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**Choice, Transition, Engagement, and Persistence: The Experiences of Female
Student Veterans at The University of Texas at Austin**

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**Choice, Transition, Engagement, and Persistence: The Experiences of
Female Student Veterans at The University of Texas at Austin**

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my family, without whom I am nothing.

To my love, Brandt, the best partner in crime anyone could ever dream to find. Not one page of this journey would have been possible without your unwavering support, unconditional love, and unbelievably great humor. I love you and I am so grateful for you.

To my parents who taught me the value of hard work, commitment to family, and love of God, I thank you. Mom, you showed me the way—you still do... Dad, when I was ready to give up, you encouraged me to “dissert first, play later.”

To my brother, who is the bravest human I have ever met. Full stop. And to my sister-in-law, who has taught me what grace under pressure looks like.

To Mags and Little Man, who are my heart and who teach me so much every day (hardly the other way around).

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Choice, Transition, Engagement, and Persistence: The Experiences of Female Student Veterans at The University of Texas at Austin

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As the numbers of veterans on campus increase as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the reauthorization of the GI Bill, higher education is called to more keenly understand and support this population (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Moreover, in light of the growing population of female student veterans, this timely study adds to the inappropriately small body of knowledge of female military veterans' experiences in higher education and to conceptualize this population's experiences with regard to college choice, transition to campus, institutional engagement, and overall persistence to degree.

By utilizing a transitional theory framework, this study advances research on the particularly complex educational trajectories of female student veterans (Hamrick & Rumann, 2011). By employing a phenomenological approach, this study brings a close examination of the experiences as described by participants, providing for a distillation of respondents' experiences into a composite description of their experiences, which can be used to inform faculty, staff, and administration about this growing population. Lastly, by

examining the experiences of female student veterans at a four-year, flagship, public research university, this study augments our understanding about a worrisome trend: female student veterans select four-year, research institutions less frequently than their male peers and nonveteran women, despite the presence of educational benefits provided by military service and the GI Bill, the robust veteran student services more often found at four-year institutions, and the long-term personal economic benefits that come from completing a four-year degree.

Female student veteran experiences served as a major source of data and research was gathered in the form of a demographic survey, individual interviews, and small focus groups consisting of undergraduate female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin. Outcomes are manifold and include the conceptualization of the unique experiences of female student veterans at the university as well as support for future policy relating to female student veterans' educational success.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	xiii
List of Tables	xiv
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Problem Statement	2
Purpose of Study	3
Research Questions	5
Theoretical Framework	6
Significance	7
High Points of Related Literature	8
Limitations of Existing Literature	8
Delimitations	10
Definitions	10
Organization of Proposal	12
Summary	14
Chapter Two: Literature Review	16
Brief History of Veterans in Higher Education	16
The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (“The GI Bill”)	17
Educational benefits for veterans after WWII.	18
The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008.	19
Student Veterans on Campus: Unique Experiences with Regard to College Choice, Transition, Engagement, and Persistence	20
Today’s student veteran.	21
Student veterans and college choice.	24
Student veterans and transition.	31
Student veterans and engagement.	36
Student veterans and persistence.	49
Female Student Veterans: Unique Experiences with Regard to Identity Development, College Choice, Transition, Engagement, and Persistence	54

Women and identity development	54
Origins of adult and identity development.....	55
Feminist theories of adult and identity development.....	59
New ways of conceptualizing adult and identity development. .	62
Female veteran identity development	69
Female veterans and military socialization.....	70
The intersection of race and gender for female veterans.	72
Female veterans and military sexual trauma.....	74
Female student veterans.....	76
Female student veterans and college choice.	77
Female student veterans and transition.	80
Female student veterans and engagement.....	82
Female student veterans and persistence.	84
Theoretical Framework.....	87
A brief history of Schlossberg's theory of transition.....	87
Schlossberg's theory of transition defined.....	89
Approaching transitions: transition identification and transition process.....	90
Taking stock of coping resources: The 4 S system.....	92
Taking charge: strengthening resources.....	95
Transition theory and student veterans.	95
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	100
Problem Statement.....	100
Research Questions.....	102
Research Design.....	103
Analytical Paradigm.....	104
Participants.....	105
Site of the Study.....	107
Sources of Data.....	108
Data Analysis.....	110

Data Quality	112
Timeline for the Study	114
Assumptions and Limitations	114
Chapter Four: Findings	118
Demographic Summary of Participants	119
Age, ethnicity, marital status of participants.	120
Military service of participants.	121
Educational trajectories and experiences of participants.	122
Composite description of female student veterans at UT Austin.	127
Comparison of composite description with populations at UT Austin.	128
Demographic differences.	129
Educational trajectories and experiences.	131
Participant Profiles	133
Participant profile summaries: Janna, Tracy, Maria, Irene, Molly.	134
College choice.....	136
Transition experiences.	140
Institutional, social, and academic engagement.....	145
Institutional engagement.....	146
Social engagement.	149
Academic engagement.	153
Perceptions about persistence.	154
Aspects of identity development.....	156
Making the most of opportunities.	160
Chapter Five: Discussion	165
Discussion of Key Findings	167
Distinct patterns of demography.	167
Unique ethnic/racial distribution.....	168
Marital status and presence of dependents.....	170
Unique educational experiences and trajectories.....	172
College choice.....	172

Transition.	174
Engagement: institutional, social, academic.	177
Persistence.	180
Conceptions of identity and success.	183
Analysis of Key Findings via Transition Theory.....	185
Assessment (situation).	186
Analysis (self).	188
Assistance (support).	190
Action (strategies).	192
Summarizing participants' experiences via transition theory.....	195
Chapter Six: Summary.....	197
Results Summarized by Research Question	199
Visual Representation of Participant Experience	202
Limitations	204
Participant recruitment.....	205
Sample representativeness.	208
Data collection and measures.....	209
Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice	213
Theory implications.	213
Policy implications.....	214
Implications for practice.	218
Suggestions for Future Research	221
Conclusion	225
Appendix A: Recruitment Materials.....	228
Email to Potential Participant	228
Campus Flyer	229
Advertisement: Campus Newspaper.....	229
Advertisement: Online Classified Advertisement	230
Language for Student Veterans Association (SVA) Site.....	230
Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire.....	231

Appendix C: Interview Protocol	235
Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol	237
Appendix E: Consent Form	239
References.....	241

List of Figures

Figure 1: The Transition Framework.....	90
Figure 2: Coping Resources—the 4 Ss	93
Figure 3: Adaptation of the 4S Model	98
Figure 4. Visual representation of participants’ persistence experiences.	204

List of Tables

Table 1. Demographic summary of participants.....	121
Table 2. Military experiences of participants.	122
Table 3. Educational experiences and trajectories of participants.....	125
Table 4. Perceptions of campus services by participants.....	126
Table 5. Participant perceptions about transition and engagement on campus.	127
Table 6. Comparisons of participant racial/ethnic distribution.....	130

Chapter One: Introduction

For many female veterans who become college students and juggle multiple roles, the deeply rooted sense of a responsibility for others that they adapted to a combat situation will follow them into an academic environment. This sense of teamwork and connectedness when balanced with the justice and fairness orientation adopted from the discipline of the military become important components of success in the college environment. (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 75)

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which female military veterans experience post-secondary education. As the numbers of veterans on campus increase as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the reauthorization of the GI Bill, higher education is called to more keenly understand and support this audience (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Particular attention is warranted for the unique needs presented by female student veterans, an increasing number of which, in addition to balancing often-competing roles of wife, mother, and student, are also members of racial or ethnic minorities (General Accounting Office, 2005; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2011).

The demographic makeup of the United States Armed Forces has shifted dramatically in the past 40 years, especially in regard to gender (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Women make up approximately 14 percent of active-duty military, a four-fold increase since the end of the Vietnam War in the mid-1970s. Female soldiers comprise approximately 11 percent of troops currently deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan and almost half of all women veterans have served in the Gulf War Era (1990 to present) (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2007). In 2011, women constituted 8.3 percent of all

living veterans; by 2035 that number is projected to be 15 percent (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2011). Further, the number of female veterans and servicemembers pursuing postsecondary education grew from one percent in 1964 to approximately 15 percent in 2012 (Hamrick & Rumann, 2012). By 2009, 27 percent of all college students with military experience were female (Radford, 2009).

Problem Statement

Studies suggest (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Dobie et al., 2004; Moore & Kennedy, 2011; Perconte, Wilson, Pontius, Dietrick, & Sprio, 1993) that women are disproportionately affected by particular experiences in the military. Female servicemembers are more likely to suffer incidents of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and incidents of sexual assault than their male counterparts (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (NCVAS), 2011; U.S Department of Defense, 2007). For women, basic training uniquely affects identity development, as it “strips civilian and personal identity and socializes individuals into members of a cadre” (Sherman, 2010, p. 12). As Herbert (1998) describes, basic training involves radical resocialization; it is a process of “depersonalization and deindividuation in which the military, in the form of drill sergeants, must strip the individual of all previous self-definition” (p. 9). In terms of gender development, what is respected in the military is “a gender identity that demonstrates male characteristics” (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 40). In response to

this pressure, female servicemembers act either more feminine, more masculine or both (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; DeFleur & Warner, 1987; Herbert, 1998; Williams, 1989).

Similarly, following military service, female veterans experience campus differently than their male peers. Female veterans are less likely to use educational benefits (DeFleur & Warner, 1985; NCVAS, 2011; U.S. Department of Defense, 2007). Once they make the decision to enroll in postsecondary education, female veterans experience the transition to campus differently than male peers, often retaining connections to pre-service faculty or mentors, initiating communication with these individuals, depending on previously-established networks rather than developing new ones for assistance as they adjust to campus (Ackerman et al., 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2011). And unlike male veterans, female veterans on campus are less likely to find same-gender role models, which compounds issues associated with establishing a civilian identity (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

From this, Hamrick and Rumann (2012) suggest that “colleges and universities should be aware of the potential implications for women veterans and servicemembers who subsequently enroll in college” (para. 2). As Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) note, “when the structured military community is removed, the individual is forced to again redefine who she is as a civilian, a veteran, a female, and a student” (p. 40).

Purpose of Study

The primary purpose of this study was to contribute to the inappropriately small body of knowledge of female military veterans’ experiences in higher education

(Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2011). In light of the growing population of female student veterans, this timely study conceptualized this population's experiences with regard to themes of college choice, transition to campus, institutional engagement, and student persistence. By utilizing a transitional theory framework, this study advanced the research on the particularly complex educational trajectories of female student veterans (Hamrick & Rumann, 2011).

Secondarily, as this study employed a phenomenological approach, it brought a close examination of the experiences as described by participants, which allowed the researcher to better understand the complexities and nuances of the phenomenon (Lolatte, 2010). Such an approach allowed this study to distill respondents' experiences into a composite description of their experiences, which will inform faculty, staff, and administration about this growing population.

Lastly, by examining the experiences of female student veterans at a four-year, flagship, research university, this study augmented our understanding about a curious trend: female student veterans select four-year, research institutions less frequently than their male peers and nonveteran women, despite the presence of educational benefits provided by military service and the GI Bill, the robust veteran student services more often found at four-year institutions, and the long-term personal economic benefits that come from completing a four-year degree.

Research Questions

To gain a deeper understanding about female student veterans in higher education, the following questions guided the study:

- 1) What are the experiences of female veterans at a large, four-year, research institution?
 - i. How did female student veterans choose this institution?
 - ii. What are female student veterans' experiences with regard to making the transition from the military to this institution?
 - iii. In what ways and to what degree are female student veterans engaged (socially, academically, and institutionally) with campus?
 - iv. What are the characteristics of female student veterans' persistence to degree at this institution?
- 2) How do female student veterans navigate identity development in this context?

In addition to broad questions about female student veterans' experiences and identity development in the context of higher education, this study also sought to understand more specifically how this population makes the most of the opportunities presented by post-secondary education and what variables are associated with these successes. To this end:

- i. In what ways do female student veterans make the most of opportunities presented by post-secondary education? What variables distinguish these opportunities?

- ii. In what ways do female student veterans define academic, career, or personal success?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of transition theory provides a mode for examining female student veterans' experiences in higher education. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) describe college students—traditional or nontraditional, as facing “many changes that can have short- and long-term effects on their lives” (p. 212). For student veterans, the changes they experience in higher education are even more complex, as veterans in transition from the military to higher education move through several phases of personal, emotional, cultural, and social transitions as they reintegrate into civilian and then postsecondary settings (Lackaye, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

As early as 1977, Schlossberg advocated for an understanding of the decision-making processes of adult learners. The role transitions of adulthood, she claimed, “often involve crisis, conflict, and confusion” (1977, p. 77). From this, Schlossberg conceptualized the decisions of adults in the context of transition, describing her model as a way to analyze “human adaptation to transition” (1981, p. 2). From this, Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) characterize transition as an event or nonevent, which results in a change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Such a framework exists in three major parts: 1) approaching transitions, in which the type of change, individual perspective and context, as well as impact of the transition are examined, 2) taking stock of coping resources, wherein individuals assess their assets and liabilities

with regard to dealing with the transition, and 3) taking charge, which introduces the “4 S System,” which refer to the person’s situation, self, support, and strategies, i.e., the variables which influence adults’ abilities to cope with transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

In summary, the use of Schlossberg’s theory of transition to undergird this study helps to address the paucity of literature on student veterans and their transitions (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). In particular, the theory facilitates what Smith (2012) describes as “an understanding of adults in transition and [their] coping strategies for better management of the transition process” (p. 37). In addition, the use of transition theory, as it employs a phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis, allows attention to be given to what Rumann and Hamrick (2010) note as “personal-level transitions,” the individual experiences unique to this population which are essential for educators and researchers to better understand in order to serve this growing audience (p. 432).

Significance

This study holds significance for administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals, as it provides a way to examine a growing, unique population on campus, one which will only grow in number and potentially in complexity (Cook & Kim, 2009; Radford, 2009). Findings of this study form a potential primer or blueprint for describing successful trajectories of female servicemembers as they make the transition from the military to postsecondary education, particularly to four-year, research institutions (Persky, 2010).

In addition, this study holds societal significance as it examines the phenomenon of low numbers of female student veterans selecting four-year institutions, as enrollment in four-year degree programs are linked to higher salaries, longer working lives, greater career mobility and an increased quality of life (Bowen, 1977; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

High Points of Related Literature

What follows is an examination of existing literature in four areas crucial to understanding female student veterans' campus experiences. I begin with a brief history of veterans in higher education, outlining the most salient pieces of legislation and the ways in which such policy influences veteran presence on campus. From this, I present a review of the unique characteristics which today's student veterans bring to higher education; themes of college choice, transition, engagement and persistence are explored. Within this setting, I present an overview of the literature specific to the experience of female student veterans, including a review of identity development in the context of higher education. Finally, a summary of the theoretical approach of transition theory provides a framework for examining female student veterans' experiences in higher education.

Limitations of Existing Literature

It is important, however, to recognize limitations in extant literature. The amount of scholarly work on student veterans as a population is limited and dated (DiRamio, et al., 2008; Lolatte, 2010). As a whole, literature about military veterans is concentrated

around veterans of conflicts from the mid-20th century (Morreale, 2011). While there is an increase in the number of publications about the veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF; October, 2001-ongoing) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF; March, 2003-September, 2010) college, a significant number of these works are unpublished dissertations (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Of the few studies involving veterans' transition to the classroom or their specific experiences in higher education, most focus on male veterans or on veterans as a whole, the body of work devoted to female student veterans slight (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Similarly, literature on female servicemembers or veterans, while growing, consists largely of guidebooks about the transition from the military to civilian life absent of participation in postsecondary education, and scant academic treatment is dedicated to women as an identifiable group with regard to deployment or PTSD (Cantrell & Dean, 2005; Hoge, 2010; Moore & Kennedy, 2011). A majority of literature related to female student veterans' experience in the military comes from the popular press and military reports (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2012).

Though itself dated, Atwell (1999) suggests that limited research has been conducted on the educational experiences of military veterans as a result of the overarching focus of the Department of Veterans Affairs on "timely and accurate delivery of benefits," rather than on benefit utilization or outcomes (p. 54). Similarly, sociological research tends to view veteran experiences rather myopically, examining servicemembers' transitions in and out of the labor market, rather than fully exploring

this population's experiences in higher education nor considering the unique perspective of female servicemembers (Kleykamp, 2006; Teachman, 2007).

Delimitations

In light of the vast history of the institutions of the armed forces and of higher education, it is important to specify what, specifically, this study is designed to examine. It is not an examination of PTSD, personality disorders, nor disabilities or counseling of student veterans, though all four areas are worthy of study and do intersect with student veterans in significant ways. This study is not an examination of nontraditional students, per se, though student veterans are a subset of the larger—and growing, nontraditional audience. Lastly, it is not an examination of women in higher education, nor an examination of women in the military. The focus of this study is the lived experiences of female veterans in higher education, particularly at one, four-year, flagship, public research institution.

Definitions

Key terms found in the study are defined as follows:

College choice refers to the process by which a student selects a postsecondary institution, a decision, suggested by Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999), which is described as a confluence of econometric characteristics such as cost-to-outcome ratio and sociological factors such as gender and socioeconomic context.

Engagement refers to the multidimensional construct involving academic, behavioral, cognitive, and psychological factors which, together, describe a student's

degree of integration—or goodness of fit, with his or her learning environment (Astin, 1977, 1985; Kuh, 2003; Merriam et al., 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Female veteran refers to a woman who is a current or former member of the active duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves, regardless of deployment status, combat experience, or GI Bill use (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2007).

Female student veteran refers to a female postsecondary student who is also a current or former member of the active duty military, the National Guard, or Reserves, regardless of deployment status, combat experience, or GI Bill use (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2007). While the veteran population may be quite diverse (Kleykamp, 2013), others urge using a common definition on campus and nationwide, so as to remain inclusive and consistent in describing this population of learners (Vacchi, 2012).

Identity, for the intents and purposes of this study, is comprised of the qualities one uses to constitute individuality, and is socially and personally constructed (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Nontraditional student is defined as presenting any of the following characteristics: attending college part-time, delaying college attendance, being financially independent, being married, supporting dependent(s), working more than 30 hours a week, or being age 24 years or older (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2007).

Persistence to degree in this study refers to Tinto's (1975) conceptualization which takes into consideration individual characteristics, interaction with the college setting, and institutional attributes, emphasizing academic and social integration as the most salient influencers of student success.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety problem that develops in some people after extremely traumatic events, such as combat, crime, an accident or natural disaster (APA, n.d.).

Transition refers to any event or non-event, which results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). Transitions can be anticipated or unanticipated, and they can have both positive and negative effects on a person's life (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989).

Veteran-friendly refers to the intentional efforts made by campuses to identify and remove barriers to the educational goals of veterans and to create what describes as a smooth transition from the military to college life (Moon & Schma, 2011; American Council on Education (ACE), 2010).

Organization of Proposal

In this chapter, I introduce the growing audience of female student veterans and our lack of understanding about this unique audience's experiences in higher education, specifically the trajectory of those who enroll at four-year, research institutions. Rooted in this context is a study designed to investigate the experiences of female student veterans via research questions designed to illicit data about this population's choices

about college, their transitional experiences and characteristics, reflections about their modes of engagement on campus, characteristics related to persistence to degree, and notions of identity development within this context.

