six Veteran college student parents, there are potential positive effects this

work can have on Veteran student parents and student Veterans, as well as higher education administrators. As discussed in Chapter 2 when considering the prevalence of this student population, there is a lack of literature concerning Veteran's higher education experiences and the unique challenges they face within this context. A consequent impact of this dissertation is to encourage Veteran students to develop and use their voices, specifically those who may not have felt that they had one. By presenting their stories, Veteran students may recognize the value their narratives bring to our institutions and feel more confident about letting their experiences be heard while also creating an increased interest for other scholar-practitioners to expand on the literature of this population.

I believe that through this research, Veteran-serving higher education organizations are able to truly see their impact through the words of their own stakeholders. I believe organizations across college campuses will be able to use this knowledge to strengthen and further develop their membership and ongoing relationships with Veterans, particularly those who are parents. Additionally, this research may also provide Veterans who are considering post-secondary education with idea of what services exist in higher education and what peers reported as being helpful. Through the individual testimonies provided in this research, prospective student Veterans are able to see that there are various networks and services to support a positive experience.

While examining the experiences of student parent Veterans during their post-secondary education, four common themes emerged throughout, leading to the development of implications and applications for this research: relationships, institutional services, motivations, as well as barriers and threats.

**Relationships**

Across the participants, relationships and support networks existed in various ways. Veteran peers, social groups, faculty assistance, and family support all had meaningful impacts on participants. Unexpectedly, this study indicated that social groups based on multiple identities were just as important as the support systems within Veteran services. Frequently throughout the narratives, participants mentioned the importance of having a network for mental health as well as academic support. Healthy relationships among students and their systems of support were reported by all participants as having a positive effect on their progress in their programs of study as well as their self-confidence. Participants who reportedly had unhealthy or strained relationships within their support structures frequently reported ways in which they were negatively affected both academically and mentally. Relationships reported by participants include but are not limited to peers, professors, family, advisors, and for many their boss.

**Institutional Services**

The availability of institutional services varied across each of the participants institutions, with some reported as robust and some lacking in services. As mentioned, an unexpected finding of this research was the frequency in which Veterans found their support from groups targeting their intersectional identities, not only as Veterans. For one participant, the group he gravitated too most was based on sexuality, another found a haven among a group of women who leveraged the on-campus childcare. Student- facing offices such as financial aid and academic advising were also discussed in great detail. Students who had positive interactions with staff members within the financial and advising offices reported feeling more supported by their institutions. Meanwhile, students with negative interactions reported increased stress, feeling unwelcome, and a less positive view overall of their academic institution. Among the participants, five



disclosed that they were disabled as a result of their service, but, only three leveraged the Disability Office. It was reported that the stigma surrounding the term “disability” in conjunction with not wanting to draw extra attention was a factor that kept two Veterans from obtaining accommodations, resulting in additional classroom challenges.

### **Motivations**

The factors leading to the transition into college were similar across each of the participants experiences with slight differences. All six Veterans discussed the importance of returning to school for their families: children, parents, and spouses. One participant returned to school to be a role model to her child and although unintentional also became one for her own parent, who did not graduate high school. Family influence and dynamic were reported most frequently as motivators across all the participants. Another motivator reported was the need to support their families financially; in an economy that values the attainment of a college degree, access to better paying and secure careers were a consideration. An unexpected source of encouragement mentioned by two participants came from significant loss. For one participant the unexpected death of her husband was a jarring life change that led to her return to school. She enrolled at the institution he was attending, not only to earn the credentials to financially support their two children, but also simultaneously honoring his memory. Another Veteran spoke highly of a fellow service member who died on a mission stating that they shared dreams of coming back from deployment and having the college experience. Unfortunately, given his friend’s death, this was not the case. He used this experience and loss as a motivator to push through challenging situations and remain focused.