In Chapter 2, I review the literature which grounds our knowledge about this population, particularly with regard to the larger populations of student veterans and women in higher education, situating female student veterans as a unique subpopulation within these contexts. Particular attention is paid to literature regarding the themes of college choice, transition, engagement, and persistence. Results of this review indicate that with regard to these themes, female student veterans display markedly different experiences than male veteran peers and female non-veteran students, underscoring the need to more keenly understand and support this audience (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Theories associated with transitions and life events provide a framework for the study, positioning data collection and analysis outlined in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 3, methods designed to answer the study's research questions are outlined, including rationale for questions to ask of the participants in a preliminary demographic survey, individual interviews, and in a focus group setting. From this, descriptions of participant selection and site of the study are introduced. A discussion about research ethics, data trustworthiness, reliability, and validity follows. Lastly, issues relating to researcher bias are presented.

Chapter 4 presents a composite demographic summary of the questionnaire respondents as well as profiles of five interviewees and focus group participants,

including descriptions of their experiences of college choice, transition to postsecondary education, campus engagement, and persistence to degree. Also included are descriptions of participant identity development and perceptions of success with regard to making the most of opportunities presented by higher education.

Presented in Chapter 5 is a summary of the study's major findings, comprised in three areas: distinct patterns of demography, unique educational experiences and trajectories, and conceptions of identity and success. Also included is an analysis of these findings via DiRamio and Jarvis' (2011) adaptation of Schlossberg's transition theory, the theoretical framework that undergirds the study.

Chapter 6 summarizes the study's results by research question and presents a visual representation of participants' experiences. From this, a review of the study's limitations is presented, which brings considerable influence on the results of this study. Implications of the study and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

Summary

The body of research focusing on female servicemembers or veterans, while growing, remains limited. This literature review indicates that most studies involving student veterans focus on the experiences of male veterans or veterans as a homogenous group, failing to address the unique characteristics of female student veterans. In addition to the need to augment knowledge about female student veterans in the areas of college choice, transition to campus, levels of postsecondary engagement and persistence,

research is needed which illuminates female student veteran identity development in the context of postsecondary education.

This study, guided by Schlossberg's theory of transition (Anderson et al., 2012) and using phenomenological research design, allows for close examination of the transitions of female student veterans from the military to a four-year, flagship, research institution; the findings of which will inform faculty, staff, and administrators about the transition experiences of this growing and heretofore underserved population.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

What follows is an examination of existing literature in four areas crucial to the understanding of female student veterans' campus experiences. I begin with a brief history of veterans in higher education, outlining the most salient pieces of legislation and the ways in which such policy, in turn, influences veteran presence on campus. From this, I present a review of the unique characteristics which today's student veterans bring to higher education; themes of the student lifecycle are explored: college choice, transition, engagement, and persistence. To fully situate the experiences of female student veterans, next is presented a review of women in higher education. Within this setting, I present an overview of the literature specific to the experience of female student veterans, focusing on themes of identity development, college choice, transition, engagement, and persistence. Lastly, I present a summary of transition theory, which provides an appropriate framework for examining the unique experiences of female student veterans in higher education.

Brief History of Veterans in Higher Education

Prior to World War II (WWII), high school graduates chose to enter the workforce, attend college or enter the military; the choices mutually exclusive (Thelin, 2004). Underscoring the separation of military service from higher education, veterans' assistance did not include educational benefits until 1944 (Ortiz, 2006). Prior to WWII, a majority of entrants into the military were not college-bound, more likely to have "grown

up in deprived families, done poorly in school...their entry into the military occurred as soon as possible, even before high school graduation” (Elder, Jr., 1986, p. 240).

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (“The GI Bill“).

As WWII drew to a close, the nation faced dual challenges of adjusting from wartime productivity to a peacetime economy as well as assisting in the return of more than 15 million servicemembers. Four years of war, preceded by 11 years of the Great Depression, “left the nation, especially those in the veterans’ age group, largely uneducated, lacking in work experience, and living in substandard and overcrowded dwellings” (Greenberg, 2004, pB9). An attempt to thwart a looming social and economic crisis and avoid the mishaps of World War I by giving Veterans greater opportunities to assimilate into civilian life following their military service, the president and Congress passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009).

Providing a range of benefits, including home and business loans, unemployment compensation, as well as educational and vocational training support, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as The GI Bill, or the GI Bill of Rights, “presented a historically unparalleled federal subsidy for college enrollment,” (Bound & Turner, 2002, p. 790). Allowing millions of veterans who might not otherwise have access to higher education and other training opportunities, the GI Bill is credited as a “policy instrument with dramatic effects on the level of educational attainment of

returning veterans, as well as on the overall landscape of American higher education” (Bound & Turner, 2002, p. 785).

The bill ushered a flood of returning veterans into higher education, veterans accounting for about 70 percent of all male enrollments in the years immediately following the end of the war (Olson, 1974; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Similarly, Elder, Jr., (1986) notes enthusiasm for higher education following WWII: “through military service; only a tenth of the veterans [in a particular study] pursued no education beyond high school, compared to about a third of nonveterans” (p. 241). The typical post-WWII veteran in higher education is characterized as older than most traditional college students, often married, and strongly motivated to acquire an education and to secure specific vocational goals enabling economic stability (Bound & Turner, 2002; Donahue & Tibbitts, 1946; Olson, 1974).

Educational benefits for veterans after WWII.

After WWII, educational benefits were less generous for veterans of the wars in Korean and Vietnam, designed less to avoid social crisis and more to provide “benefits of service” (Greenberg, 2008; Teachman, 2005). The Veterans’ Educational Assistance Program of 1976 was enacted to “help subsidize the cost of paying for education by requiring contributions from veterans for matching funds from the government” (Barnhart, 2011, p. 8). Educational benefits for servicemembers were revamped in under the Montgomery G.I. Bill (Public Law 100-48) in 1984, which provided military veterans and active duty National Guard and Reserves with benefits and a monthly stipend for up

to 36 months to be used within 10 years of discharge. However, the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) also required contributions directly from veterans and was criticized for “failing to provide adequate resources for veterans caught in the upward spiral of tuition and other costs of higher education” (Greenberg, 2008, p. A56). By the mid-1990s, the educational benefit provided for veterans had “lost much of its economic impact” (Celis, 1994, para. 5).

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008.

Passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (also referred to as the Post-9/11 GI Bill or the new GI Bill), is noted as the most significant increase in education benefits for servicemembers and veterans since the original GI Bill of 1944 (Greenberg, 2008; O’Herrin, 2011; Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). Benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill are available to veterans who have served on active duty in the U.S. military since September, 2001, and are based on length of service; maximum benefits reached after 36 months of active service.

Prior to the new bill, the “maximum assistance cover[ed] only 60 to 70 percent of average tuition—not room or board—at a public four-year university” (Wright, 2008, p. A34). Designed to cover tuition and fees up to the level of the most expensive public, in-state institution, the Post-9/11 GI Bill can also be used for private institutions, graduate degrees and out-of-state tuition via agreement directly between the institution and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The Post-9/11 GI Bill also provides a monthly housing allowance, an annual book stipend, a relocation stipend, and reimbursement for

tutoring, and licensing or certification tests. These benefits are available for a period of 15 years and may be transferable to spouses and dependent children (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2008). Legislation passed in late 2010 expanded the eligibility to roughly 85,000 members of the National Guard and provided for expanded coverage of online and vocational programs (National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics, 2011; O'Herrin, 2011).

Student Veterans on Campus: Unique Experiences with Regard to College Choice, Transition, Engagement, and Persistence

OEF and OIF veteran enrollments in higher education are expected to increase nearly 20 percent from MGIB levels, with usage rates nearing 70 percent (Eckstein, 2009; Simon, Negrusa, & Warner, 2010). As “military veterans constitute a distinctive and potentially vulnerable higher education population,” it is important to examine the unique characteristics, which student veterans in bring to campus (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010, p. 1). Focusing specifically on contemporary student veterans, i.e., those deployed since 2001 as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF; October, 2001-ongoing) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF; March, 2003-September, 2010), I examine research, which describes characteristics of this population. I begin with an overarching description of the characteristics of today's student veteran, including demography, socioeconomic characteristics, educational trajectories, as well as unique mental and physical health challenges experienced by this group. From this, I examine student

veteran experiences with to college choice, transition to postsecondary education, engagement, and persistence to degree.

Today's student veteran.

Understanding the characteristics of student veterans is warranted, given their increasing numbers on campus (DiRamio et al., 2008; Radford, 2009). In 2007, 1.2 million (73 percent) of all Post 9/11 veterans were 39 or younger; that number is expected to climb to nearly two million by 2013 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2007). Similarly, gender distribution of servicemembers has also changed over time. In 1980, women comprised four percent of the veteran population (McDonald, 2011; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2007). That number grew to seven percent by 2006, and by 2020, the number of Post 9/11 female veterans is expected to reach 1.9 million, or 10 percent of the veteran population (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2007).

In the context of higher education, recent research (Brown, 2011; Cate, 2011; Diramio & Jarvis, 2011; McDonald, 2011; Pattillo, 2011) suggests that veterans of the Post-9/11 era are a unique subpopulation of adult learners. In particular, Cook and Kim (2009) found that veterans perceive higher education to be extremely valuable, a high priority, and a necessary step toward improving their lives after military service. Specific characteristics of this subpopulation include having financial benefits, a cadre of transferable credits earned during active duty and/or prior institutional experience, as well as student and organizational management experience (ACE, 2008; Brown, 2011).

Unlike traditional undergraduates, student veterans align more closely with nontraditional students as a result of these experiences, i.e., “the years spent serving in the military before enrolling in their current higher education programs” (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010, p. 1). Student veterans are more likely to be 24 years of age or older, nearly two-thirds have a spouse or a child or both, and are more likely to be employed full-time; all three of these characteristics can influence persistence rates (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2009; Radford, 2009). Similarly, many lack a coherent social network and “may flounder as they struggle to adapt to new expectations” (DiRamio et al., 2008).

However, as McDonald (2011) and Barnhart (2011) note, while student veterans share similarities with nontraditional students, student veterans face challenges unique to their population. Paramount among these challenges are balancing family with the demands of attending college as well as the dealing with effects of psychological and/or physical service-related trauma in making the transition from military life to college (ACE, 2008; Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; McBain, Cook, Kim & Snead, 2012). Other challenges faced by this audience include difficulty in relating to non-veteran students and college faculty (Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008), the affects of which will be discussed in more detail elsewhere in this review, alongside literature related to engagement. In addition, student veterans face challenges with regard to timely reimbursement of educational benefits as well as inconsistency in evaluation and articulation of credits for military experience (ACE, 2008; Cook & Kim, 2009;

Radford, 2009), both of which can dissuade student veteran persistence rates and will be discussed in greater detail elsewhere in this review.

Student veterans are also very likely to experience a range of mental health issues such as major depression or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Recent studies suggest that as many as 40% of all returning OEF/OIF veterans meet criteria for these disorders (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Grossman, 2009; Simon, 2011; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008), and that nearly one-third of those who seek care at a Veterans Affairs facility are treated for mental health needs (Seal, Bertenthal, Miner, Sen, & Marmar, 2007). Student veterans dealing with depression or PTSD may experience intrusive memories and flashbacks, outbursts of anger, distrust of authority, inability to concentrate or sleep, hyper-vigilance, and psychological numbing, all of which can negatively impact their ability to succeed in a postsecondary setting (Black, Westwood & Sorsdal, 2007).

Similarly, student veterans may also present unique physical health issues as a result of OIF/OEF service—in particular, nearly 20% of these veterans have experienced traumatic brain injury (TBI) (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008), and it is suggested that cognitive injuries are among the most prevalent of service-related injuries (Barnhart, 2011). As Madaus, Miller, and Vance (2009) suggest, any of these factors would challenge student veterans' capacities for success in higher education; today's veteran is more likely than any other generation to experience these challenges in tandem.

Student veterans also have unique educational trajectories. Teachman (2007) argues that military service itself presents a “deficit in schooling at the time veterans are

discharged,” underscoring what is described as a competition between recruitment efforts of the military and higher education (p. 360). Further, Teachman (2007) also suggests that the GI Bill “alters trajectories of veterans,” specifically with regard to timing of military service, such that early entries into military and subsequent educational experiences will result in lower overall educational attainment (p. 360). However, recent studies (Kleykamp, 2013) suggest that OIF and OEF veterans are enrolling in colleges and universities at rates higher than their civilian counterparts, proposing that the presence of the GI Bill plays a role in eventual enrollment in postsecondary education.

A distinct demography, socioeconomic characteristics, mental and physical health challenges, and educational trajectories combine to suggest that student veterans comprise a unique subpopulation of learners. To this end, what follows is an examination of the ways in which this group experiences major events within postsecondary education, specifically themes of college choice, transition to higher education, engagement with chosen institution, and persistence to degree.

Student veterans and college choice.

Economic models of college choice. Examinations of the college choice process typically follow one of two perspectives: economic or sociological theories (Bergerson, 2009; Paulsen, 1990; Somers et al., 2006). Economic models presume that prospective college students are rational actors and make careful cost-benefit analyses when choosing a college or university (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). For student veterans, it follows that the presence of educational benefits earned via military service does

positively influence college attendance, however, it is but one of several factors involved in the college decision-making process (Field, 2008; Radford, 2009). Steele et al. (2010) noted that the existence of the GI Bill was a “major influence on [student veterans’] decisions to enroll in higher education” (p. 18). The bill is also credited with influencing enrollment status, as Radford (2009) notes that for the 2007-08 academic year, military undergraduates at any postsecondary institution were more likely to enroll full-time than military undergraduates who did not receive benefits.

While college choice is certainly related to levels of benefits for student veterans (Steele et al., 2010), educational decisions aren’t solely based on financial considerations (Radford, 2009). Recent research suggests that student veterans approach college choice in more robust ways than current models allow (Rumann, 2008). Two-year colleges remain an “institution of choice for nontraditional students such as veterans” (Barnhart, 2011, p. 12). By 2011, 43 percent of veterans and servicemembers were choosing to use their educational benefits at two year institutions, suggesting that cost may play at least some role (Field, 2008; O’Herrin, 2011). And yet, nearly 85 percent of veterans eligible for full tuition waivers and living allowances are not enrolled in postsecondary programs, while nearly half of veterans who do choose to attend are enrolled at community colleges (Lopez, 2011; McNealy, 2004; Field, 2008).

However, transfer or articulation patterns of student veterans are not tracked by the VA, meaning that the path from two- to four-year institution is not known. As most veterans utilize just half of their allotted 36 months of educational benefit, Field (2008)

suggests that this is indicative of veterans earning a two-year degree and then halting their education. Also, Barnhardt (2011) suggests that level of academic preparedness may influence college choice and that as community colleges have open enrollment, they are identified by veterans as a place to update lapses in skill or abilities. Community colleges may also act as a buffer or staging area, as veterans are encouraged to utilize their benefits quickly upon discharge; in the absence of a more long-term plan, veterans may remain at such two-year institutions in lieu of moving on to a four-year college or university or simply fail to persist in gaining an associate's degree (Field, 2008; Somers, 2012).

Institutional factors can also influence enrollment decisions. Several reports outline that veterans choose schools that have articulation agreements in place or accept military-based credits, both of which are found more commonly at community and two-year colleges (ACE, 2008; Field, 2008; Radford, 2009). DiRamio et al. (2008) summarize the criticality of utilizing credits earned in the military via dual importance; the 36-month cap on educational benefits provided by the Post 9/11 bill, and age of student veterans, whose persistence in higher education is often related to the “ability to make rapid progress and build on the knowledge they established in the military” (Steele et al., 2010, p. 30). Further, community colleges also offer what many veterans note as a top priority; of veteran students enrolled in postsecondary education in 2008, nearly three quarters noted convenient location as an important factor in their college selection process (Field, 2008; Radford, 2009; Steele et al., 2010).

However, while only slightly more veterans than other college students are enrolling in low-cost community colleges, veterans are more likely to enroll in costlier for-profit institutions than non-veteran peers (Johnson, 2010). Further, veterans increasingly choose colleges that host veteran-specific admissions and financial aid counselors, who “help them get their federal benefits, provide academic support and make accommodations for physical and emotional disabilities” (Field, 2008, p. 4). Steele, Salcedo, and Coley (2010) note that the existence of GI Bill benefits is also a factor in decisions to attend pricier programs, though recent research suggests that student veterans attending for-profit programs use the bill’s benefits as well as student loans, often in equal amounts (Radford, 2009).

Further, student veteran choice of for-profit institutions is driven by what has been defined not as an economic decision but as a choice in favor of “convenience” (Field, 2008; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Lipka, 2010). In particular, convenience is demonstrated most often via flexible course delivery formats, such as online learning, and campuses close to military bases—recurring characteristics of for-profit institutions. Such factors are held in high esteem by veterans and drive choice often more so than cost alone (Field, 2008; Field, 2009).

Student veterans who select public, four-year colleges cite program offered and institutional reputation as being top priorities influencing their choice (Steele et al., 2010). However, despite the Post 9/11 bill’s living allowances for students enrolled more than half time and taking at least one on-campus course, public, four-year institutions are

the least common choice for student veterans, as only approximately twenty percent select this option (Radford, 2009). Conversely, nearly half of military undergraduates at public, four-year institutions utilized veterans' education benefits, compared to one-third of student veterans at other institutional types, which suggests that these benefits make it more affordable for student veterans to attend a four-year college. However, the propensity for veterans to select two-year and for-profit colleges in greater numbers than four-year degree options is an outcome that deserves attention (Field, 2008; Radford, 2009; Steele et al., 2010).

However, at particularly larger, flagship public institutions, whose size can be “intimidating,” the presence of veteran-focused support services plays a large role in selection (Field, 2008, p. 5). Specifically, the characterization of campuses as “veteran-friendly,” is influential in veterans' choice, particularly as the process by which institutions can claim the descriptor is self-imposed, and the term itself is diverse, including “factors such as campus culture, academic environment, student body size and composition, and location” (ACE, 2012). In comparison to for-profit institutions, four-year colleges have been slow to adopt practices that allow for the veteran-friendly characterization, particularly in the areas of student services (Field, 2010).

Conversely, the Student Veterans of America (SVA), a nonprofit organization devoted to providing military veterans with the resources, support, and advocacy needed to succeed in higher education and following graduation, notes four-year institutions as hosting some of its first and largest chapters of members whose peer-to-peer connections

provide support during the transition from military to student life and play a role in student recruitment (SVA, 2012).

Sociological models of college choice. Sociological models explain the college selection process as one of status-attainment, as students make selections based on aspirations, which they see being met by institutions (Paulsen, 2001; Somers et al., 2006). Similarly, Shaw, Kobrin, Packman, and Schmidt (2009) note this process as “reciprocal,” describing the student and the institution as having a relationship with each other, actively searching to meet needs.

McNealy (2004) offers a view of student veteran college choice, which is contrary to an economic model, one that may address why veterans forgo postsecondary education or “select community or two-year colleges in disproportionate numbers, despite substantial military financial resources” (p. 40). Using a framework of social reproduction theory, which suggests that college choice is shaped by educational and occupational mobility, McNealy (2004) explains student veteran college choice as a function of this mobility, reproduced as a mirror of existing class structure. More specifically, as veterans fall into lower socioeconomic statuses, social reproduction theory describes veterans’ decisions to opt out of or to under-utilize earned educational benefits as a result of perceptions of societal barriers and working class socialization (McNealy, 2004).

Similarly, more recent research has expanded the understanding of social reproduction theory to explain student veteran college choice, specifically to include

factors associated with access (Lopez, 2011). As today's student veteran population becomes more diverse, the pool of potential first-generation college students is increasing, a population which separates from the military with educational benefits but lack support structures or familial or community history with higher education (Lopez, 2011; Radford, 2009). Lopez (2011) also suggests that opting out of college or under-utilizing earned benefits can also be a result of lack of academic preparation, a result of lower socioeconomic status commonly found in the general veteran population. This conceptualization of veterans' college choices can have profound influence, particularly when comparing veteran choices to non-veterans: while nearly 20 percent of all college students choose to enroll in the nation's top 500 colleges or universities, only six percent of Post 9/11 benefits recipients chose to enroll in this tier of school (Lopez, 2011; Radford, 2009; Steele et al., 2010).

In summary, most widely accepted models of college choice fail to address the multiple factors student veterans involve in their college decision-making processes; in addition to financial considerations, student veterans are influenced by the presence of institutional support, credit for experience, and flexible course delivery modes. Moreover, socially constructed notions of personal and professional aspirations have been demonstrated to play a role in student veteran college choice processes. The paucity of college choice models which address these unique characteristics underscores the need for research specifically aimed at understanding the multiplicity of influences student veterans call upon when making college-going decisions. Of particular need is attention

to the phenomenon of low numbers of student veterans selecting four-year institutions, as enrollment in four-year degree programs are linked to higher salaries, longer working lives, greater career mobility and an increased quality of life (Bowen, 1977; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Student veterans and transition.

Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) suggest that “transitions alter our lives—our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions” (p. 2-3). While all college students experience transition to campus, student veterans entering or returning to college experience transition uniquely (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Further, student veterans display different personal characteristics and socio-emotional needs than non-veteran students as they transition to college (Bauman, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Hodge et al., 2004; Livingston, 2009). Despite many veterans’ plans to pursue higher education after military service, transition from combat to campus can be difficult and filled with barriers—barriers, which, if left unchecked, can derail student veteran transitions and, ultimately, their ability to succeed in a postsecondary setting (Barnhart, 2011).

Much of the literature concerning OIF/OEF veterans in transition to higher education centers on the disparities between the military experience and the demands of campus life. Gravley (2012), Lackaye (2011), Rumann and Hamrick (2010), and Wheeler (2012) suggest that a transition from the highly structured, hierarchical society of the military to the more student-centered mode of postsecondary education can present barriers to student veterans’ transitions. In particular, tools and skills—perhaps even

personas, which were used successfully in the military do not function with similar success in a college setting, requiring of student veterans significantly more attention to the transition process than for nonveterans. Castro et al. (2006) suggest that combat experience, in particular, if not adapted, may interfere with individuals' transition, noting "Battlemind Training," an approach wherein soldiers in transition from the military are taught to change how they might react or think in certain situations now that what is asked of them is non-combative, providing a path towards successful transitions.

Veterans, particularly those of OIF/OEF, experience what Sherman (2010) explains as differing types of guilt: "survivor guilt" the most common, but also prevalent is "agent-regret," in which servicemembers feel causally but not morally responsible for deaths or injuries of fallen peers, as well as "collateral-damage" guilt, in which veterans mourn unintended casualties. An important topic this review is unable to cover adequately, in short, the moral weight veterans feel for doing well what war required of them is but another barrier student veterans face when they transition to campus. Sherman (2010) characterizes this moral weight of war as "their private burdens...[that] we in the teaching profession, on campuses where the military/civilian gap still yawns far too wide, have an obligation to help our students understand what soldiers go through" (p. 8).

Recent research suggests that veterans might benefit from a "neutral zone," or period of neutral adjustment between discharge from the service and starting college (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Despite the 36-month cap on educational benefits, Ostovary

and Dapprich (2011) advocate against accelerated enrollments, which may place veterans at risk to experience an onset of anger outbursts, poor concentration, or increased irritability when exposed to the stress of an academic setting, in turn, becoming a barrier against the transition to campus. Such efforts are credited as precursors to veteran-friendly physical spaces on campus, such as Virginia Commonwealth University's "Green Zone," spaces designated as having staff and faculty trained in veteran needs, as well as institutional practices involving hosting dedicated space for veterans to gain tools to engage in debate and make use of resources (Cook & Kim, 2009). A more robust examination of institutional practices supporting veteran transition and engagement on campus will be explored elsewhere in this review.

Student veterans are often older than most traditional students, as years of service and ensuing challenges and leadership experiences resulting from military service have "matured, and, perhaps hardened them" (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 12). Similarly, Rumann and Hamrick (2010) propose that veterans in transition from deployment to higher education "construct and reconstruct new social identities," in processes which are unique to this audience. These distinct characteristics and experiences serve to differentiate veterans from nonveterans in the ways they experience and make sense of transition to campus, resulting in a population that Steele, Saucedo, and Coley (2010) note as a "distinctive and potentially vulnerable" (p. 1). Further, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) denote several risk factors typically associated with nontraditional students that student veterans also face, due to their age: delayed entrance, part-time enrollment status,

being married, and having dependents all negatively influence transitions to postsecondary education, and, ultimately persistence. In particular, a consequence of student veterans' delayed entrance to college may be the need to re-learn certain skills upon enrollment; coupled with the potential non-transference of military credits, student veterans may find this inability to build on existing knowledge a barrier, in ways similar to the nontraditional student experience (Ackerman et al., 2009; Cate, 2011; Covert, 2002).

Student veterans are also more likely to arrive on campus with mental or other health issues (Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006). Data cited by the Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health (2007) suggest that 27 percent of returning veterans report significant depression, 24 percent report alcohol abuse, and 43 percent report difficulties with anger. As the ratio of wounded to dead for OIF/OEF is more than four times the level for Korea and Vietnam, many veterans return with significant disabilities (Burnett & Segoria, 2009; DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Wheeler (2012) suggests that these mental and physical disabilities can manifest themselves in relationship changes, social isolation, and violence, the result of which are barriers to veterans' abilities to successfully transition to civilian life and to be successful in school. Similarly, inability to navigate the bureaucratic processes required by service organizations involved in disabled veterans' transitions may also become "barriers to successful educational outcomes" (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011, p. 67).

In addition, student veterans sometimes face the process of transition multiple times, as deployment or re-deployment rarely follows academic calendars, requiring student veterans called to active duty to prepare for mobilization, separate from the institution, and then re-enroll upon return. Bauman (2009) describes disruptive deployments as unsettling to student veterans as “the phenomenon of ‘stopping out’ for the civilian college student...having skipped a term or more and then having returned to college” (p. 16). However, for the student veteran, the negative influence of such disruption on transition to postsecondary education can be even more pointed, as upon re-enrollment, student veterans will have an even stronger chance of facing age-related risk factors found in nontraditional (i.e., older than average) students, and are likely to have increased possibility of suffering mental or physical disabilities due to their service, both of which negatively influence transition (Bowling & Sherman, 2008). In a largely theoretical piece, Livingston et al. (2011) outline the Student Veteran Academic and Social Transition Model (SVASTM), which illustrates the “grounded theory which explains student veterans’ re-enrollment management,” which highlights that student veterans may first experience academic challenges of reintegration, but their social transitions are more problematic (p. 320). To this end, the researchers described a series of stages re-enrolling student veterans experience, such as moving from “invisibility” in which they withdrew from social settings, to one of self-direction toward utilization of campus services and re-engagement with veteran and nonveteran peers.

These acute differences displayed by student veterans as they transition to campus has prompted a call for research to learn more about this growing population; in particular, “there is an urgent need to conduct research that will provide campuses with the information needed to promote the academic achievement of veterans who are students” (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 13). Further, needs assessments must also include efforts to “know the students who constitute the veteran population” (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005, p. 44). Others call for studies that examine not only the transition process but the outcomes of those transitions, particularly with regard to student engagement and persistence, as well as post-graduation employment outcomes (Kleykamp, 2013).

In summary, veterans face unique barriers in their transitions from military service to campus; any one of these barriers can negatively influence success in school, however, in combination—common for this population, they may take a toll on veterans’ abilities to succeed (Elliott, Gonzalez & Larsen, 2011). While no national-level systemic effort yet exists to assist veterans as they transition to higher education, several studies serve to outline potential steps institutions can take toward becoming more “veteran-friendly;” an examination of that body of literature is included below (Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Radford, 2009).

Student veterans and engagement.

Recent data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), in which student veterans were recognized for the first time as a unique population, suggest that

veterans attending four-year colleges are less academically engaged than other students—even other undergraduates with comparable demographic traits (2010). While student veterans tend to be older, enrolled part-time, and more often first-generation students as compared to traditional college students, even when controlling for such differences, student veterans are less engaged with faculty and feel less campus support than their nonveteran peers (NSSE, 2010). Recognizing that student success is positively influenced by integration or engagement with the university community (Astin, 1977, 1985; Kuh, 2003; Merriam et al., 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1993), the rationale for examining modes of student veteran engagement is clear. A review of the literature regarding student veterans and engagement is conceptualized into three categories: academic experiences, socialization opportunities, and institutional structures.

Student veterans and academic engagement. Much of what exists in the literature on student veteran and academic engagement is rife with contradiction. While recent research suggests that student veterans feel academically unprepared for college (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008), this perception is challenged by findings that veterans bring with them strong study habits (Cate & Gerber, 2012). Adding to this complex understanding, NSSE (2010) data suggest that student veterans spend as much time studying as their nonveteran peers, yet do so while also balancing other responsibilities such as employment and family obligations. As DeSawal (2012) notes, student veterans face challenges with regard to academic expectations, specifically as this population often must establish “balances between academic and life responsibilities,

relating to nonveteran students in and out of the classroom” (p. 72). However, other sources cite familial obligations as positively influencing academic success for adult learners (Clark & Caffarella, 1999). Similarly, as DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) note, under the pretext of higher maturity due to their older-than-traditional-student age and military socialization, it follows, then, that student veterans should be successful in their academic pursuits, likening school to a military mission—a job to be done.

Also influencing student veterans’ academic engagement are the very real challenges, for many, of dealing with service-related mental and physical disabilities, which often require unique accommodations in the classroom (Branker, 2009; Steele et al., 2010). Other studies note the presence of PTSD as a factor impeding academic success, as the disorder presents difficulty with concentration and dealing with stress (Church, 2009; Glover-Graf, Miller, & Freeman, 2010; Miller, 2011). Further, student veterans may also have sporadic attendance in class due to chronic pain or other facets of service-related injuries, negatively affecting their capacities to engage academically (Church, 2009).

Given these challenges, both real and perceived, a subset of the literature on student veterans and academic engagement comes directly from faculty experiences with this population. Rodriguez Martin (2009) details the efforts of Smith College’s school of social work faculty in creating programming dedicated to telling the stories of student veterans. Similarly, several studies examine faculty attempts to address what Hawn (2011) describes as a growing gap between the values of the armed forces and civilian

society writ large, via veteran-centered curriculum (Bellafiore, 2012; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, & Sulak, 2011). In particular, studies which address faculty perceptions of returning veterans serve to positively influence student veterans' academic engagement, by both addressing issues of faculty self-efficacy in terms of teaching veterans (Hawn, 2011), as well as providing what DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) describe as creating a place in the college curriculum for a potentially marginalized subset of the student population.

Student veterans and social engagement. Deputy executive director of Student Veterans of America, Michael Dakduk, has called fitting in on a college campus “a culture shock that’s hard to adjust to [for military students]” (as cited in Johnson, 2010, p. 1). In addition to being older than many nonveteran peers, student veterans’ life experiences serve to make veterans more emotionally mature than their classmates—often Millennials, who depend on parental authority, resulting in a social divide between student veterans and nonveterans (Branker, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Further, DiRamio et al., (2008) note that student veterans have difficulty connecting with students and faculty who have little knowledge or experience with military culture. This negative influence on student veteran’s social engagement with the campus community is compounded if students or faculty harbor anti-military or anti-veteran views, the resulting classroom climate characterized by Burnett and Segoria (2009) and Glover-Graf et al. (2010) as perhaps the most significant barrier to becoming part of the academic community.

Similarly, military socialization and combat experiences serve to discourage social engagement between student veterans and their nonveteran peers. Glover-Graf et al. (2010) and DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) note several factors influencing this phenomenon, such as not sharing similar interests with nonveterans (e.g. parties and social functions), resulting in an overall feeling of difference, or separateness, which, in turn, can manifest itself in social isolation. NSSE (2010) data support this self-perception of student veterans as being unengaged, socially, primarily in measures about interaction in the classroom, in which student veterans reported significantly lower levels of engagement than their nonveteran peers.

In this context, Glover-Graf et al. (2010) suggest that friendship for student veterans does not appear to be a casual, easily extended relationship; rather, it is one of “deep camaraderie,” withheld, in most instances, for fellow veterans. Further, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) conceptualize veteran friendships on campus as being more of a “bond of shared experiences... a family so unique to their lives” (p. 31). It is with this conceptualization in mind that several studies argue that for student veterans, peer groups are essential for providing the social interaction and networking veteran students desire (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) go so far as to suggest that peer connectedness for veterans was akin to the basic need of safety, as outlined in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, second only to physiological demands of survival such as food, shelter, and sleep. The results of this study suggest that the impact of a supportive peer group is so vital to the successful

integration of veterans into a college setting, that it may even supersede the negative influence of an institution which is not perceived as veteran-friendly (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

It is from this understanding about student veteran social engagement needs that recent work regarding student organizations and partnerships for veterans is emerging. Paramount within this subset of the literature on student veteran social engagement are studies which feature student veterans' organizations, specifically playing a role in campus-level advocacy for student veteran needs (Summerlot et al., 2009). While student veteran organizations vary from site to site, Sumerlot et al. (2009) suggest that they typically serve to provide a bridge between student veterans and the campus administration, as well as provide key avenues for social engagement and resources to assist veterans as they transition to campus. The often vital role which student veteran organizations play in the development of social engagement is underscored in a statewide response described by Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley (2009) in which the social and academic needs of veterans are met through a partnership between a higher education institution, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the campus' student veteran organization. Such a response, Lokken et al. (2009) suggest, provides the fellowship and support, which "facilitates connection and reflection, always for the purpose of helping students achieve their academic and developmental objectives" (p. 79).

Student veterans and institutional engagement. In addition to academic and social engagement, NSSE (2010) data also suggest that student veterans have distinctive needs

with regard to institutional forms of engagement. However, literature type and quality in this area vary widely; while formal reports such as the NSSE provide reliable demographic information, academic analyses of these or other current data examining student veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are scarce, serving to highlight the growing need for research to focus specifically on the unique campus experiences of student veterans. Underscoring this need, Cook and Kim (2009) observed that veterans perceive a “disconnect between the programs and services that campuses create to assist veterans in their transition to the college environment and what veterans actually need or want” (p. 21).

From Soldier to Student. What does exist in the literature concerning student veterans and institutional engagement stems from student affairs perspectives and centers on the notion of *veteran-friendly*, i.e., the marked efforts made by individual campuses to identify and remove barriers to the educational goals of veterans (Lokken et al., 2009; McBain, 2012). Representing the first definitive effort to assess the state of institutional efforts aimed at veterans, *From Soldier to Student: Easing the Transition of Service Members on Campus* (Cook & Kim, 2009) is a large-scale, nation-wide survey, representing the responses of over 700 institutions to questions about veteran programs, services, and campus infrastructure with regard to the student veteran population. Results from this massive study, while varied, are distilled into five factors by DiRamio and Jarvis (2011): financial matters, administrative and strategic planning, advising and career services, psychological counseling services, and veterans’ office on campus.

Together, these factors serve as a way to benchmark institutional efforts as well as to provide a framework for gauging preparedness and future efforts.

Among the data surfaced by the study with regard to institutional roles concerning student veterans' financial matters, two items are of paramount significance; the first is uncertainty about campus recognition of educational experiences gained in the military (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Results suggest that the processes surrounding assigning credit to these experiences is, at most institutions, not only complicated and confusing, but it is not always stewarded by individuals training for this particular need, as nuanced understanding of military education and accreditation is required (Persky, 2010). In and of itself, this process can act as a barrier to successful integration of student veterans; however, it is compounded by the influence of institutional type, as the study also suggests that private institutions are less likely to accept military training as college credit than public two- or four-year institutions. The second item found with regard to financial matters is a lack of flexibility in terms of student veterans' often unpredictable deployment schedules and course registration or completion. In particular, private institutions were less likely than public two- or four-year institutions to have neither a flexible tuition refund policy nor flexibility with regard to re-enrollment of returning student veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

With regard to strategic and administrative planning, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) note the troublesome phenomenon of schools with small veteran enrollments displaying the least effort devoted to long-term planning about how to serve student veterans; they

argue that given the sector-wide influx of student veterans as a result of OEF/OIF, no school can afford to ignore this population's needs. Institutional type also plays a role in this factor, as private schools were found less likely to engage in strategic planning for student veterans as a population, which is particularly worrisome in that private schools' participation in the Yellow Ribbon program, which funds the difference in tuition benefits, bringing private colleges within reach for student veterans, is increasing.

Similarly, in terms of psychological counseling services, data indicate that just over half of public, four-year institutions have staff trained in working with student veterans, whereas community colleges and private institutions were much less likely to have these resources, perhaps explained by cost (community colleges) and by small enrollments of this population (private institutions). DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) suggest outsourcing counseling to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as a viable option, but such an option "is incumbent on campus administrators to reach out to the VA, establish a working relationship, and request direct, on-campus support from the agency" (p. 110).

Lastly, the fifth factor unearthed by the study concerns perhaps the most tangible manifestation of an institution's commitment to student veteran engagement: the presence of an on-campus veterans office, suggesting that such a place can serve not only as a place for veterans to connect and interact, but also as a single-point of contact for "navigating the bureaucracy of higher education," (p. 111). Not surprisingly, private schools and those with low student veteran enrollment were less likely than public, four-

year institutions to host such a place on campus. Of particular note is the results also revealed an emerging trend of some state legislatures in directing state institutions to create and support veterans' offices on campus.

In 2012, this seminal piece was updated; the results captured in *From Soldier to Student II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members* (McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead) present progress made in addressing the five core factors of institutional efforts toward enhancing student veterans' engagement. In particular, findings reveal that, as a whole, postsecondary institutions are more purposively including the needs of student veterans in organizational planning, as well as providing programs and academic advising designed specifically for military veterans (McBain et al., 2012). Institutions are also recognizing and awarding credit for prior military experience, and provide financial accommodations for students called to active duty. However, McBain et al. (2012) suggest that more work needs to be done particularly with regard to the transition process, specifically in the form of augmented training for staff and faculty and streamlined processes for re-enrollment of deployed students.

In summary, the *From Soldier to Student* reports provide access to broad, sector-wide information about institutional success and challenges with regard to augmenting student engagement.

Institutional engagement with regard to student veterans with disabilities. Given the high number of individuals who have and will transition from the military to postsecondary education, as many as 40 percent estimated to have some form of

disability, we are wise to consider institutional responses to engaging with this particular, and growing, population (Church, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Grossman, 2009; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Literature in this area is scant, but increasingly focusing on addressing the “whole” student veteran, as a unique student subpopulation, effort placed on the intersection of military experience and campus life (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Hassan, Jackson, Lindsay, McCabe, & Sanders, 2010).