### **Barriers and Threats**

Within the findings of this theme, Veterans reported both internal and external factors that were perceived as barriers and/or threats during their programs. Internal barriers reported were imposter syndrome, feeling excluded from the student body, and, most notably among the participants, a decline in their mental health status. Participants reported feelings of heightened anxiety and stress surrounding campus life. Loud noises and large crowds often left the Veteran participants feeling uneasy and each reported avoiding situations where they would feel uncomfortable. Participants described external barriers surrounding systematic inconsistencies and policies that led to Veterans being placed at a disadvantage. Examples of systematic barriers included financial aid keeping Veterans from registering for classes due to the timing of the VA processing tuition payments, class scheduling being limited, and the upfront costs of materials and books that Veterans are expected to pay. For many Veterans using the GI Bill, the monthly housing allowance accounts for a majority of household funds. For parent student Veterans, the costs for care are higher and the negative consequences of delayed benefit payments can be the difference between homelessness and hunger. Financial strain was the most reported barrier discussed within the interviews.

### **Implications**

Given the findings of this dissertation research and its ability to provide Veterans and higher education institutions with insight into the participant experiences, there are several areas that have been identified as needing attention within the higher education landscape in order to best serve Veterans and military affiliated student populations. Vincent Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Departure in addition to Bean and Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition (1985) provided the concepts for which this study was designed and analyzed. A core belief of Tinto's

(1993) theory is that there are institutional factors, such as faculty and staff interactions and relationships, that play a key role in students' academic success. While Bean and Metzner's model focuses on similar importance, they also account for the variable environmental impacts such as family and employment responsibilities. Participants reported numerous factors that were consistent with the theoretical frameworks, however there is a need to a specific model to be developed that considers the unique life experiences and factors reported by veteran students and veteran student parents. Each of these recommendations is inherently connected; implementation would require a shift in student services as well as the staff and faculty approach.

Institutions have been increasing their recruitment and focus of non-traditional students as a result of economic and societal shifts in the U.S. (Fain, 2017). This research provides administrators with examples of Veterans feeling ostracized and without a voice on college campuses. Considering the ways in which policies and procedures effect Veterans on campus would be a positive step toward creating a welcoming and supporting environment. As the number of non-traditional students on college campuses continues to grow, and, based on the perspectives provided by these Veterans, higher education administrators can leverage this research to ensure the needs of this growing non-traditional student population are truly being met based on what they report. Recommendations were developed as a result of the experiences reported by the participants and align with the four themes: relationships, institutional services, motivations, and barriers & threats.

### **1) Universities must develop policies and procedures that support student Veterans**

Consistent policy barriers were reported by the participants and were reflected in the institutional services theme as well as the barriers and threats theme. Based on the findings of this research, recommended services are identified below.

**Data Tracking.** According to the data available, there is a lack of accurate tracking of Veteran student parents within higher education. An initial change that administrators can implement to serve Veterans properly is to identify who they are. In order to enroll in classes, every student must fill out an application; this would be the most appropriate place to inquire about military status. An admissions application in conjunction with the federal financial aid information would provide schools with an accurate count on Veterans as well as identifying student parents. To develop services and successful programming, it is important to understand who your Veteran students are and what they need; 96% of all post-secondary institutions enroll Student Veterans (USDVA, 2014). Schools should offer a voluntary self-identification option on the application, keeping in mind that as reported in this study, not every Veteran self identifies. This is particularly applicable within the National Guard and Reserve branches of the military who up until 2016 were not legally considered Veterans unless they met a service requirement (Soucy, 2016).

**Financial Aid and Advising.** To negate the challenges the Veterans reported, there are multiple processes that institutions can utilize, most notably within the financial and academic advising offices. The Financial Aid office is one of the most important offices to have trained staff familiar with the process and eligibility of the various GI Bill programs. Financial stress is noted as a major concern and barrier for Veterans in education within this study; as a result, having a staff member within the financial aid office who can work with students to plan around the length of the process would help in streamlining the application and disbursement of VA benefits. For Veteran students raising children, postponement of monetary benefits can have a detrimental effect on family finances. Veterans within this research reported housing insecurity, food shortages, and childcare loss as a result of financial aid delays and policies. The Office of

Academic Advising is another office that Veterans mentioned being essential to their success. Ensuring that academic advisors are trained to understand the requirements surrounding enrollment status and how a change in registration can affect eligibility may relieve stress for the students. Certifying attendance following add/drop is not a policy that can change due to regulations; however, better communication to connect Veterans to the person managing their benefits would take much of the additional stress out of the initial enrollment period.