Of particular note is that several studies found inadequate institutional attention given to the needs of student veterans with disabilities, primarily to the role of university counseling centers, resulting in an inability to meet the unique mental health needs of student veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009; Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Cate, 2011; Grover-Graf et al., 2010; Vance & Miller, 2009). In particular, Bonar and Domenici (2011) urge for attention in this area to focus on “real, clinical cases that could offer practical insights into intervention and treatment” (p. 208). Branker (2009) suggests a framework for designing an environment for student veterans with disabilities in the form of “universal design,” which advocates for intentional co-creation of the student veteran environment, such that curriculum, services, and programs are based on constant communication between campus administration and student veterans.

Similarly, Miller (2011) outlines what is termed *essential* practices for serving student veterans with and without disabilities, several of which are institutionally-related, such as broadening overall university staff and faculty capacity in terms of training on veteran issues, creating and supporting dedicated positions for serving student veterans,

employing and connecting with student veterans to provide peer mentors, and sharing lessons learned broadly across the academic community, nationally, as much as possible.

Lastly, while the capacity for military education to be utilized as college credit is an important issue across this population, for student veterans with disabilities, it may be a more pronounced desire as well as a more nuanced process. In particular, Glover-Graf et al. (2010) suggest that for student veterans with mental or physical challenges, non-transference of military education or experience to college credit negates what veterans feel is a promise inherent in their military service, i.e., time spent in the military classroom will convert to civilian college credits. For student veterans with mental health issues, this unfulfilled promise serves to undermine student engagement, as it embodies what for many student veterans is a belief that civilians in positions of authority are undeserving and unethical leaders. While this perception is held by many veterans in terms of various civilian capacities, such as law enforcement or political leaders, on college campuses, veterans tend to view institutional leadership in this vein, i.e., untrustworthy (Grover-Graf et al., 2010). Complex, confusing, and often fruitless credit transfer processes serve to reinforce this viewpoint, particularly for student veterans with disabilities.

Institutional engagement via case study. In addition, a small growing body of literature concerning examples of individual institutional efforts toward building student veteran engagement is present. These single-site case studies serve to provide critical data about site-specific attempts and successes, as well as lessons learned and implications for

administration, staff and faculty, and resource allocation. At the University of West Florida, Ford, Northrup, and Wiley (2009) outline a student affairs-centered approach which calls for an internal needs assessment from which partnerships are sought, the result an increase in the resources able to be leveraged for student use such as engagement with local student veterans organizations and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) chapters. Francis and Kraus (2012) outline a process of developing a student veterans center at the University of Arizona, in which policy change in light of student veterans' needs is framed as a way for faculty to "critically assess our traditional attitudes with regard to *all* students" (p. 14). Brown and Gross (2011), by asserting student veterans as a separate subpopulation replete with unique capacities for success stemming from their rich life experiences and goal-oriented attitudes, advocate for systemic change in program development at Western Carolina University. Similarly, Johnson (2009) advocates for simplification of the re-enrollment process for students returning from active duty, citing Appalachian State University's close proximity to Fort Bragg as rationale for gaining the administration's attention to this critical issue. Moon and Schma (2011) share a vignette of Western Michigan University's institution-wide approach to responding to student veteran needs, which included, among myriad other features, university-wide training about military students, faculty and staff mentoring programs, as well as augmented modes of communication with deployed students, in an effort to "not only accommodate, but embrace service members who want to pursue higher education" (p. 59).

To summarize, recent nation-wide efforts such as the NSSE study and reports such as *From Soldier to Student* serve to underscore the degree to which student veterans bring unique characteristics and needs to higher education. Student veterans tend to be older, enrolled part-time, and more often first-generation students as compared to traditional college students, even when controlling for such differences, student veterans are less engaged with faculty and feel less campus support than their nonveteran peers (NSSE, 2010). As such, efforts to engage this population are most successful when addressing the specific academic, social, and institutional needs they present.

Student veterans and persistence.

In considering the persistence of student veterans, existent literature is scarce; what does exist supports the understanding of student veterans as a unique subpopulation, their experiences able to be categorized with regard to several frameworks.

Models of student persistence and student veterans. Identified as the theoretical framework that influences student success, persistence is understood to reflect personal characteristics as well as external or environmental factors that contribute to or inhibit a student's academic outcomes (Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992). Working primarily with traditional students, Tinto (1975) conceptualizes college student persistence as one which takes into consideration individual characteristics, interaction with the college setting, and institutional attributes, emphasizing academic and social integration as the most salient influencers of student success. Tinto (1993) revises his theory to reflect the growing nontraditional population, broadening his model to

encompass the “wider social, economic and organizational forces [which] influence the behavior of students within the institutions of higher education,” (p. 86). Recognizing the unique characteristics of nontraditional students, Bean and Metzger (1985) conceptualize attrition for nontraditional students not as a function of social influence or integration with the institution, but rather via the intersection of three characteristics particular to nontraditional students: enrollment status, residence, and age.

Utilizing Bean and Metzger’s (1985) framework, Barnhart (2011) found that for veterans at two-year colleges, social integration was not a strong influence of persistence, nor was veteran status. In terms of enrollment status, veteran students enrolled in two-year colleges are more likely to persist when enrolled full-time, whereas non-veteran students are equally likely to complete regardless of full- or part-time status (Barnard, 2011). However, student veterans further differentiate themselves from non-veteran students with regard to the influence of age on persistence, as several studies suggest that veteran persisters tend to be significantly younger than non-completers (Barnhart, 2011; MacLean, 2007; Teachman, 2007).

Utilizing an adaptation of Tinto’s (1993, 2000) longitudinal model of institutional departure to explain both institutional structure and student veteran behavior, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) suggest use of the model with student veterans provides new modes of viewing the unique attributes these students bring to campus. Specifically, this model allows recognition of the differences in which student veterans commit to educational goals, such as external characteristics of being older than the traditional student, married,

and often employed full time, all of which, suggest DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) positively affect persistence in college. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) also suggest further research is needed with regard to the concepts of social and institutional integration as they influence persistence, positing that for student veterans, simply to connect with fellow veterans on campus (social) may not also translate to further academic and social integration with the broader campus community, essential for persistence to degree.

Military service as a negative influence of persistence. While military service has historically been viewed by some as “a way up and out of difficult economic circumstances,” the newly enhanced educational benefits offered by the Post 9/11 GI Bill can be viewed as increased motivation to enlist (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 39-40). And yet, several recent studies suggest military service as negative influence of persistence in postsecondary education. Teachman (2007) found that veterans of the all-volunteer force have different educational trajectories, “receiving less education than their civilian counterparts, and that this educational gap grows over time” (p. 359). Particularly for post 9/11 veterans, Barnhart (2011) found that “veteran service may lead to a lesser probability for persistence than nonveteran characteristics” (p. 128). Similarly, Kleykamp (2013) found that military service among those without any college experience, negatively influences postsecondary enrollment after service, despite the presence of the wide availability of the GI Bill. Kleykamp (2013) also found that age and marital status negatively influenced college enrollment and persistence among veterans, suggesting a need to further investigate how this educational gap affects veterans’ eventual

participation in the labor market. In terms of college grade point average (GPA), Durdella and Kim (2012) found that student veteran status is negatively associated with overall college GPA, and that student veterans were more likely than nonveteran peers in selecting academic majors “that had negative effects on college GPA...—i.e., engineering and applied sciences” (p. 119).

Race and gender as influencers of persistence. The variables of race and gender also display differences in persistence rates of veterans as compared to nonveterans (Barnard, 2011). Specifically in regard to race, recent studies support national trends that African-American students are less likely to persist in comparison to White students, while Asian students are the most likely racial group to complete, regardless of veteran status. However, this corpus lacks attention to persistence rates by race in four-year institutions, in which veteran students are increasingly enrolling and yet many may “have a long term goal [four-year degree] that may not be realistic or attainable” (Barnard, 2011, p. 141).

In terms of gender as it intersects with persistence, literature is scant. Kelykamp (2013) suggests that “research can no longer ignore female veterans in the study of military service on civilian lives...future research should, in particular, evaluate the effectiveness of the Post 9/11 GI Bill in helping veterans reach labor market parity with peers,” presumably, through an examination of academic success of this population (p. 14).

Future directions for student veteran's persistence research. Of particular note is that as the number of veterans enrolled in postsecondary education increases, together with the impact of time, more attention can be paid to the enrollment patterns and degree attainment of student veterans. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) suggest that the next wave of research with this population may contain longitudinal studies, made possible given that veteran status is beginning to be collected at the student record level at many institutions. This aligns with Kleykamp's (2013) advocacy for greater attention to post-college employment and career outcomes for veterans, particularly given the negative influence of military service on employment found for veterans.

In summary, recent research suggests that certain variables uniquely influence college completion for post 9/11 student veterans (Barnhart, 2011). Similar to nontraditional student attrition models, student veterans are negatively influenced by age and less than full time enrollment, though the strength of these influences may depend on institution type. However, student veteran persistence can also be described via an adaptation of persistence models, which have a high fidelity with traditional students, primarily on functions of academic and social integration. Of note is the negative influence of military service on student veteran persistence and economic success, particularly worrisome given the increasing numbers of veterans eligible for educational benefits under the new GI Bill, who are, subsequently, enrolling in postsecondary education. Similarly, persistence literature for student veterans is scarce in terms of four-

year colleges, as most recent research focuses on elements of student veteran success in two-year settings (Barnhart, 2011; Hamrick & Rumann, 2010; Rumann, 2010).

Female Student Veterans: Unique Experiences with Regard to Identity Development, College Choice, Transition, Engagement, and Persistence

Hamrick and Rumann (2012) suggest that “colleges and universities should be aware of the potential implications for women veterans and servicemembers who subsequently enroll in college” (para. 2). It follows, then, that to understand female student *veterans* in the context of higher education, we must first examine the experiences of female students in postsecondary education, as this will provide a basis for contextualizing the unique experiences of female student veterans on campus. What follows is a review of salient literature, which addresses identity development of women, of female veterans, and of female student veterans.

Women and identity development

“Identity is the interface between the individual and the world, defining as it does what the individual will stand for and be recognized as” (Josselson, 1987, p. 8). Generally, suggests Hayes (2000), identity develops through internal and external influences. Similarly, Bem (1993) suggests that external constructs do not merely shape us, they also affect how we construct meaning. In this way, the intersection of identity development and the process of meaning making are fused. Further, “identity formation is a significant learning process for women (and men)” (Hayes, 2000).

Origins of adult and identity development.

A growing body of work examines the influence of gender with regard to the learning process, and supports significant differences between men and women in terms of identity development (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997). What follows is a brief review of the major theories which serve to explain identity development as it intersects with gender, particularly in the context of higher education.

Erickson's Identity Development Theory. Psychologist Erikson (1968) conceptualized development with regard to internal and external forces, creating a model which describes eight stages of development, each distinguished by a psychosocial event or "crisis," which an individual must resolve by "balancing the internal self with external environment" (p. 96). The first four stages coalesce in childhood to form a basis of identity, in which an individual moves from dependence to autonomy, whereas stages five through eight comprise transitions into adulthood, in which identity development is marked by the emergence of individual's sense of self and the decisions made from this sense which encompass intimacy and commitment to purpose, their identity rooted in acceptance of self and sureness of path (Marcia, 1980).

Erikson's theory has served well as a foundation for psychological development of adults, particularly in the ways in which it takes internal and external influences into consideration (Evans et al., 2010). However, Erikson's theory has been criticized for reliance on samples of White, middle-class males, which therefore fall short in describing

identity issues for all individuals (Jones, 1997; Josselson, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Marcia's Ego Identity Statuses. In an attempt to redress this imbalance, theorists such as Marcia attempted to work with equally balanced male-female sampling attempt to bring a deeper understanding of how these established perspectives relate to women *and* men (Levinson & Levinson, 1996; Marcia, 1980; Norman, McCluskey-Fawcett, & Ashcraft, 2002). Based on Erickson's stage theory, Marcia (1966, 1975, 1980) identified four states of identity, or ways of balancing crisis and commitment, which occur in identity-building decision making, and offer "additional ways to understand how individuals ...resolve identity crisis," (Evans et al., 2010, p. 52-3). Individuals in *foreclosure* status commit to parental values without crisis, accepting direction authored by others; as this status is typically unchallenged by his or her environment, i.e., lacks crisis in which to respond, or "to commit," Marcia theorizes that in this stage of identity, individuals have difficulty in the absence of authority. Individuals in *moratorium* status, however, actively question parental values and authority; however, as they "grapple between resistance and conforming to authority" they lack a commitment to either (Evans et al., 2010, p. 53). In *identity achievement*, individuals wrestle with crises and commit to choices that lead to personally held goals. In the status of *diffusion*, individuals do not experience crises nor do they make decisions related to embracing choices, i.e., they avoid identity developing decision-making.

Like Erikson, Marcia's ideas have great utility in terms of applicability to traditional college student development. However, the static nature of Erikson's stages and Marcia's statuses is rather limiting in terms of analyzing identity development, which, as even Marcia (1975) noted, is never static. Further, as they exist in a continuum, Marcia's theory fails to explain phenomena of identity development that happen outside this spectrum.

Perry's Scheme of Intellectual Development. Providing the first extensive description of college students' intellectual and moral development, Perry (1970) conceptualized human attitudes toward knowledge in which the human experience moves from intellectual and moral absolutes to "the affirmation of the pluralism of the relativistic world" (p. 135). Consisting of nine positions, this scheme represents four epistemological or meaning-making attitudes, the first of which is *duplicity*, in which the world is viewed dichotomously, i.e., good-bad, or right-wrong, and learning consists of information transfer from authority. Individuals who have moved into *multiplicity* exhibit uncertainty about what constitutes right or wrong, which leads to the honoring of multiple viewpoints, wherein knowledge can come from various sources. *Relativism* is initiated by the need to support opinions—they no longer all appear valid, rather knowledge is contextually defined and based on evidence (Evans et al., 2010). The final positions in Perry's scheme embody an epistemological attitude described as *commitment in relativism from which individuals make* contextual choices that are more ethical in nature rather than simply more complex, suggesting not intellectual development but moral,

ethical and identity development (King, 1978; Perry, 1981). Commitment, suggests Perry (1981), is where “one finds at last the elusive sense of “identity” one has searched for elsewhere (p. 97).

However, as Perry’s scheme was constructed based on data from a sample of students from an all-male, highly selective university, its generalizability to women, people of color, and other non-dominant groups is limited (Knefelkamp, 1999). In addition, it is suggested that the scheme may be outdated as it may not relate to today’s college population, which is significantly older than that of the 1950s and 60s when the model was created (King; 1978; Moore, 2002).

Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development. Conversely, Chickering (1969), introduced a theory of college student development, which suggests seven *vectors*, which—although they may build on each other, are not mutually exclusive or linear, and together contribute to the formation of identity. Revised with Riser (Chickering & Riser, 1993) Chickering’s theory provides a comprehensive picture of psychosocial development, taking into consideration aspects such as “developing competence,” “managing emotions,” “moving through autonomy toward independence,” “developing mature interpersonal relationships,” “establishing identity,” “developing purpose,” and “developing integrity.” Chickering and Riser (1993) also noted that external influences such as institutional features and environmental factors played a role in students’ development.

While Chickering's theory is practical, easy to use, and comprehensive, it is nonetheless limited, particularly concerning its validity with regard to the interrelationships of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and culture; this calls for broad, inclusive theories rather than ones that are narrow and group specific (Evans et al., 2010; Reiser, 1995).

In summary, the earliest theories of adult development are difficult to generalize. (Coté & Levine, 1983; Erickson, 1959/1980; Evans et al., 2010; Perry, 1970). Further, theories which address the intersection of other identity domains such as race and gender are also absent from these early conceptualizations (Evans et al., 2010). It is from this that adult and identity theories stemming from a feminist perspective find purchase, as they inhabit what Jones (1995) and Kroger (1985) suggest is a paucity of research in the area of women's identity development.

Feminist theories of adult and identity development.

In terms of Marcia's attempts to redress gender imbalance in Erikson's work, Scholars such as Hancock (1985) dismiss the relativity of such studies for women, as they are viewed as simply *additive*, as opposed to involving women or utilizing female perspectives or ideas. For Hancock, unless studies are rooted in a feminist approach, their results illustrate the "discrepancy between the socially derived expectations [of men and women]" (cited in Ross-Gordon, 1999, p. 33). To this end, several recent models of adult development and cognition—particularly *relational* models are structured from the position of feminist inquiry. By employing the experiences of women, they are

appropriate for use in describing the ways in which women grow and develop throughout their lives (Gilligan, 1982; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Josselson's Theory of Identity Development. To this end, Josselson (1991) sought to “understand the internal and developmental roots of identity formation in women,” particularly as they relate to Marcia’s identity statuses and why some women resolve identity crises and some avoid identity-related decisions (p. 33). Utilizing an entirely female sample consisting of college students, Josselson (1996) examined how women “revise their lives as they grow from late adolescence to mature adulthood,” as well as how these women adjusted to the societal changes to ideas of gender in the late twentieth century (p. 5). Further, Josselson (1987) explains that what we need are “meaningful ways to compare women with each other” (p. 5).

Utilizing Marcia’s four identity statuses, Josselson (1987) conceptualized them as “pathways” rather than static stages, as such added nuance and attention to the distinct gendered roles women play in their lifespan. Moreover, Josselson’s work helped to “identify what is fundamental to women’s experience to produce a uniquely feminine identity and how this may vary within identity pathways” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 60). Examining identity in what Jones (1997) calls “the context of difference,” introduces capacity to describe power, privilege, silence, and voice, paving the way for a new series of identity development theories (p. 376).

Women's Ways of Knowing. While Josselson’s use of a solely female sample is pioneering, and as such, the results are highly generalizable to women, the bases for her

theories are rooted in a male-oriented schema. Conversely, the seminal work of Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing* (WWK) (1986) addresses, solely, women's identity development. In response to male-oriented concepts of adult cognitive development theory, namely Perry's Intellectual Scheme (1970, 1998) and Kohlberg's moral development theory (1973), and with a nod to Gilligan's (1982) argument for the place of women's voice in such theory, the framework of WWK is entirely seated in female or *womanly* ways of knowing. Belenky et al. (1986) conceptualize women's cognitive development—or what they term as knowing, into five major categories, which move from simple to complex. In the first position, silence, women feel voiceless, passive, incompetent, and are defined by others. The second position, received knowledge, women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving information but not of creating it. In subjective knowledge, the third position, women understand knowledge on a personal level, and begin to gain a voice. In the position called procedural knowledge, “women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 336). In the final position, constructed knowledge, women view all knowledge as contextual and experience themselves as creators of knowledge.

Other feminist theories. Stemming from WWK, other studies also examine cognitive development with regard to gender. King (1994) and Kitchener (2004) echo the importance of contextual knowing and women's construction of their own knowledge in relationship to WWK's final two stages. Similarly, Baxter Magolda (1992) underscores

the intersection of subjective and objective knowing as components of contextual knowledge. In particular, Baxter Magolda's (2009) more recent work deeply informs the understanding of adult women's cognitive development as it pertains to the ways in which they moved from viewing authority as an external entity and identifying self as "author of one's life...taking responsibility for one's beliefs, identity, and relationships" (p. 40).