**Benefits Certification.** All participants included in this study reported financial hardships and challenges related to the ways in which GI Bill benefits were administered and managed at their respective institutions. The GI Bill requires certification of benefits from each institution to ensure proper payment to the school and individual. This certification often takes place after the school's determined "add/drop" period which is a few weeks into the semester; if a school official is late or incorrect, the timing can take far longer. Housing and living allowances come one month following the certification, leaving many Veterans struggling financially during at least the first two months of any given semester. Due to the delay of federal tuition payments being released to institutions, many registrars' offices have automatic financial aid holds that take effect with a balance, leading to the Veteran not being able to register for classes; the result is frequently delayed graduation. Additionally, the provided stipend to cover the cost of required books comes in approximately two months into the semester, leaving Veterans to not only pay out of pocket for their materials, but the amount of the stipend is \$150 a semester which in most cases will cover one or two books. Within the financial aid office, it would help these students to remove any aid-related holds on their accounts to ensure that they are not placed at a disadvantage due to a timeline over which they have no control. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics the inflation of book prices from 2006-2016 soared over 87%

(USDL, 2016). This increased cost was reported as being a financial hinderance; addressing this through a lending library, an unlimited eBook access code, or other deeply discounted way to obtain the materials required could support Veteran student success,. At minimum, these changes may allow Veteran students to have equitable access to classes and materials without the additional financial stress.

**Attendance and Leave Policies.** Across universities, there are varied attendance and leave policies; in addition, there are individual policies set by professors for each class. While the absence policies are necessary to ensure that students receive the highest quality instruction, it is important to note the ways in which these rules may put Veteran students at a health risk. For any student, illness may require absence from a class; Veterans are often managing physical conditions in conjunction with various mental health conditions. Through this study it was discovered that often Veterans were putting their own health secondary to that of their children, leaving dangerous mental health conditions untreated to avoid issues with absenteeism. For many schools the Disability Office would be able to assist with accommodations such as this; however, the stigma surrounding the term disability may have a negative effect on a student's willingness to seek assistance. There has been discussion within higher education to change the disability office to a less stigmatized name. Creating a more welcoming and destigmatized environment for Veterans may include renaming the Disability Services office to a more strength focused title such as Access Services, Center for Student Ability, Diversity and Inclusion, and Student Access Center.

### **Universities must develop Veteran and military programs and resources**

Each of the participants attended a different institution for their degree, both public and private. Each institution had its own offerings for Veteran students: lounges, dedicated advisors

and academic supports, bookstore discounts, childcare, and priority registration were just a few of the options across the institutions. The availability or desire for specific services was reported by the participants and were reflected with in the relationship theme, institutional services theme, as well as the barriers and threats theme. Based on the findings of this research, recommended services are identified below.

**Veteran Spaces.** Five of the six universities from which the participants graduated had created Veteran and military resource centers and seemed to be proactive about addressing issues experienced by this diverse non-traditional student population on their campuses. The existence of a Veteran-specific space at the institutions were reported as beneficial when used by students. For Veteran with children, the centers became a hub of activity ranging from quiet study to referrals for childcare. The American Council on Education has also noted “A Veterans’ lounge might provide a study area with computers and would offer student Veterans one convenient location where they can spend time, interact with peers, find the answers to their questions, and feel comfortable” (ACE, 2018). For some Veterans the center may act as a place to socialize, whereas other students rely on this designated space to do academic work.

**Veteran Singular Point of Contact.** It is imperative to develop policies to connect both Veteran and key administrative employees with Veteran students to inform staff and prepare them to address issues that Veterans face on campus. Veterans value the trust that is built through hands-on, in-person assistance from a single source knowledgeable about all of the facets of their benefits and resources. Therefore, this research suggests campuses without one should develop an office appropriately named and properly supported to advocate for Veterans and their particular needs. The school’s Veterans Affairs (VA) certifying official would make the most appropriate central point of contact at the institution. Appointing the certifying official as

the singular contact for both student Veterans and the VA would ensure that information travels efficiently and accurately between the student, the school, and the VA benefit office. Veterans have reported that they would prefer an individual contact at the school to act as a one-stop shop for navigation (USDVA, 2014, ACE, 2018). Consistent and ongoing support, funding, and evaluation at multiple levels will ensure all levels of the university adhere to regulations while serving a changing dynamic of students.

**Faculty and Staff Engagement.** Faculty and staff provide crucial connections to the campus and for non-traditional students, for some they may act as the sole affiliation with their institution. As Bean and Metzner (1985) and Vincent Tinto (1993) discussed within their research, students with a low sense of connection or negative feelings about their school are at a higher risk of dropping out. These sentiments were echoed in this research as well. For students with military experience, the availability of professionals who share a military background or connection proved beneficial and desired (ACE, 2018). Within higher education 62% of students are first-generation college students, meaning they have no familial experience to pull from when navigating college life (USDVA, 2014). As discussed in chapter 4, participants reported that when they had peers who took the time to get to know them, it had a positive impact on them academically. In having mentors and supporters that share a vital part of the student's identity, students could see themselves represented within the people they looked up to and felt more comfortable around them. Within military units it is common for new sailors and soldiers to be assigned to a member of the unit who has been there for over a year in order to assist with the transition and assimilation process. A system designed to help Veterans on campus may include a similar approach. Connecting incoming Veteran students with members of the institution who are either enrolled in classes or employees of the school to assist with the culture difference from



the military to a college campus could provide support for Veterans making the transition onto college campuses.

**On-Campus Childcare.** Over 47% of student Veterans have children that they are caring for during the time that they are attending college classes (ACE, 2018). For parents managing a school schedule along with childcare and potentially a job, the availability of affordable and safe childcare is needed. Research has found that the average annual cost of childcare is higher than that of a year's tuition at a public institution in 28 states, leaving Veteran student parents in a vulnerable financial and mental health situation (Child Aware America, 2018). Investing in and providing on campus childcare to support student Veteran parents and civilian non-traditional student parents would benefit all involved. Lack of safe childcare contributes to the achievement gap seen among student parents and having these services available would address that gap while also increasing the student's commitment to the school (Miller, 2010).

### **Universities must create and maintain a Veteran Friendly Campus Culture**

Through the participant stories shared in this dissertation, it was made clear that making students feel welcome and validated on campus has an impact on their success or failure. While some colleges claim to be 'Veteran-friendly', even those who hold the distinction can make concrete improvements to better serve Veterans on campus. Based on the findings of this research, recommended services are identified below.

**Professional Development for Institutional Employees.** Mandatory training for all staff who work with or on cases involving Veterans could be designed. For Veteran students interacting with offices on campus, it would be beneficial to have representatives who are not only familiar with the Veteran culture but also the ways in which Veterans' benefits work.

To increase understanding among the faculty and staff of an institution, it would be beneficial to utilize a program that can support faculty and staff when assisting student Veterans identify and connect with appropriate resources. Green Zone training which was developed by Veteran services professionals at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2010, is now offered on over 100 college campuses across the United States. The training is primarily used to illuminate issues faced by military-affiliated students while training staff and faculty to gain tools; enhancing the overall experience for military-connected students so they may better advise and support them toward degree completion. Institutions can customize professional development opportunities to ensure that when implementing programs, they are appropriate for the school culture and will serve student's needs.