In summary, these influential works which have utilized a feminist perspective of inquiry have led to significant strides in the ways in which adult and identity development may be conceptualized. As Ross-Gordon (1999) summarizes, recognition of the influence of gender on identity development sets forth new understandings of the ways in which men and women differ, suggesting an important link between development and cognition, socio-cultural settings, and psychological or internal concepts.

New ways of conceptualizing adult and identity development.

In the time since Perry and Chickering described college student identity development, the student population in the United States has become significantly more diverse, having shifted from a male to a female majority, and now includes students of color, adult students, immigrants, students with disabilities, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students (Jones, 1997; Thelin, 2004). Several newer approaches exist with which we can attempt to understand the identity construction of these varied populations, particularly adept as they foreground aspects of marginality

(such as race, ethnicity, or sexuality) heretofore excluded from conceptualizations of identity (Abes, 2009; Jones, 1997; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). What follows is a brief review of the major identity theories, which address racial, gender, critical, and multiple identity conceptualizations.

Racial identity theory. Focusing on the role of race and the degree to which it is incorporated into identity, racial identity theory addresses race as a sociopolitical and cultural construction (Evans et al., 2010). Specifically, models of racial identity theory are used to help understand how people view the world and their place within it from the lens of their cultural or racial heritage, most notably with regard to perceptions of privilege, oppression, or opportunity.

In terms of black identity development, the Cross and Fhagen-Smith model is the most well-known and presents the process of black identity development in terms of the lifespan, outlining one's pattern of *nigrescence*, or the "process of becoming black" (Cross, 1991, p. 147). Individuals who establish a black identity through adolescence into adulthood progress along *nigrescence pattern A*; pattern B describes those who are not socialized toward blackness or have not formed healthy black identities, who usually experience a conversion in adulthood (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). Pattern C, which may occur after experiencing either pattern A or B, entails "an expansion or modification of black identity throughout adulthood," resulting in what Cross and Fhagen-Smith describe as *nigrescence recycling* (Evans et al., 2010, p. 256).

Models of white identity development center on the creation of racial consciousness and what Rowe, Bennet, and Atkinson (1994) define as sensitivity to and appreciation of other racial or ethnic groups. Helms (1992) outlines a two-phase sequence described as *abandonment of racism*, in which individuals recognize their role in perpetuating a society which privileges whiteness, followed by the *evolution of a nonracist identity*, in which individuals choose to exist in awareness of race and their role within such a setting.

Recognizing that neither of these predominant racial constructs apply to the specific experience of Latinos, Ferdman and Gallego (2001) outline a model which conceptualizes Latino identity development via *orientations*—lenses through which Latinos may view themselves and others. In contrast to black or white racial identity models, Ferdman and Gallego's model is neither linear nor cyclical; instead it describes ways in which Latinos may or may not identify as pan-Latino, i.e., identifying with the broader Latin community, with a particular subgroup, or perhaps align with or viewed as adopting a white racial identity.

Conversely, Kim's (1981, 2001) Asian American identity model, by suggesting sequential, progressive stages, describes the unique experiences of this population. Moving from *ethnic awareness* of one's Asian heritage to the experience of *white identification*, which Kim notes as the result of this community's collective desire to be accepted, individuals then reach an *awakening to social political consciousness*, rejecting the oppressive social structure of white privilege. Asian Americans, suggests Kim, move

then to *redirection to consciousness*, in which they embrace their racial heritage, and then to *incorporation*, wherein confidence in one's racial identity is present.

In summary, racial identity models provide a way for us to understand the influence of race on our lived experiences, highlighting the individual differences heritage contributes to development. However, research on the validity of racial identity theories is lacking, and the research that does exist “rarely addresses the applicability of models to higher education” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 269).

Gender identity theory. Gender identity—one's sense of self as male, female, or in between, is fixed well before students enter college, however, early adulthood can be a time of identity exploration and expression (Lev, 2004). In particular, for those individuals for whom their socialized gender role does not align with their biological sex, i.e., transgendered individuals, college can be a time of both new conceptualizations of self as well as isolation.

Lev (2004) suggests a way to consider the categories of sex (male/female), gender role (masculine/feminine), and sexual orientation (heterosexual/homosexual) such that the system is binary; i.e., these categories are fixed and aligned. In a model that rejects such a binary system, Bem (1974) proposes that masculinity and femininity are not opposites measured against each other; rather, using the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, characteristics of sex, gender, and sexual orientation are viewed separately via a low to high scale, both dismantling gender polarization and allowing for variation within gender categories as well as across.

Further, Bem (1983) proposed gender schema theory, an approach which describes sex typing, i.e., socially-constructed gender expectations, as a result of individual and environmental factors, a process which she claims is both “learned and not inevitable nor un-modifiable” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 336). Developed in early childhood, these gender schemas are learned— influenced by socio-cultural definitions of male and female; from this, children organize ideas about gender based on these societal constructs. The result is gender categorization based on the degree to which individuals perceive relative strength of maleness or femaleness in relation to the norms of his or her socio-cultural setting. Lastly, individuals construct their sense of gendered self from this framework, conforming to learned categories of male and female, receiving positive reinforcement from their settings for acting within expected gender norms (Bem, 1993).

Multiple dimensions of identity theory. Jones (1997) suggests that race and gender are vital in constructing the multiple dimensions of women college students, and as such, she advocates for viewing of identity not as fixed, but rather constantly re-described and constructed. Further, identity, Jones (1997) argues, encompasses important social constructs such as race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, ability, and disability, heretofore not incorporated in adult or identity development theories. A consideration of the intersection of these dimensions as well as the sociocultural and historical contexts in which individuals develop contributes to “a more complex understanding of the dynamics of college student development” (Jones, 2009, p. 288).

Addressing this need, Jones and McEwen (2000) and Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) propose the model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI), a conceptual illustration of the relationship among college students' socially constructed identities (race, social class, sexual orientation, gender, religion) and the relative salience of influences such as peers, family, norms, stereotypes, etc. At the heart of this model is "the core sense of self, including personal attributes and characteristics," which is then surrounded by context such as sociocultural background and past experiences (Evans et al., 2010, p. 245). In intersecting circles surrounding the core is what Evans et al. (2010) note as "significant identity dimensions (race, culture, gender, family, education, sexual orientation, social class, and religion)" (p. 245). Thus, through conceptualizing the capacity for multiple social influences upon identity development, Jones' and McEwen's (2000) model provides a way for us to understand identity development as a fluid, dynamic process, deeply related to context and as "having multiple intersecting dimensions" (p. 408).

While examining the role of privilege and oppression is critical to the understanding of identity development, holistic models which affect this type of examination are still relatively new, and as such, lack the kinds of data other theories wield. However, complexities of identity development in a postmodern world are not fully captured without attention to multiple and intersecting identities and the sociocultural contexts in which identities are constructed and negotiated (Jones, 2009).

Critical theories of identity development. Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) argue that a new generation of identity development theory highlights the “experiences of marginalized populations by turning our attention to the way power and privilege shape identity” (p. 583). Critical Race Theory, or CRT, assumes that failure to recognize social identities perpetuates inequality; by focusing on the racism present in our society, we can attempt to challenge the power of these structures. Examining identity development via CRT provides opportunity to deconstruct oppressive structures, values the uniqueness of the individual, and suggests actions for societal redress of inequality (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker, 1998). Similarly, Latino Critical Theory, or LatCrit, places race and ethnicity at the center of inquiry, and brings Latino-centered perspectives against the European influenced perspectives, the result of which is to address the affect of marginalization on development (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

Further, queer theory can offer a fluid approach to gender, which provides an opportunity for students, particularly the transgendered, to “move across the spectrum of gender expression and identity” in such a way as to negate past notions of fixed, single categories of identity (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009, p. 591).

In summary, new ways of conceptualizing identity development take into consideration the influences of race, gender, and the positionality of power as it relates to socio-cultural characteristics.

Female veteran identity development

Since the dissolution of the draft in 1973, women have entered the military in ever-increasing numbers. Today women comprise 16 percent of the U.S. active duty armed forces and approximately eight percent of the veteran population; by 2035, women are expected to make up 15 percent of the veteran community (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2011). And yet, there exist distinct differences in demographic characteristics between male and female veterans. Female veterans tend to be younger than male veterans; more than half are under the age of 45, whereas nearly 80 percent of male veterans are 45 years of age or older (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). Female veterans also have different levels of educational attainment, as nearly 30 percent have completed a four-year degree in contrast to just over twenty percent of their male counterparts (Holder, 2011; Kleykamp, 2013; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). Female veterans are employed at higher rates than their male peers, which may relate to their relative youth as well as to their educational attainment (Kleykamp, 2013; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). Although both male and female veterans are likely to be married, female veterans are twice as likely as their male counterparts to be divorced or never married. (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). In terms of race or ethnicity, only 9 percent of male veterans classify themselves as a member of a minority, in contrast to nearly twenty percent of female veterans.

It follows, then, that in terms of identity development, female veterans hold a unique set of experiences. According to Baechtold and De Sawal (2009):

Understanding the development of women veterans requires making a connection between what these women experienced during their military service and how those experiences may or may not relate to how they make meaning of their experiences as college students. (p. 38)

More specifically, the growing number of female veterans creates a need for the use of a “new framework for understanding how this student population views their collegiate experience and meaning making” (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 39). As Iverson and Anderson (2012) urge, it is “essential to recognize the complexity and multidimensionality of female veteran identity” (p. 105). As Bem (1993) notes, external forces and societal constructs affect the ways in which individuals make meaning in terms of their identity development. What follows is an examination of the types of social forces experienced by female servicemembers which, in turn, influence the unique identity development process of these individuals; themes of military socialization, the role of race and gender, and sexual trauma are explored.

Female veterans and military socialization.

Iverson and Anderson (2012) argue that to understand female veterans as they transition to higher education, we must understand the culture into which female veterans have been socialized: the military. Characterized as an institution which constructs soldiering as a predominantly male and masculine activity, the military requires women servicemembers to shift views of gender identity (Abrams, 1993; Hicks, 2011; Iverson & Anderson, 2012; Silva, 2008; Smith, 2012). In particular, female veterans in “a male-

dominant setting must learn how to redefine and manage ‘femaleness,’” resulting in pressure to act either more feminine or more masculine, or both (Herbert, 1998, p. 21). Similarly, female veterans must also navigate what scholars have identified as a *hypermasculine* identity common in military settings, dependent upon power derived from dominating other, presumably weaker, peers, which is rewarded by military culture (Benedict, 2009; Demer, 2013; Finlay, 2007; Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; Lorber & Garcia, 2010).

In addition to navigating this concept of identity, female veterans are also less likely to ask for help, even when the need is warranted, for fear of appearing weak (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Smith (2012) describes this fear of a “perceived weakness ... exploited by [male] superiors and subordinates,” resulting in the need to “check overt aspects of femininity at the door” (p. 31). Similarly, stigmas about women in combat persist when these women enter campus, the result a discrediting or minimizing women veterans’ lived experiences (Iverson & Anderson, 2012).

And yet, other studies have found that not all women in the military respond to the hypermasculine setting in similar ways. Demer (2013) found that some women, particularly those which move into college from the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC), are unable to reconcile “the contradiction between their identities as women and the qualities they deem necessary for combat or even a military career” (p. 954). To this end, these women opt out of the conflict between femininity and soldiering, instead choosing to “resist the hegemony of the military” by performing gender in particularly

feminine ways, such as resisting authoritative leadership styles, or making nurturing overtures toward their peers and subordinates. In this way, these women exhibit what Demer (2013) describes as a “cultural imperative of sustaining a gendered self,” as a reaction to the gendered foundation of the military.

The psychological outcomes of navigating pressures to be more or less feminine as well as feigning strength in stressful situations do not easily fit into existent models of identity development (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Upon reintegration into civilian life, “when the structured military community is removed, the individual is forced to again redefine who she is as a civilian, a veteran, a female, and a student” (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009, p. 40). For many female veterans, this takes place within a postsecondary setting, wherein female veterans find themselves thus unsure of how to fulfill their new role not only as a student but also as a woman, an experience which several suggest is distinctly different for men as behavior learned in the military are often regarded in society writ large (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Herbert, 1998; Smith, 2012). Further, Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) suggest that upon transition to civilian life, when a military socialization is no longer pressing, “a new vocation must be found in a college or university setting, [and] many women veterans face identity crisis” (p. 40).

The intersection of race and gender for female veterans.

Adding to the complexities of female veterans’ conceptualization of identity is the role of race as it intersects with gender. The percentage of minorities serving in the armed forces is increasing, particularly with respect to female active duty and veterans (U.S.

Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). An increasing number of female veterans, in addition to balancing often-competing roles of wife, mother, and student, are also members of racial or ethnic minorities (General Accounting Office, 2005; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011).

While too vast a topic to explore but cursorily in this review, the intersection of race and gender in identity development is nonetheless an important consideration (Bem, 1993; Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005). Several scholars suggest that the military—just as it constructs an archetypal soldier as masculine, produces similar privileging for the majority (Demers, 2013; Iverson & Anderson, 2012; Prividera & Howard, 2006; Silva, 2008). Even in recent history, minority servicemembers experience negative military experiences ranging from racist comments to racial segregation (Moore & Webb, 2000). This disparity is more pronounced for minority women than it is for men, as “women veterans face ‘the double whammy’ phenomenon: disadvantaged because of both their race and their gender” (Moore & Webb, 1998, p. 99). Similarly, as suggested by Dill, McLaughlin, and Nieves (2007) the recognition of the dual and powerful influence of both gender and race on identity development underscores the need to examine the lived experiences of female veterans via a framework which supports a multi-faceted conceptualization of their experiences. Further, Iverson and Anderson (2012) call for the “interlocking hierarchies that sustain difference based on gender and race” to be examined, particularly as they relate to female

veterans' transition from the military institution to that of postsecondary education (p. 96).

Female veterans and military sexual trauma.

Of importance to an examination of female veteran identity development is the prevalence of “military sexual trauma” (MST), termed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which, in addition to sexual assault, includes “repeated, threatening sexual harassment occurring during military service” (Hyun, Pavao, & Kimerling, 2009, p. 1). As the numbers of women in the military increase, high rates of MST are reported; recent estimates suggest that more than half of military women experience unwanted sexual contact, nearly 30 percent experienced one or more completed or attempted rapes during their service, and nearly 10 percent experienced sexual coercion (Lipari, Cook, Rock, & Matos, 2008; Street, Stafford, Mahan, & Hendricks, 2008; Street Vogt, & Dutra, 2009). While male servicemembers also suffer MST, female veterans are far more likely than their male peers to experience sexual assault (Zinzow, Grubaugh, Monnier, Suffoletta-Maierle, & Frueh, 2007).

For female veterans, experience with sexual assault is associated with a greater risk of PTSD (Demers, 2013; Zinzow et al., 2007). Further, the risk for female veterans to develop PTSD is compounded by active combat duty, as recent findings suggest that the likelihood to develop PTSD was four times higher for female veterans who have experienced sexual assault than for those who have experienced combat-related stressors alone (Zinzow et al., 2007). Female veterans who have experienced MST, upon returning

home, are more likely to have negative mental health issues and report substance abuse, as well as feelings of loneliness, anxiety, depression, and anger (Demers, 2013; Street et al., 2009).

And yet, given the increasing numbers of female veterans who have participated in active combat, “viewing women veterans’ psychological issues as stemming *solely* sexual assault ignores the increasing scope of the complexity of PTSD among today’s veterans” (Iverson & Anderson, 2012, p. 91-2). Paramount among mental health needs is that female veterans are more likely than male counterparts to experience PTSD and yet less likely to be diagnosed or seek treatment (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; U.S. Department of Defense, 2007). Reasons for this are suggested to relate to cultural views of women’s identities, which are not compatible with that of combatant, as well as tendencies for mental health professionals to misdiagnose women with PTSD as suffering from depression or anxiety, separate from their military experiences (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). In addition, female veterans presenting symptoms of PTSD may be dismissed by veterans’ offices, the staff of which may not recognize the parity of service today’s female servicemembers may have in terms of combat (Iverson & Anderson, 2012). Further, the drama or crises which “plague the typical civilian woman may appear ridiculous and absurd when compared with the dangers of combat,” further dissuading female veterans from self-reporting symptoms and seeking treatment (Blankenship, 2008, p. 15).

In summary, a female veterans' sense of self "change(s) through their military experiences, contributing to a new, transformed identity" (Demers, 2013, p. 3). Forces of military socialization, the intersection of race and gender, as well as prevalence of military sexual trauma influence this population's identity development. To this end, recognizing female veterans as separate typology—particularly as they transition to college and the postsecondary setting is wise.

Female student veterans.

The growth of the numbers of women serving in OIF/OEF translates to higher numbers of women veterans attending college; it is estimated that approximately 26 percent of all veterans attending college are female (Radford, 2009). And yet, the literature shows us that the experiences of female veterans entering postsecondary education are markedly different than that of nonveteran peers and male veterans, particularly with regard to demography, military socialization, the role of race as it intersects with gender, and the prevalence of military sexual trauma and PTSD.

And yet, issues of gender are often excluded from research on veterans as a group. In particular, the studies that make up the most recent *New Directions For Student Services* note that "although gender issues were not part of our study, we heard from female veterans that they faced unique and difficult challenges because of their gender and the male-dominated traditions of the military" (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 13). As these women transition from the military into postsecondary education, attention to

serving female student veterans must become a critical element (Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; Iverson & Anderson, 2012).

A distinct demography, socioeconomic characteristics, military socialization experiences, mental and physical health challenges, and educational trajectories combine to suggest that female veterans, in fact, comprise a unique subpopulation of learners in the context of higher education. To this end, what follows is an examination of the ways in which this group experiences major events within postsecondary education, specifically themes of college choice, transition to higher education, engagement with chosen institution, and persistence to degree.

Female student veterans and college choice.

Several factors are found to influence college choice particularly for female student veterans. As it does for male veterans, the presence of educational benefits earned via military service, i.e., the GI Bill, positively influences female veterans toward choosing college over entering the workforce after deployment (Steele et al., 2010). Yet, as female veterans exhibit higher levels of educational attainment than their male peers (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013), it follows that female veterans utilize these benefits in ways that differ from male veterans. These differences are borne out in recent data about educational benefits usage by institution type; nearly three times as many female veterans use their benefits for graduate education as male veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

Curiously, female student veterans also select two-year colleges more frequently than their male peers (Field, 2008). While two year colleges remain the preference for veterans as a whole—a confluence of convenient location, flexible delivery mode, and word of mouth from fellow veterans, recent data suggest that female veterans are selecting two-year colleges instead of four-year public, private, or for-profit institutions more often than male veterans (Field, 2008; Lopez, 2011; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011).

While all parenting veterans may wrestle with childcare, women servicemembers are more likely than male peers to be sole caregivers of children after separating from the military (Demers, 2013). In addition, a higher percentage of female veterans are divorced compared to nonveteran women and male veterans, making convenient childcare a potentially central concern in terms of college choice (Foster & Vince, 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; Iverson & Anderson, 2012). Further, Hamrick and Rumann (2012) suggest that the time restrictions placed on GI Bill funding prompts college decisions to be made hurriedly upon deployment, which may preclude for female student veterans any options which don't readily offer childcare. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) suggest that this concern is not merely a practical one; for female veterans, the deeply rooted sense of responsibility for others fostered by military socialization “become important components in the college environment” (p. 75).