**Extra-Curricular Opportunities for Engagement.** There are a variety of ways that schools make their students feel welcome and included on and off campus. Supported by Vincent Tinto's departure theory (1975) and indicated by the participant reports, the ways in which students are engaged by their institutions have an effect on their successful completion. The creation and funding for a formal student Veteran organization would allow for a community to be built on campus. Activities that participants described from their institutions included robust student activities targeted at traditional aged students: open mic nights, karaoke, and outings appropriate for the demographic. Veterans may not feel welcome or appropriate attending events with traditional students who may be a similar age to their children. The Student Veterans of America and the Veterans of Foreign Wars are two of the national organizations that have representation on college campuses and provide social engagements for Veteran students. Both the SVA and VFW work with and on behalf of Veterans on issues of advocacy as well as events highlighting the service of members connected to the institution. The incorporation of a Veteran

focused group could create a positive conversation and increase the feelings of inclusion on campus. It is important to note that the process of creating a student group on campus varies, however institutional support is recommended. As discussed in chapter two, military Veterans have adapted to their former lifestyle of a regimented routine, goal orientation and a disciplined mindset, therefore creating social and academic opportunities for these students is beneficial.

### **Future Research**

The goal of this dissertation was to understand the roles that institutions played in the successful completion of bachelor's degrees according to Veteran students, specifically those who are parents. This study examined the experiences of Veteran student parents from various branches and institutions, and the results focus on the commonalities of their perceptions of the institutional services and interactions that they perceived as contributing to their success. This research combined with the lack of research about Veteran student parents creates an opportunity for future research. Eventual research could increase the number of Veteran participants and focus on a specific subset of institutions to gain a more nuanced understanding of the available and desired targeted services.

Although not a participant criterion, all of the fifteen initial participants in this study identified as first-generation college students, meaning neither of their parents had gone to college as of their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Future studies could ensure that the sample is representative of students with parents of different educational backgrounds; this may also affect how comfortable the Veteran students were with self-advocacy and higher education navigation.

Further, this study only looked at Veterans who successfully persisted to degree completion and were college graduates, so it is limited in terms of comparisons with Veterans who were not successful in their attempts to transition from the military into college. As a result, researching

those Veteran students who did not complete their programs or transfer to a different institution could yield rich insight into other or unknown barriers and threats to persistence and completion not addressed in this study. Ultimately there is a need for theoretical models to address the experiences and best practices for Veteran student parents and civilian student parents.

### **Conclusions**

This dissertation has presented the experiences of six military student Veteran parent college graduates at six separate institutions across Massachusetts to better understand their experiences and perceptions. It is my hope that these findings are used to develop policies and practices that will be used to better support these students to ensure their academic success. With the decline of the traditional student pool, increased enrollment of Veterans, and the projection of growth of student parents on college campuses it is essential that we are prepared to serve an increasingly diverse population.

### **Final Reflection**

As professionals we are often faced with a plethora of information and best practices with no resources or funding to incorporate into our daily work. I am fortunate to be in a position that allows me to leverage this research into additional studies as well policy changes to support Veterans, student parents, at promise, and non-traditional students. This research has been presented at the Council of Education Annual conference titled “Covering All Bases” which focused on intersectionality of “at-promise” students. This research has also been adapted into a training session for the National Association of Veterans Upward Bound to expand the knowledge base for practitioners who work with first generation and low-income Veteran students. Additional work I intend to do with the data collected includes a book of testimonials as well as peer reviewed articles including the participants not included in this dissertation.

The findings of this study led me to make adjustments and policy changes within the Veterans Upward Bound Program that I manage at Suffolk University. The Center for Access and Opportunity is home to the Veterans Upward Bound program in addition to two additional federally funded grant programs, each serving a specific population. As an office, we have shifted to a model that allows any staff member to work with a student regardless of program affiliation, to allow for the relationships to develop organically and not through force. In addition, each person employed within the office is a first-generation college student, most of low-income backgrounds, and all of whom share the mission to better the lives of our students and improve access and opportunity in higher education. We have a staff that truly represents our student body, we are as diverse as the students are which creates a sense of trust among us. The changes have been made to ensure that students who need the support, have access to professionals who represent them and relate to their experiences. Taking the time to ensure that students feel a positive connection to a member of our office is crucial to developing a trusting rapport.