In addition to convenience and child care factors, Lolatte (2010), using an all-male sample, suggests that other aspects influence the selection of two-year over four-

year colleges, in particular, what is described as lower levels of access as a result of military socialization against four-year institutions. Similarly, Lopez (2011) suggested that male veterans chose two-year colleges over four-year institutions due to a lack of confidence in their academic skills. Similarly, McNealy (2004) found that male veterans choose community colleges in disproportionate numbers, despite funding, due to “entrenched mechanisms that guide veterans’ choices...as veterans are primarily from lower socioeconomic statuses” (p. 41).

While these influences have been found in the male veteran population and it may be plausible that some of these rationale may be generalized to the female veteran population, data do not exist which examine the college choice process specifically for women servicemembers. The trend of selecting less prestigious institutions more frequently than male peers is indeed curious, as women servicemembers, as a whole, are more educated than their male peers. Moreover, as the military has been described as a “bridging” mechanism, providing women the opportunity to move into occupations heretofore unavailable or difficult to enter, selecting two-year programs upon separation from the military is characterized as an underutilization of earned benefits, in need of further examination (Cohen, Warner, & Segal, 1995; Kleykamp, 2013; Lolatte, 2011; McNealy, 2004). Also, four-year institutions have been found to provide more robust veteran services than two-year colleges, primarily true for public rather than private or for-profit institutions, which also underscores the incongruity of the trend for female students to choose two-year colleges more than male peers.

Rather important implications stem from this trend. Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) suggest that female veterans select schools where they are more apt to see other female veterans; at schools where female veteran enrollment lags behind the overall veteran population, such as at four-year institutions, the cycle is perpetuated. Lolatte (2010) and Lopez (2011) caution that veterans' selection of community colleges over four-year institutions may serve to dissuade them from aspirations of a bachelor's degree.

In summary, as part of the population of student veterans, female student veterans are presumed to experience the phenomenon of college choice in similar ways to their male peers. However, despite having higher levels of overall education than male peers, female veterans choose two-year—and, presumably, less prestigious institutions more frequently than their male peers. In particular, their presence at four year, research institutions lags significantly behind male counterparts—and presence of GI Bill doesn't positively influence that choice (Steele et al., 2010).

Female student veterans and transition.

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) note that although literature dedicated to female veterans is increasing, a gap remains in the research on gender differences in how military women readjust to civilian life, particularly to the college setting. What does exist in the transition literature focuses on female student veteran identity development and mental health needs.

When the male-oriented structure of the military is removed, suggest Baechtold and De Sawal (2009), a female student veteran is forced to redefine herself in terms of

being not only a student, but also in terms of being a woman—an experience unique to female veterans, as male veterans benefit from the masculine structure of the military. And yet, not all female veterans will have a similar transition experience due to the heterogeneity found in this population. Iverson and Anderson (2012) advocate for a recognition of the “complexity and multidimensionality of veteran identity,” particularly with regard to gender development (p. 105).

With regard to mental health, significant numbers of female service members report sexual assault or harassment while in the military, the result of which is often a feeling of loneliness and being “left out” upon adjustment to civilian life, and a belief that experiences would not be understood by family and peers (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 38). Further, female student veterans who reported abuse while in the military are at much greater risk for anxiety, substance abuse, depression and anger, requiring of their transition to campus life to be both replete with institutional opportunities for treatment as well as for sharing stories about their military experiences with other female veterans, neither of which are found in sufficient supply (Baechtold & De Sawal (2009). Demers (2013) describes the transition to college for female veterans as requiring “safe spaces to tell their stories, so they can cleanse themselves of the contamination of their war experiences, try on various ways of being female, and imagine new possibilities for their futures, reducing the probability of poor mental health” (p. 18).

In contrast to male veterans, female veterans enrolled in postsecondary education are younger, are more often single, are deployed fewer times, and experience combat less

frequently than male peers—characteristics that, separately, positively influence the transition process from the military to higher education (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). And yet, research examining the specific transitional experiences of female servicemembers is scant, precluding data crucial to understanding the ways in which this growing population functions as they move from the military into postsecondary education.

Female student veterans and engagement.

Like their male peers, female student veterans seek out others with military experiences for networking and camaraderie rather than nonveterans. Demers (2013) found similar patterns of social engagement with female veterans of OEF/OEF as they transitioned to campus, describing that joining a military service organization on campus “immediately ameliorated their distress” (p. 3). However, Hamrick and Rumann (2011) suggest that this is even more pronounced a practice than it is for male veterans, perhaps due to the paucity of female veterans on campus. In a report authored by the American Council for Education (ACE) (2010), the need for social engagement among female veterans is described in even more specific terms, as “some women veterans have suffered trauma and harassment from the very men who were supposed to be at their side,” promoting the conclusion that these are very different [engagement] issues from those that most male veterans face” (p. 6).

In terms of academic engagement, women veterans can “seemingly disappear on college campuses” (ACE, 2010, p. 6). Further, Smith (2012) notes that female student

veterans are less comfortable than their male peers in interacting with faculty in the classroom, suggesting this reticence is only counteracted by necessity; a developing intrinsic motivation for academic success supersedes this population's preference to remain disengaged from the typically hierarchical and male-oriented structures of higher education.

Similarly, Iverson and Anderson (2012) suggest that greater institutional engagement for female veterans can be achieved via addressing the stereotyping of veterans as male, white, and heterosexual, as such structural barriers "hinder the acculturation of and success of women veterans" (p. 105). This is particularly important for female student veteran engagement, as this population brings "reluctance to seek help, hesitancy to self-disclose, and tendency to conceal distressing or negative personal information," which, combined with institutional barriers as described above, can negatively influence student engagement (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 77-8).

In summary, female student veterans, like their male peers, find social engagement via connecting with other military students. However, for female veterans, the need to connect with similar-gender veterans is critical as it can mitigate perceived academic and institutional barriers present in the hierarchical setting of higher education, often dominated by majority-male faculty and administration (Demers, 2013; Iverson & Anderson, 2012). In addition, female student veterans' reticence to self-identify as veteran, to seek help, or to interact with faculty in the classroom are compounded as they

have fewer same-gender role models on campus, a phenomenon worthy of examination (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

Female student veterans and persistence.

In terms of gender, research suggests that female students, regardless of military experience, tend to display higher levels of persistence in traditional and four-year institutions, yet persist less in two-year settings (Boice, 2007). This offers a crucial note of understanding as women have enrolled in two-year colleges at higher numbers than males for the past four decades (AACC, 2009), and female servicemembers are choosing two-year institutions more frequently than male peers (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). Further, female participation in the military has increased fourfold since the dissolution of the draft, and women now comprise 15 percent of the total U.S. military population (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

Bean and Metzner (1985) found that for nontraditional students, such as student veterans, gender both positively and negatively influences attrition: nontraditional status positively influences attrition, perhaps due to heightened goal commitment due to age or family responsibilities, and, conversely, nontraditional status also negatively influenced attrition, suggested in light of the limited options to transfer to other, presumably four-year institutions. However, in an attempt to apply the Bean and Metzner model to student veterans, Barnhart (2010) found the influence of gender to be nonsignificant, noting that for veterans, persistence was linked to enrollment rates and race rather than gender.

Similarly, a recent study concerning the affects of deployment length found gender-based differences, suggesting that male and female servicemembers experience stressors differently, which may play a role in their respective capacities for persistence to degree (Adler, Huffman, Bliese, & Castro, 2005).

Lastly, there is a growing body of sociological research which suggests that female veterans are negatively advantaged in the labor market regardless of education, which calls into question the very ideals surrounding the GI Bill; more attention is warranted this particular socioeconomic outcome as it intersects with educational success for female veterans (Holder, 2010; Kleykamp, 2013).

As female veterans have distinctly different personal characteristics than male peers, it follows that their persistence experiences will be different from male veterans, particularly as female veterans are younger and have higher levels of pre-service education, factors which positively influence persistence (2001 NSV report). And yet, literature which examines persistence particularly for veterans is scarce—of female veterans it is nonexistent—not the least bit curious given the increasing numbers of servicemembers returning from OIF/OEF and utilizing the now-expanded GI Bill. The growing population of women in higher education and the military combined with paucity and conflicting results of existent research on female persistence rates only adds to the criticality of the need to better understand the experiences of female students—veteran or nonveteran, on campus.

In summary, female student veterans present a “distinctive subpopulation of women on our campuses” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 5). Female student veterans make unique choices concerning college selection; of those without undergraduate degrees, female student veterans enroll in two-year institutions more frequently than their male peers, opting for the convenience offered by two-year colleges rather than the prestige and robust veteran services found at most four-year institutions, often denying themselves the longer-term security of a four-year degree and access to adequate academic and mental health resources (Lolatte, 2010). Female student veterans also have unique transitional needs and experiences as they navigate from the military to postsecondary education, most notably found with regard to mental health and gender identity development—neither of which have been examined adequately enough to provide sufficient guidance to the higher education community writ large (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Once enrolled in college, female student veterans exhibit engagement patterns which are distinctively different from male veterans, particularly as they shun organizational structures which are hierarchical and male-dominated, often avoiding student veterans’ organizations, as this population is reticent to draw attention to their veteran status, instead preferring to connect with other women veterans who have similar experiences (ACE, 2010; Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Demers, 2013). Lastly, research concerning female veterans’ patterns of persistence to degree is limited and what does exist is contradictory, suggesting that female veterans exhibit a unique set of factors

which influence their academic outcomes (Baechtold & De Sawal, DiRamion & Jarvis, 2011; Hamrick and Rumann, 2012). Recognizing these characteristics, Hamrick and Rumann (2012) advocate that “colleges and universities should be aware of the potential implications for women veterans and servicemembers who subsequently enroll in college” (para. 2).

Theoretical Framework

Finally, a summary of the theoretical framework of transition theory provides a mode for examining female student veterans’ experiences in higher education. Evans et al. (2010) describe college students—traditional or nontraditional, as facing “many changes that can have short- and long-term effects on their lives” (p. 212). For student veterans, the changes they experience in higher education are even more complex, as veterans in transition from the military to higher education move through several phases of personal, emotional, cultural, and social transitions as they reintegrate into civilian and then postsecondary settings (Lackaye, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). What follows is an examination of the literature regarding transition theory, particularly with regard to use as a framework for examining the experiences of student veterans.

A brief history of Schlossberg’s theory of transition.

As early as 1977, Schlossberg advocated for an understanding of the decision-making processes of adult learners. The role transitions of adulthood, she claimed, “often involve crisis, conflict, and confusion” (1977, p. 77). From this, Schlossberg conceptualized the decisions of adults in the context of transition, describing her model as

a way to analyze “human adaptation to transition” (1981, p. 2). Rather than framing adult development via age or stage models, Schlossberg’s concept of transition recognizes the variability of the experiences of adulthood, and contends that the transition process “requires the simultaneous analysis of individual characteristics and external occurrences” (1981, p. 3).

Drawing on the work of Levinson, Schlossberg’s model incorporates issues of life structure, the presence of a mentor, and what she described as “the polarities of young-old, feminine-masculine,” (1981, p. 3). And yet, in contrast to Levinson, Schlossberg’s model rejected the notion that transitions are closely linked to chronological age as well as the presumption that adults develop at similar paces (Evans et al, 2010; Schlossberg, 1981). In contrast, Schlossberg’s model stems from research which suggests the variability of the adult experience (Neugarten, 1979; Valliant, 1977). Schlossberg’s model is also influenced by work which suggests that life stage and external influences are more influential in adults’ transitional processes than age alone (Brim & Kagan, 1980; Lowenthal, Thurner, & Chiriboga, 1975). Furthermore, in contrast to more linear models of adult development, Schlossberg’s theory suggests that while transitions provide “opportunities for growth and development, a positive outcome for the individual cannot be assumed” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 213).

From this, Schlossberg (1984) reconsiders her model in book-length treatment, *Counseling Adults in Transition*, in which she suggests that adults present a “response” to transition rather than an ‘adaptation,’ replacing the presumption of a positive outcome.

This treatment also grounds her model within the context of adult development theories, aligning it closely with Egan’s “helping” framework, such that Schlossberg’s transition theory becomes the basis for conceptualizing the event or transition, and Egan’s model allows for the creation of appropriate advising—or “helping” to be created in response (Schlossberg, 1984). In a second edition to *Counseling Adults in Transition*, Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) reintroduce the process such that it hosts three components: approaching change, taking stock, and taking charge, the last component introducing the 4 S System, which “refer to the person’s Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies” (p. 27), which reframes Schlossberg’s (1984) previous examination of the variables which influence adults’ abilities to cope with transition. Third and fourth editions of the book integrate Schlossberg’s theory of transition with ideas related to the growing diversity of the human population, notions of spirituality with regard to transition, as well as suggesting how various counseling efforts can help guide adults in transition (Evans et al., 2010). Though each of these editions has its own, discrete contributions, the fourth and most recent edition will serve as the basis for the following section in which the theory is defined.

Schlossberg’s theory of transition defined.

Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg (2012) define transition as an event or nonevent which results in a change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. From this, the transition model provides a systematic framework for understanding these events/nonevents as well as the context in which they occur. This framework exists in

three major parts: approaching transitions, taking stock of coping resources, and taking charge, and is illustrated in Figure 1 (Anderson et al., 2012).

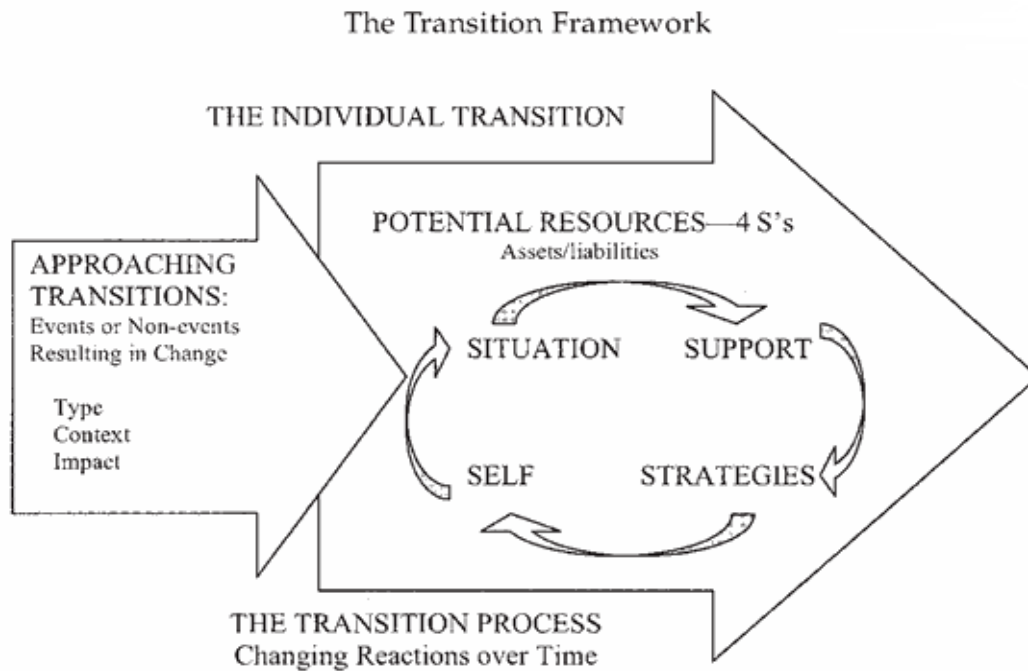


Figure 1: The Transition Framework.
Source: Anderson et al. (p. 39, 2012).

Approaching transitions: transition identification and transition process.

Transition identification. Identifying the *type*, *perspective*, *context*, and *impact* of a transition is critical to understanding how an individual assigns meaning to a particular transition; paramount among the experience is the identification of the type of transition that has or will occur (Anderson et al., 2012). Suggested by Goodman et al. (2006), there

are three types of transitions: anticipated transitions, which occur as predicted or expected; unanticipated transitions, which are not planned or scheduled; and nonevents, i.e., events which are anticipated or expected to occur and do not (Evans et al., 2010).

Anderson et al. (2012) note that the variability of adult experience prevents these categorizations to be static or similarly defined across the population, rather, the “individual’s appraisal of the transition is key,” as what might be an unanticipated event for some may be anticipated or perhaps a planned nonevent for others (p. 43). Thus, *perspective*, note Anderson et al. (2012), hinges on an individual’s appraisal, which determines crucial parts of the model, such as context, and impact.

Contextual factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geographical location influence the ways in which individuals experience and identify transition (Anderson et al., 2012). These factors, i.e., *context*, can be understood as a function of the individual’s relationship to the transition, and can be grand, such as societal norms and events, or they can be specific to the individual, such as family income or personal characteristics (Evans et al. 2010). Also highly variable is the *impact* of a transition, defined as the degree to which a transition alters one’s daily life, whether negatively or positively (Anderson et al., 2012).

The transition process. Anderson et al. (2012) suggest that a transition has no particular end point, rather, it has nondiscrete phases of “assimilation and continuous appraisal as people move in, through, and out of it” (p. 59). *Moving in* or *moving out* is the first stage, in which individuals find themselves in a new situation, wherein the need

to familiarize oneself is present. Confronting this new situation and addressing its requirements comprises is defined as *moving through* a transition, whereas *moving out* is seen as the ending of one series of transitions or changes.

Taking stock of coping resources: The 4 S system.

Four sets of factors influence the ability of the individual to cope with transition: situation, self, support, and strategies, referred to the “4 Ss” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 61). Illustrated in Figure 2, these factors are conceptualized as an individual’s assets and liabilities, as they influence one’s ability to successfully cope with change; the ratio of assets to liabilities changes in light of the uniqueness of each transition and its type, perspective, context, and impact.

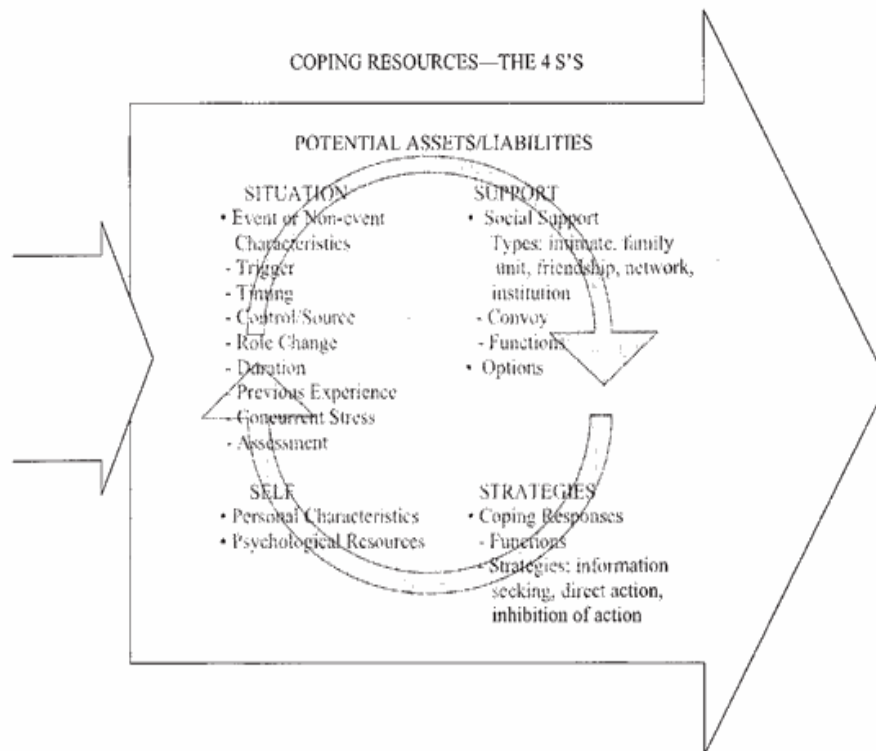


Figure 2: Coping Resources—the 4 Ss
Source: Anderson et al. (p. 62, 2012).

Situation. An individual's situation is comprised of eight facets, beginning with a *trigger*, a specific life event which precedes a transition, which “stimulates individuals to look at themselves and their lives in a new way” (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 68). The notion of *timing* can characterize a transition, prompting an individual to see it as “on time” or “off time,” which can result in judgment of the event/nonevent as being positive or negative. How an individual perceives *control* can influence coping abilities; having high degree of control with regard to how one reacts to triggers—internal or external, can augment an individual's capacity to manage change. Many transitions involve a *role change*—whether a gain or loss, and understanding how this change is manifested in an individuals' new situation is crucial to the transition process. Similarly, understanding the *duration* of the transition can “affect the ease or difficulty of assimilating the transition” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 71). An individual's *past experiences*, real or vicarious, can also influence future similar transitions, as positive experiences can help augment ability to cope with change, whereas negative experiences can have detrimental effects. The ability to manage transition is also affected by the presence of simultaneous instances of change, or *concurrent stress*, particularly salient should changes in one areas of an individual's life stimulate change or transition in other areas. Lastly, an individual's situation is influenced by the way in which he or she *assesses* responsibility for the event/nonevent prompting change, as attribution of responsibility can have an effect on behavior (Anderson et al., 2012).

Self. Individuals bring individual qualities to the transition, factors which play an important role in how they cope with change. *Personal and demographic characteristics* such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage in life, health, and ethnicity play a role in the ways adults cope with transition. Individuals also bring to the transition *psychological resources* which aid in coping with change. Strong ego development, an optimistic outlook can augment one's ratio of assets to liabilities in terms of coping with transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Similarly, individuals' commitments, values, and spirituality also influence their ability to respond to change, functioning as aids to coping (Evans et al., 2010).

Support. In the transition model, support is comprised of three facets: types, functions, and measurement. The *types* of support people receive are classified into four sources: intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions or communities. *Functions* of support include affect—the expression of liking, admiration, respect, or love; affirmation, which entails acknowledgement of the rightness of some action; aid, which refers to assistance; and honest feedback, meaning reactions offered that are potentially negative or positive (Anderson et al., 2012). Social support can be measured in terms of perceptions of degree of affect, affirmation, and aid an individual feels is present at the time of transition, and the degree to which those supports are stable or are likely to change (Evans et al., 2010).

Strategies. Coping with transition usually involves successfully managing stress, uncertainty, or potentially threatening aspects (Kortegast & Hamrick, 2009). Further,

Anderson et al., (2012) conceptualize coping responses as “strategies,” and describe three categories of such responses. Responses that modify the situation include negotiation, advice seeking, and thinking optimistically about the situation. Responses that seek to control the meaning of the problem include selective ignoring, positive comparisons, and substitution of rewards. Lastly, responses that help manage stress after it has occurred include denial, passive acceptance, and withdrawal.

Taking charge: strengthening resources.

Building on the final component of the 4 Ss, strategies, the transition model suggests integration with the Cormier and Hackney model (1993, 2005) as a way to identify actions that can be taken to support individuals in transition as a next phase after approaching the transition and taking stock of the situation. Anderson et al. (2012) suggest that the 4 Ss of the transition model provide an appropriate basis upon which “helping models” such as Cormier and Hackney’s may build, particularly as helping models require the situational and environmental assessments inherent in the transition model. From this basis, helpers can reframe, or help to change individuals’ interpretations of the meaning of the transitional setting (situation), as well as assess individual assets (self), suggest support efforts (support), and help consider strategies for problem-solving (strategies) (Evans et al., 2012).

Transition theory and student veterans.

Veterans deal with multiple transitions. They are leaving the military, along with their colleagues. Even though there is relief, even excitement about returning

home, they are leaving the familiar, their friends, and sense of mission. At the same time that they are dealing with “role exit” matters, they are moving into two new systems: reintegrating with their families and starting college. We love to picture the male or female soldier coming home to a warm, loving family and getting back right into the groove, but that’s not reality. We are really discussing a series of complex and complicated transitions. (Schlossberg, as cited in DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 18)

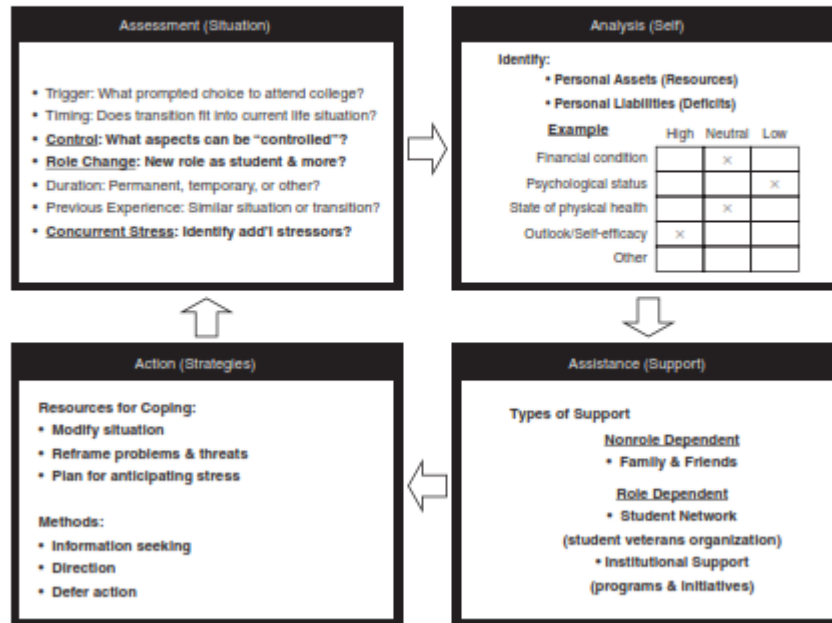
Very little is known about student veterans’ post-deployment transitional experiences (DiRamio et al., 2008). In particular, sources that examine the transitional experiences of student veterans are limited to doctoral dissertations, academic or anecdotal reports, and lack an understanding of the complex transition experiences of student veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). What does exist focuses “less on individual-level transitions and more on topics such as the impact of federal assistance programs for veterans” (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010, p. 432).

To date, only two studies have addressed the transition experiences of post 9/11 student veterans. Employing a multi-campus study of 25 student veterans, DiRamio et al. (2008) created the first conceptualization of the transition process for veterans, the results of which suggest the need to consider this group a “special needs population” due to its unique transition experiences, which include challenges in relearning study skills, connecting with peers, and financial concerns as major aspects of the transition process (p. 97). Building on this model, Rumann and Hamrick (2010) examined the transition

process of six student veterans in the community college setting, and found that the transition for student veterans can also include self re-identification and assessment, “prompted by the perception that, in important ways, they were not the same people they had been prior to deployment” (Rumann, 2010, p. 22).

Both of these studies utilized transition theory as frameworks for examining student veteran experiences. Further, Ryan, Carlsrtom, Hughey, and Harris (2011), in a piece designed for academic counselors, suggest that Schlossberg’s theory of transition is a particularly advantageous way to frame an examination of student veterans’ experiences, as such a framework provides a mechanism by which individual-level strengths and needs can be understood. Similarly, in a piece designed for helping professionals in higher education, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) build on the concept of Schlossberg’s theory of transition as a powerful tool for assisting student veterans in their postsecondary journeys. Recognizing the unique transition experiences of student veterans, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) introduce an adaptation of the 4 S System (Figure 3) in which each of the components of situation, self, support, and strategies, is configured for the “population of student who have served or are serving in the military...elements are particularly germane to the transition of students from the military to college” (p. 12). Though largely theoretical, this adaptation of the 4 S System of the Schlossberg transition theory may provide a way for helping professionals to support student veterans with the “concerted effort to assist in the transition process,” which recent research affirms is needed for this unique subpopulation (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 17).

Adaptation of the 4S Model



Source: Adapted from Schlossberg (1981, 1984) for use by college personnel when assisting students with military experience

Figure 3: Adaptation of the 4S Model
Source: DiRamio and Jarvis (p. 13, 2011).

In summary, the use of Schlossberg’s theory of transition to undergird this study helps to address the paucity of literature on student veterans and their transitions (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). In particular, the theory facilitates what Smith (2012) describes as “an understanding of adults in transition and [their] coping strategies for better management of the transition process” (p. 37). In addition, the use of transition theory, as it employs a phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis, allows attention to be given to what Rumann and Hamrick (2010) note as

“personal-level transitions,” the individual experiences unique to this population which are essential for educators and researchers to better understand in order to serve this growing audience (p. 432).

Conclusion

The body of research focusing on female servicemembers or veterans, while growing, remains limited. This literature review has shown that most studies involving student veterans focus on the experiences of male veterans or veterans as a homogenous group, failing to address the unique characteristics of female student veterans. In addition to the need to augment knowledge about female student veterans in the areas of college choice, transition to campus, levels of postsecondary engagement and persistence, research is needed which illuminates female student veteran identity development in the context of postsecondary education.

This study, guided by Schlossberg’s theory of transition and using phenomenological research design, will allow for close examination of the transitions of female student veterans from the military to a four-year, flagship, research institution; the findings of which will inform faculty, staff, and administrators about the transition experiences of this growing and heretofore underserved population.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Based on this literature review, and using a transition theory framework (Anderson et al., 2012) and a phenomenological approach, this qualitative study examined the experiences of female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). Data were gathered in the form of a demographic questionnaire, individual interviews, and small focus groups conducted with female student veterans enrolled at UT Austin. Principal goals of the questionnaire, interviews, and focus group efforts were to determine how female student veterans perceive their campus experiences, how they manage and navigate identity development in the context of higher education, and how they make the most of opportunities presented by their presence on campus.

Problem Statement

Studies suggest (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Dobie et al., 2004; Moore & Kennedy, 2011; Perconte et al, 1993) that women are disproportionately affected by particular experiences in the military. Female servicemembers are more likely to suffer incidents of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and incidents of sexual assault than their male counterparts (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2011; U.S Department of Defense, 2007). For women, basic training uniquely affects identity development, as it “strips civilian and personal identity and socializes individuals into members of a cadre” (Sherman, 2010, p. 12). As Herbert (1998) describes it, basic training involves radical resocialization; it is a process of

“depersonalization and deindividuation in which the military, in the form of drill sergeants, must strip the individual of all previous self-definition” (p. 9). In terms of gender development, what is respected in the military is “a gender identity that demonstrates male characteristics” (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 40). In response to this pressure, female servicemembers act either more feminine, more masculine, or both (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; DeFleur & Warner, 1987; Herbert, 1998; Williams, 1989).

Similarly, following military service, female veterans experience campus differently than their male peers. Surprisingly, female veterans are less likely to use educational benefits (DeFleur & Warner, 1985; National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics, 2011; U.S. Department of Defense, 2007). Once they make the decision to enroll in postsecondary education, female veterans experience the transition to campus differently than male peers, often retaining connections to pre-service faculty or mentors, initiating communication with these individuals, depending on previously-established networks rather than developing new ones for assistance as they adjust to campus (Ackerman et al., 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2011). And unlike male veterans, female veterans on campus are less likely to find same-gender role models, which compounds issues associated with establishing a civilian identity (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

From this, Hamrick and Rumann (2012) suggest that “colleges and universities should be aware of the potential implications for women veterans and servicemembers who subsequently enroll in college” (para. 2). As Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) note,

“when the structured military community is removed, the individual is forced to again redefine who she is as a civilian, a veteran, a female, and a student” (p. 40).

Research Questions

To gain a deeper understanding about female student veterans in higher education, the following questions guided the study:

- 1) What are the experiences of female veterans at a large, four-year, research institution?
 - i. How did female student veterans choose this institution?
 - ii. What are female student veterans’ experiences with regard to making the transition from the military to this institution?
 - iii. In what ways and to what degree are female student veterans engaged (socially, academically, and institutionally) with campus?
 - iv. What are the characteristics of female student veterans’ persistence to degree at this institution?
- 2) How do female student veterans navigate identity development in this context?

In addition to broad questions about female student veterans’ experiences and identity development in the context of higher education, this study also sought to understand more specifically how this population makes the most of the opportunities presented by post-secondary education and what variables are associated with these successes. To this end:

- i. In what ways do female student veterans make the most of opportunities presented by post-secondary education? What variables distinguish these opportunities?
- ii. In what ways do female student veterans define academic, career, or personal success?

Research Design

Phenomenology is a philosophy of the unique, such that it relates that which is essentially not replaceable, seeking to uncover, systematically, the structures and meaning of lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). By attempting to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain depth and richness, phenomenology aims to illustrate behaviors surrounding phenomena in an object-centered way (Moustakas, 1994; Van Kaam, 1966). By aiming for a deeper understanding of our lived experiences, phenomenology “attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9).

Visiting phenomena in such a way requires the setting aside of pre-existing understandings or judgments, a practice described as “bracketing,” in which every day or ordinary ways of perceiving things is rejected such that we may see phenomena freshly, naively, and without the lens of our own past experiences influencing their meaning (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Such a process, suggests Merleau-Ponty (2012), allows primary emphasis may be placed on how respondents

perceive and make meaning about their experiences. Collecting data from several who have experienced this phenomenon by “querying the person(s) and engaging in dialogue,” individual and nuanced descriptions of the phenomenon are developed (Moustakas, 1994, p. 15). From these individual descriptions, a composite experience is rendered, which conveys the overall essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Analytical Paradigm

As this study employed a phenomenological approach, it utilized a social constructionist paradigm to examine and analyze female student veteran experiences in higher education. As a paradigm, social constructionism is based on relative ontology and a subjectivist epistemology (Guido, Chavez, & Lincoln, 2010). As such, reality is based on individual and group experiences, and knowledge is constructed via individual reconstructions coalescing around group consensus, shaped by cultural constructs (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Further, as social constructionism rejects the notion of objectivity aside from what is perceived by one who has experienced the phenomenon, it allows emphasis to be placed on an individual’s cultural perspectives or worldviews, underscoring his or her own ideas in the ways meaning is made (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Spiegelberg, 1982). Such a paradigm suited this study’s design, particularly with regard to the interview and focus group settings, as it supported broad questions asked of participants, so that they may construct meaning of a situation, “forged in discussion or

interactions with other persons” whether other members of the sample or the researcher (Creswell, 2007, p. 21).

Participants

Participants were recruited from The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) via purposive sampling. Participants met the following criteria: they self-identified as a female veteran and they were enrolled as an undergraduate in the fall term of 2013 at the institution. Participants were recruited through a variety of means, as no formal list of female student veterans exists. Given this, identifying participants to invite into the study was found to be not only challenging, but in this particular instance, it was also without precedent. Initial recruitment measures included contacting officers of the campus chapter of the Student Veteran Association (SVA) and the staff of the Office of Student Veteran Services (SVS), as well as my own faculty and staff contacts with personal and professional connections to female student veterans, including members of my dissertation committee, leaders of student organizations, and female student veterans whom had been identified anecdotally as leaders or point persons for this population. In addition to these relational modes, I augmented my reach on campus via print and online advertising in the Daily Texan and by posting flyers in high-traffic areas. To supplement my reach broadly across the Austin area, I utilized social media and created a Facebook presence for my study, employed geo-targeted online advertisements, and posted information about my study on related Facebook pages, inviting both broad and specific attention for my study. Lastly, to address members of this population who might have

been less formally engaged with the campus, I reached out to local organizations involved with veterans to help spread the word about my study.

As identified, participants were invited into the online questionnaire, wherein the final question asked if participation in an interview and/or focus group was of interest. Of the 51 respondents to the questionnaire, 13 indicated a willingness to continue participation in the study via an interview and/or a focus group. Upon subsequent contact, only five of the 13 who had expressed interest in continued involvement in the study ultimately accepted my invitation to participate in an interview. Of these 13, only three also participated in a focus group.

Also via the questionnaire, participants were asked if they were willing to invite other female student veterans to be involved in the study, an effort designed to underscore the phenomenological approach of the study. This particular effort, that of encouraging female student veterans to invite peers into the study, was initially considered a crucial recruitment tool, as female student veterans may not readily self-identify as “veteran” to campus administration nor engage with often male-dominated groups such as student veteran’s organizations, but they may be in contact with other female veterans (ACE, 2010). However, only 10 of the 51 respondents replied in the positive to the invitation to share information with other female student veterans; these respondents were given electronic versions of a flyer for my study. The efficacies of this particular recruitment effort are unknown.

In terms of size of sample, due to its purposive nature, the number of participants may be small, so long as it is representative and not random (Creswell, 2007). There are approximately 650 student veterans on campus, and while the exact number of female student veterans is unconfirmed, recent research suggests that, nation-wide, a quarter of the veterans on college campuses are female (Radford, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). From this, it follows that the female student veteran population at UT Austin may be comprised of up to 160 individuals; this in and of itself is merely a rough estimate, as women servicemembers select four-year institutions less frequently than male peers, and thus, estimates that address nation-wide descriptions may not be able to be generalized to this campus (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). The goal of this study is to include in the survey at least half of the estimated female student veteran population at UT Austin and 10 percent of the estimated population in the focus group efforts. Such a goal meets Polkinghorne's (1989) recommendation of including five to 25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon.

Site of the Study

Initially, the study was situated entirely on the campus of The University of Texas at Austin, a four-year, public, research institution, which was designed to address the primary research question, that of seeking to understand the experiences of female student veterans at an elite postsecondary institution. Further, the campus exists in a rare confluence of veteran-friendly features, most notably its proximity to Fort Hood, which

places the university in what scholars have suggested is a recent trend of military veterans seeking enrollment near colleges close to their last tour of duty (Radford, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Smith, 2012). UT Austin is also in close proximity to Austin Community College, with which it holds articulation agreements, providing a pipeline for students to transfer associates degree coursework toward a four-year degree.

However, as participants were identified, a majority was found to live off-campus and one was studying abroad, making on-campus interviews and focus groups potentially challenging to schedule, resulting in a sample which may have defied representativeness. To this end, an amendment to the study was approved mid-December by the Office of Research Support, permitting interviews and focus groups to be hosted via phone or an online platform such as Skype. All interviews were hosted after the amendment, and, as a result, all were hosted via phone, due to participant preference. Similarly, one of the three focus groups was hosted on Skype.

Sources of Data

Research was gathered in three specific modes: a demographic questionnaire, individual interviews, and small focus groups. The questionnaire (see Appendix B), operationalized in Qualtrics, presented a battery of broad, demographic questions designed to provide more detail about the personal and background characteristics of female student veterans at UT Austin, with particular focus on the process of choosing UT Austin and initial experiences on campus (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Efforts to source questionnaire respondents were ongoing throughout the entire data collection period.