Although I am not currently in a position to influence the Universities current institution-based services, I am fortunate to work alongside Veteran services and student affairs administrators who are open to new approaches and willing to make changes to support their students. The array of motivations expressed by the participants led me to seek a deeper understanding of the external and internal catalysts for my own students. To understand where they were is the only way to truly get a sense who they are, and that is the most effective tool I use to encourage them to visualize who they can become.

### **Personal Statement**

When I first began my doctoral journey during the summer of 2014, I found myself managing a severe case of the syndrome. Imposter Syndrome is a psychological pattern of thought causing doubt and consistent internalized fear (Le, 2019). This left me with a perpetual inability to believe that my success was deserved or that I belonged there among so many great minds. In 2009 when I walked into North Shore Community College to take Introduction to Children's Literature, I knew that I wanted to be at the front of the classroom someday. As I prepare to take my place among doctoral degree holders, I wish to reflect and share from my experiences.

A Ph.D. may take up to eight years to complete and professional doctoral degrees can take anywhere from four to six years to complete. These estimates are dependent on timing, program design, the subject area you are studying. Life can be hard, and it can eat you up if you allow your mistakes and failures to define you and your path. Life will not pause for your studies; babies will be born, marriages will happen, people will die, holidays will come and go. While you are burning the midnight oil, people will continue to live their lives and you may unfortunately have to sacrifice and miss events. I was advised that during my studies I should not: "Start a new anything, move, get a new job, say yes to anything extra-curricular." I disagree whole heartedly; my constant connection to the real world outside my research was a reprieve on many days. You need to strive for balance. Your life is not just about academics, and you dedicate every moment of each day to academics. From the beginning of your academic journey, seek out healthy role models and mentors, and learn their strategies for work-life balance.

I must confess that the loneliest I have even felt was throughout the PhD process. Self-isolation is easy to fall into and a strong support system will help. Both as a mother and as a student, I spent a lot of time finding and developing my network; people whom I could turn to for support while I was balancing motherhood, work, and school. As a first-generation student, the academic village was the most challenging to fill. I did not have anyone that had experienced the ups and downs of graduate school. Rely on your social support network; talking to classmates, friends and family are important strategies for self-care. Maintain contact with your friends and colleagues. With social networking and other Internet tools such as Skype, it is easy to stay in contact with friends around the country, or even the world.

When you board an airplane, the attendants always advise you to put your mask on before helping others – this is because you are no good to them if you do not help yourself. This was the hardest lesson I ever had to learn, and graduate school was a true test of my ability to follow through with that. Find ways to manage your stress, because it will be in no short supply. For me, I choose one day a week to mindlessly binge on tv shows, just to let my mind rest and spend as much time with my family as I could. This was the time I needed to rejuvenate and maintain balance. Please, be aware of your physical and mental wellness, self-care strategies are not always enough, the first move is yours.

At times I would truly struggle with remembering the reason I started this, what decisions I made to bring me to that exact moment in time. I often found comfort in this poem, and a sense of fortitude. When things got tough, I reflected on those who came before me and that this work was done to help those who came after.

“It is the VETERAN, not the preacher, who has given us freedom of religion.

It is the VETERAN, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press.

It is the VETERAN, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech.

It is the VETERAN, not the organizer, who has given us freedom to assemble.

It is the VETERAN, not the lawyer, who had given us the right to a fair trial.

It is the VETERAN, not the politician, who has given us the right to vote.”

Author: Unknown



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Recruitment Email to Presidents

Dear SVA Chapter President,

My name is Alicia Reddin, and I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Studies at Lesley University. I am conducting research on the experiences of Veterans in higher education to determine what institutional supports and services they perceived promoted a positive experience and lead to successful degree completion.

My study requires that I interview 8-10 Veterans who used the Post 9/11 GI Bill at a college in Massachusetts, attended full time, completed their bachelor's degree between the years of 2016-2018, and are current residents of Massachusetts.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time without penalty. I am asking you to distribute the attached memo to your alumni membership.

While portions of the study may be presented publicly or later published, no identifying information will be included.

There are no risks anticipated with participating in the study, and no incentive for participation is being offered.

If you have questions about the study, feel free to contact me via phone at C: (\*\*\*) \*\*\*-\*\*\*\* or via email at [areddin@lesley.edu](mailto:areddin@lesley.edu) or contact the Lesley University IRB chair, via email at [IRB@lesley.edu](mailto:IRB@lesley.edu).

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Alicia M Reddin

U.S. Navy Veteran

**Appendix B: Recruitment Email to Participants**

Dear SVA Member:

My name is Alicia Reddin, and I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Studies at Lesley University. I am conducting research on the experiences of Veterans in higher education to determine what institutional supports and services they perceived promoted a positive experience and lead to successful degree completion.

My study requires that I interview 8-10 Veterans who used the Post 9/11 GI Bill at a college in Massachusetts, attended full time, completed their bachelor's degree between the years of 2016-2018, and are current residents of Massachusetts.

I am requesting your participation in my doctoral study and would welcome the opportunity to speak with you about the study at your convenience to explain the parameters and degree of commitment involved.

Please feel free to share this with other Veterans who you feel would meet the above-mentioned criteria. Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Note: If you have questions about the study or your potential participation, feel free to contact me via phone at **C: (339) 224-2467** or via email at [areddin@lesley.edu](mailto:areddin@lesley.edu) or contact the Lesley University IRB chair, via email at [IRB@lesley.edu](mailto:IRB@lesley.edu).

Sincerely,

Alicia M Reddin – US Navy

### **Appendix C: Informed Consent (Participant)**

My name is Alicia Reddin, and I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Studies at Lesley University. I am conducting research on the experiences of Veterans in higher education to determine what institutional supports and services they perceived promoted a positive experience and lead to successful degree completion. Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study outlined below.

Your interview will be held at a location and time convenient for you, will last up to 120 minutes and be audio recorded. In order to protect your privacy, identity, and anonymity, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym as the name by which you would like to be referred to in the study. Please note that any names or identifying information will be coded and given pseudonyms.

You may be contacted again via phone or email after the interview to enhance or clarify your statements. Once the transcripts are completed you will be given a narrative summary of our interview for review to ensure accuracy. If there are items you would like edited, please notify me within 10 days of receiving the summary documents.

All information provided by you will be treated in a confidential manner, and no real names will appear on the transcripts of the interview or in the discussion of the study results. In addition, your institution will not be identified in the study.

While portions of the study may be presented publicly or later published, no identifying information will be included. Portions of the study or transcripts may be used in the future for later studies.

Once the study is complete, you will have the chance to read the study outcomes and findings if you are interested in doing so.

There are no risks anticipated with participating in the study, and no incentive for participation is being offered. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

If you have questions about the study or your potential participation, feel free to contact me via phone at **C: (339) 224-2467** or via email at [areddin@lesley.edu](mailto:areddin@lesley.edu) or contact the Lesley University IRB chair, via email at [IRB@lesley.edu](mailto:IRB@lesley.edu).

Please read and sign below if you are willing to participate:

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (print full name), hereby agree to participate in the project described above. I give my permission to be interviewed and understand that it will be tape recorded. I understand that my responses will be kept and secured for an undetermined period of time.

I understand the nature and intent of the study and have been given the chance to ask questions. I understand whom to contact if I have any future questions. I also understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, and I can expect to receive a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: **Alicia M Reddin**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



**Appendix D: Sample Interview Questions**

<b>Core Questions</b>	<b>POTENTIAL Follow Up Questions</b>
Can you please tell me a bit about yourself?	Can you tell me about how you balanced school and out of school responsibilities? Was XYZ your first institution? How long did it take you to complete your bachelor’s Degree?
Can you tell me about you as a student during your bachelor’s program?	Were you involved with any student groups on or off campus? Were you involved with any Veterans Groups on or off campus?
What were your interactions with faculty members like?	Are there any specific instances you would like to share? *Positive or Negative or one of each
What were your social interactions with other students like?	Are there any specific instances you would like to share? *Positive or Negative or one of each
Who or what would you say supported your educational goals?	Can you tell me more about that?
Were there any interactions that you feel hindered your educational goals?	Can you tell me more about that?
What supports & Services were available to Veterans Students at your school?	How were your experiences with those services?
What would have made your time at XYZ better?	Can you explain to me how that would have been helpful to you as a student?
If you were able to give advice to school faculty on how to better support you, what would that be?	Can you explain to me how that would have been helpful to you?
Is there anything else that you want to share?	

**Closing:**

“Thank you so much for participating in this research study and taking the time out to answer a few questions and talk about your experience. I just want to also reiterate and reconfirm the confidentiality of this interview and anonymity of the contents of this research. Do you have any questions before we conclude? Thank you again!”

**Appendix E: Demographics Form**

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Military Brank and Rank: \_\_\_\_\_

Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

Graduation Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Final GPA: \_\_\_\_\_ \*if known

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_ African American \_\_\_ Asian \_\_\_ Black African \_\_\_ Caucasian  
\_\_\_ Hispanic \_\_\_ Latino \_\_\_ Pacific Islander \_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship Status: \_\_\_ Married \_\_\_ Single \_\_\_ In Relationship \_\_\_ Divorced

Children: \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

Ages: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix F: Interview Protocol Sheet for Semi-Structured Interviews**

Date/Time \_\_\_\_\_

Location \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer Alicia M. Reddin

Interviewee Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee Alias: \_\_\_\_\_

Release form signed? \_\_\_\_\_

Demographics Collected? \_\_\_\_\_

Notes to interviewee:

Approximate length of interview: 60 - 120 Minutes

Purpose of research: The purpose of my qualitative research study is to examine the experiences of Veterans in higher education to determine what institutional supports and services they perceived promoted a positive experience and lead to successful degree completion.

**Appendix G: First Cycle In Vivo Coding Sample**

Actual Text	Participant	In Vivo
<p>“My mom and I would be there helping Jake with his homework while we did ours. It was a chain, I was writing college papers, my mom was studying for her GED and Jake was in elementary school.</p>	<p><b>Regina</b></p>	<p>“my mom”                      “helping Jake”                      “we did ours”</p>
<p>“My boys, they’re my world, ever since they were born {pause} my wife basically raised them alone while I deployed so when I got back, I wanted to be there for them. They had all the important talks with her, puberty, dating, even hygiene but I was the one they saw go back to school and that made them proud”</p>	<p><b>David</b></p>	<p>“my boys”                      “I wanted to be there for them”                      “made them proud”</p>
<p>“When I was little, my mom would always role play with me to make sure I knew what to do and where to go if immigration ever came for them. Day to day I was always prepared for the worst. I didn’t want that for Adam.</p>	<p><b>Madeline</b></p>	<p>“my mom”                      “prepared for the worst”                      ‘for Adam”</p>
<p>“Being gay in the military is still not easy but being home I could really be myself. For years I wasn’t able to bring the girls or Max to anything, not because I was ashamed. I didn’t want work to be any harder. I was so far in the closet; I was basically a coat hanger. But college gave me a place to just be myself without worrying about how I would be professionally perceived or taunted.”</p>	<p><b>Duncan</b></p>	<p>“be myself”                      “not because I was ashamed”                      “in the closet”                      “a place to just be myself”</p>
<p>“Those kids could have been mine! It was fine though, I loved being around them, my kids were almost at the age that they didn’t really want to be around me so it was nice. I liked having a group to study with, and stress with.</p>	<p><b>Alice</b></p>	<p>“I loved being around them”                      “I liked have a group”</p>
<p>“I wasn’t sure what to expect when I walked through the front door. I just kept thinking about how he [Zach] would feel seeing me in the moment. I had to be a role model for the kids and make this work. He was gone and I needed to take care of them the way he did”</p>	<p><b>Rita</b></p>	<p>“role model”                      “for the kids”                      “make this work”                      “provide for them”</p>