Embedded in the questionnaire was an invitation to participate in an individual interview designed to elicit more nuanced conversation about participants' unique pathways to UT Austin as well as their personal reflections about their levels of engagement and persistence in college. Interviewees were then invited to participate in a small focus group in which they answered open-ended questions about how they chose to attend UT Austin, their experiences on campus, the ways in which they engage with veteran and nonveteran peers and the faculty, as well as selection of academic major and perceptions of institutional environment and policy. In addition to being a particularly salient mode of collecting phenomenological data (Creswell, 2007), for this audience, focus groups were suspected to avoid for this audience what Hicks (2011) has called inadvertent and unintended complexity.

My own past experiences with student veterans supported plans to gather data via these three sources, especially focus groups, as my own conversations with veterans about their experiences on campus were richer and more robust when part of a small group conversation rather than in one on one discussions. Though my research experience to date had been limited to male-only samples of student veterans, they lead me to believe that the most successful invitations for participation are those that capitalize on veterans' busy schedules—to this end, initial attempts placed focus groups on campus, when, presumably, students are present for class, and/or in the evenings to accommodate work and school schedules.

To ensure the privacy of participants, several protections were utilized. The online questionnaire was housed on a secure server hosted by the university, responses planned for deletion after data collected. My notes, interview and focus group recordings, and transcriptions held securely via password-protections, and limited only to my use and access. Further, each participant was given a pseudonym, used throughout interview and/or focus group activities, transcriptions, and subsequent analysis. Personal, student-level data such as specifics about academic major, city of origin, branch of service, or other identifiable characteristics were removed to protect the privacy of participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of analyzing the questionnaire results to build a demographic description about participants. Following this, data analysis consisted of reading the transcribed interviews and focus group conversations, and coding them according to significant statements and themes, which suggested how participants experienced the phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Moustakas, 1994). This process was assisted via Dedoose (version 4.12.0 for Windows). From these statements and themes, ideas about female student veterans' experiences at UT Austin and identities emerged, resulting in a *textural description*, i.e., what the participants experienced, as well as a *structural description*, which illustrated how they experienced the phenomenon, with regard to "conditions, situation, or context" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). From these descriptions, a composite description was culled, resulting in what Moustakas (1994)

calls the essential, invariant structure, or *essence* of the phenomenon, such that a deeper understanding of the phenomenon is distilled.

Further, analyzing the data via transition theory added depth to both participants' individual descriptions of their college experiences as well as to the composite description of the phenomenon of female student veterans' experience at UT Austin. These experiences, from selecting the institution, negotiating enrollment, navigating social, academic, and institutional engagement, and persisting to degree, can be seen as a series of transitions—or, perhaps as one, larger, holistic view of the experience of this phenomenon by this particular audience: in effect, its essence. An examination of this essence via transition theory focuses on “how individuals experience a change in assumptions about self and a corresponding change in both behavior and relationships” (DiRamio et al., 2008, p. 80). To this end, the framework of Schlossberg's transition theory, specifically the variables and stages comprised within the “4 Ss” (situation, self, support, and strategies) were used to analyze the data (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Lastly, displaying participants' experiences via a schema or diagram may prove useful, especially if such a conceptualization can convey the essence of their experience of the phenomenon such that it serves as a tool for others to better comprehend what this particular group has experienced (Moustakas, 1994). To this end, data analysis also included visualizations of the participants' individual and shared experiences of this phenomenon, i.e., the series of unique transitions female student veterans at UT Austin experience.

Data Quality

Several techniques were employed to improve data quality and assurances in the study. In particular, to address possible pitfalls with regard to the sample lacking representativeness, efforts were made to invite as large a group of participants as possible, particularly for the survey effort. To this end, sharing the questionnaire via social media played a role in building the sample, as a venue such as Facebook and university's Know Events list serve allowed for broad dissemination of the study's aims and recruitment message as well as snowballing effects due to the ease of sharing information in these media (Pew Research Center, 2013). In addition, the presence of outliers was consistently assessed, specifically in regards to the possibility that respondents with experiences far outside of others involved in the study may signal a female student veteran who might be avoiding engagement all together. Conversely, it seems that the nature of the small group invitation precluded just this sort of respondent; members of my sample did not appear to be attracted to participate in such a medium, as focus group participation did not meet initial goals for attendance, thus, compounding the notion of representativeness for data culled from these sources. Being cognizant of outliers is a critical route to increasing the study's potential validity (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Initially, the possibility existed that that I may know some of the study participants through previous student veteran research, which could have raised the potential for researcher effects. While this wasn't the case, I was nonetheless prepared to

discourage these possible effects by planning to remain on site as long as possible for each meeting, thereby augmenting conversations with unknown participants and taking a lower profile with those I knew. Similarly, as Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest, stating intentions in advance and unequivocally may also help address the risk of researcher bias; to this end, goals of my research were noted at the start of each interview and focus group meeting, and, in several instances, became the topic of conversation as sessions came to an end and participants began to ask me questions of their own. Also, a conscious effort to utilize participant direct quotes where possible—in lieu of my paraphrasing, particularly with regard to making claims about the phenomenon, was made in an effort to stem potential researcher bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Maxwell, 1996).

Validity was also strengthened in a number of ways with regard to data transcription. Due to the single-facilitator design of this project, interviews and focus group proceedings were recorded and transcribed by a third party. From this, “participant checks” were implemented, in which participant responses as well as analyses were shared with participants, allowing for confirmation of findings, a chance to request clarity, and the possibility for the researcher to seek causal connections (Creswell, 2007).

Lastly, with regard to themes emerging from the coding process, I relied on prior experience with the larger body of student veterans—male and female, as well as concepts sourced from the theoretical framework of the study to strengthen the process of developing individual and composite descriptions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Timeline for the Study

Data collection commenced immediately upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in late October, beginning with efforts to disseminate an invitation to the demographic questionnaire, on an *ad hoc*, asynchronous basis, continuing throughout the fall semester as participants were identified. From these efforts, a sample of female student veterans was sourced, from which emerged a small subset of the population interested in participating in an interview and/or a focus group meeting. Interviews and focus groups took place in early December and continued through January rather than following initial plans to have them coincide with a Veteran's Day program due to an unanticipated shift in the program date. Data analysis began in early January and continued through early February, allowing for transcription services and "participant checks" to augment data quality. Findings and implications of the study were cultivated in early spring, allowing for presentation of these data in late March.

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions found in this study include: (a) the research design allowed for the findings to have a high degree of validity, (b) the questionnaire respondents, interviewees, and focus group participants were as they presented themselves to be (i.e., female student veterans enrolled at UT Austin as undergraduates) and replied to questions honestly, and (c) themes and categories resulting from data analysis provided for applicability with regard to female student veterans as a population.

Results of this study should be interpreted with regard to four limitations. First, the method of participant selection may have precluded a balance of race and ethnicity. Despite the participants all identifying as being female as well as veterans attending the same university, their experiences will, nonetheless, not be universal, particularly with regard to the influence of race and ethnicity. Although the participants' views may be similar to other female student veterans', it would be unwise to suggest that they represent all female student veterans' views on higher education and the navigation of personal identities on and off campus.

Second, the face-to-face nature of data collection, while allowing for rich qualitative descriptions, may have hindered a more critical response, as participants may have been unwilling to share comments in person—or with a nonveteran researcher. Conversely, as a woman interviewing other women, my overtures may have garnered perhaps more authentic, robust responses than were I a man interviewing women (Cole, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Harding, 1986; Hawkesworth, 2006).

Similarly, while a phenomenological approach provides a mechanism for a shared experience to become distilled into its “essence,” and thus, offer a deeper understanding of the phenomenon for participants and nonparticipants alike, such an approach could have also run the risk of prohibiting nuanced, individual characterizations of the experience (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). At times, it was difficult for me to bracket personal experiences and notions, precluding the aim of phenomenological study, in which data are reduced to the essence of an experience, sourced solely from those who

have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Further, such an approach, if unchecked, has the potential to belie the diversity inherent this unique subpopulation of women on campus (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Third, the theoretical framework selected, combined with my background in service to nontraditional adults in education may have inevitably affected the analysis of the data (Labbo & Reinking, 1999). As suggested by several feminist scholars (Cole, 2009; Harding, 1986; Hawkesworth, 2006), this study may have functioned as much an examination of female student veterans' thinking as it did my own.

Lastly, the timing of data collection, as it occurred at the end of the fall semester and the start of the spring semester, and was also concurrent with several holidays, may have served to limit the student responses to my overtures, and, thus, negatively influencing my sample size and the representativeness of my findings. While social media efforts and the use of technology to mitigate distance from campus may have assuaged the issues of timing, the effect of the academic and holiday calendars on sourcing this sample is unknown.

Conclusion

As the numbers of veterans on campus increases as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the reauthorization of the GI Bill, higher education is called to more keenly understand and support this particular audience (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). In particular, female veterans experience campus differently than their male peers, prompting scholars to suggest that "colleges and universities should be aware of the

potential implications for women veterans and servicemembers who subsequently enroll in college” (Hamrick & Rumann, 2012, para. 2). As Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) note, “when the structured military community is removed, the individual is forced to again redefine who she is as a civilian, a veteran, a female, and a student” (p. 40).

Existing literature on female servicemembers or veterans, while growing, is limited, and scant material is dedicated to this population. Most academic treatment of veterans’ transition to the classroom or their specific experiences in higher education focus on male veterans or on veterans as a whole, the body of work devoted to female student veterans slight (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Using a transition theory framework and a phenomenological approach, research was gathered in the form of a questionnaire, individual interviews, and small focus groups conducted with female student veterans; the goal to augment knowledge about female student veterans in the areas of college choice, transition to campus, levels of postsecondary engagement and persistence, as well as female student veteran identity development in the context of postsecondary education.

Chapter Four: Findings

It is difficult to be so much older than other students. Forming study groups and making connections to help in classes is very difficult.

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). To gain a deeper understanding about female undergraduate student veterans in higher education, the following questions guided the study:

- 1) What are the experiences of female undergraduate student veterans at a large, four-year, research institution?
 - i. How did female student veterans choose this institution?
 - ii. What are female student veterans' experiences with regard to making the transition from the military to this institution?
 - iii. In what ways and to what degree are female student veterans engaged (socially, academically, and institutionally) with campus?
 - iv. What are the characteristics of female student veterans' persistence to degree at this institution?
- 2) How do female undergraduate student veterans navigate identity development in this context?

In addition to broad questions about female student veterans' experiences and identity development in the context of higher education, this study also sought to understand more specifically how this sample makes the most of the opportunities

presented by post-secondary education and what variables are associated with these successes. To this end:

- i. In what ways do female student veterans make the most of opportunities presented by post-secondary education? What variables distinguish these opportunities?
- ii. In what ways do female student veterans define academic, career, or personal success?

To address these questions, data were gathered in quantitative and qualitative modes. An online demographic questionnaire served to produce a baseline or composite description of those who have experienced the phenomenon of being a female student veteran at UT Austin. In addition, interviews and focus were also conducted to provide individual-level data and robust descriptions of these experiences.

This chapter presents a composite demographic summary of the sample, profiles of interviewees and focus group participants, and descriptions of the experiences of this audience with regard to themes of college choice, transition to postsecondary education, campus engagement, and persistence to degree. Also included are descriptions of participant identity development and perceptions of success with regard to making the most of opportunities presented by higher education.

Demographic Summary of Participants

Fifty-one individuals participated in the online questionnaire, and a summary of the samples' attributes is presented here, in terms of demographic characteristics, aspects

of military service, and educational trajectories. This summary provides a composite demographic description of participants.

Age, ethnicity, marital status of participants.

Responses to demographic questions are found in Table 1. In terms of age, the majority (69%) of participants are between the ages of 23 and 29, the remaining split between early and late thirties; no participants are over the age of 41. Nearly 80% of participants are Caucasian/White, followed by 6% Hispanic or Latina, and 3% each Asian and Black or African-American. Nearly half of the sample (47%) is single, never married; a slightly smaller number, 38%, are married. Twelve percent reported their marital status as divorced, and no participants are widowed, and 65% of participants have minor dependents.

Age range	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
17-22	1	4
23-25	8	31
26-29	10	38
30-33	5	19
34-37	0	0
38-41	2	8
42+	0	0
Ethnicity/race	Frequency (n)¹	Percent of sample (%)
Asian	2	6
Black or African-American	1	3
Caucasian/White	27	79
Hispanic or Latina	7	21
Native American/Pacific Islander	0	0
Other	0	0
Marital Status	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
Single, never married	16	47
Married	13	38
Legally separated	0	0

¹ Multiple responses permitted

Divorced	4	12
Widowed	0	0
Other	1	3
Dependents	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
No	12	35
Yes	22	65

Table 1. Demographic summary of participants.

Military service of participants.

Responses to questions about military service are found in Table 2. A majority of the participants served in the Air Force (40%), followed by a quarter of the sample having served in the Army, and 10% each served in the Coast Guard, Navy, or the Marines. Five percent served in the National Guard. Location of service was varied, with equal numbers having served within the Continental U.S. as served internationally. Fifteen percent served in territories directly involved in OEF/OIF (Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom), namely Afghanistan and Iraq. The average length of service was six years; the shortest term in the sample was three years, and the longest was 12. Nearly half were deployed at least once, whereas 40 % were deployed twice, and 11% were deployed three or more times. Almost half of the participants (45%) were actively engaged in combat. Length of time since separating from the military was almost evenly split; nearly one half of the sample was less than one year out, the other half more than one year.

Just over 40 percent of the sample reported veterans' educational benefits as the most common reason for joining the military, followed by a desire to gain skills and job experience for a future career. One-fifth of the sample cited a patriotic desire to serve

their country through military service, and a similar number reported family military service as a strong factor in their decision to join the military. Though the particular relationship or gender of veteran family members was not asked, most commonly, participants noted a father's service, though one revealed that "my mother retired after 22 years as a Master Sergeant in the Air Force."

Branch of service	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
Air Force	8	35
Army	7	30
Coast Guard	2	9
Marines	2	9
National Guard	1	4
Navy	3	13
Number of times deployed	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
Once	8	40
Twice	9	45
Three or more times	3	15
Active combat	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
Yes	10	45
No	12	55
Time since separating from military	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
Less than six months	5	23
Six to 12 months	6	27
More than one year	11	50

Table 2. Military experiences of participants.

Educational trajectories and experiences of participants.

Responses to questions about educational experiences are found in Table 3. In terms of their education, enrolment before military service and during deployment was varied for the sample; 62% attended college before deployment, and a third of those earned the equivalent of an associate's degree before enrolling at UT Austin. A majority (80%) did not enroll while deployed, which is consistent with conceptualizations of

veterans' stagnated educational trajectories (Boyce, 2007; Kleykamp, 2007; Steele et al., 2010). A majority of participants reported utilization of veteran's educational benefits (85%), and a similar number relayed that the GI Bill's educational benefits positively influenced their decision to enroll in college. In particular, participants planned to use their veteran's benefits to complete their undergraduate degree and to augment skill sets learned in the military. Several participants described this intersection of degree completion and educational benefits usage, as they asserted the desire to "use my ed benefits toward a bachelors degree," and having wanted to "earn a bachelors degree, at the very least, utilizing my GI bill," and that they desired to "finish my bachelor's degree, which I had begun working toward in 2001, right before I joined the Marine Corps."

Participants ranked location as the top factor influencing their choice to attend UT Austin. Following location, institutional prestige and the receipt of GI Bill benefits were ranked similarly in terms of their influence on these women's choices to attend UT Austin. Program or major offered followed next in terms of influencing college choice, and participants ranked the influence of family or friends last in terms of major factors in their decision to attend UT Austin.

A majority of the participants were enrolled full time (71%) and lived off-campus (80%). While varied, the liberal arts were the most common academic major, with clusters in international relations/global studies and psychology. All participants reported grade point averages at least 2.1; half (50%) reported averages of 3.1 or above. Ninety-four percent of these veterans estimated the date of their graduation to be in or before

2015. Six percent were unsure as to their completion date. Ninety-four percent of the participants entered UT Austin with a class standing of sophomore or higher. Ninety-five percent reported plans to graduate in the next two years, and 71% indicated that they intended to continue their studies and pursue an advanced or professional degree after graduating from UT Austin, suggesting strong perceptions of persistence.

Receiving veteran's educational benefits	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
Yes	20	87
No	3	13
GI Bill influenced college decision	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
Yes	13	68
Not sure/maybe	3	16
No	3	16
Major factors influenced college choice	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
GI Bill	8	40
Location	15	75
Prestige	11	55
Program/major	7	35
Family/friends	3	15
Reside on-campus/off-campus	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
On	4	20
Off	16	80
Enrolled full-time/part-time	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
Full-time	14	70
Part-time	6	30
GPA	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
3.1-4.0	10	50
2.1-3.0	10	50
1.1-2.0	0	0
Less than 1.0	0	0
Anticipated date of graduation	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
2013	1	5
2014	8	40
2015	8	40
2016	1	5
2017	1	5
2018	0	0
Uncertain	1	5
Class standing upon enrollment	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)

First-year	1	5
Sophomore	8	40
Junior	7	35
Senior	4	20
Highest degree expected	Frequency (n)	Percent of sample (%)
Bachelor's	5	25
Master's/Professional	9	45
Doctoral	5	25
Other	0	0
Uncertain	1	5

Table 3. Educational experiences and trajectories of participants.

In terms of their perceptions of campus services for veterans, participants reported high satisfaction with several service units, including Admissions, the Student Veterans Center, and Academic Affairs/Counseling, and the Student Veterans Association (see Table 4). Moderate satisfaction with Financial Aid, Student Health Services, and Career Services were also reported. The Office of Disability Services was noted as not applicable for a majority of participants. Of particular note, numerous open-ended responses cited the Student Veterans Center and its director as the most important on-campus service assisting student veterans in achieving academic success:

For those vets that are just transitioning and are still getting used to the various services on campus, the Student Vet Center is most important. [the Center's director] and other vets are very approachable and are always eager to ensure that a new vet knows their way around campus, knows how to fill out VA Benefits paperwork correctly, and what office to take it to if there are questions.

In terms of perceptions about what might have made connecting to the university easier, participants noted a desire for more mentorship opportunities, both with faculty as well as peers, through which they might have gained a better understanding of veteran and student services, acclimated more readily to campus, and connected more easily with

other veterans. As one participant noted, “mentorship was a huge reason why I was extremely successful in the AF [Air Force] and it is one of the aspects of the military I miss the most.” Another participant described the value of veteran peer guidance, and suggested that having had “a veteran mentor to show me around campus would have been nice.”

Service	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Not Applicable	Responses (n)
Admissions	11	6	0	0	17
Financial Aid	8	5	1	3	17
Academic Affairs/Counseling	9	6	2	0	17
Disability Services	4	4	1	8	17
Student Health Services	7	6	2	2	17
Student Veterans Center	11	5	1	0	17
Student Veterans Association	10	6	1	0	17
Career Services	6	9	1	1	17

Table 4. Perceptions of campus services by participants.

And yet, participants also noted difficulties in connecting with campus (see Table 5). While two-thirds (65%) noted that they felt welcome at UT Austin, 50% of participants reported a lack of a good relationship with a member of the faculty or staff, 35% noted that they hadn’t developed a network of supportive friends at UT Austin, nor that their college life/experience was what they’d expected it to be. Similarly, two-thirds (64%) claimed that they were not affiliated with a campus group (social or academic, formal or informal) and 41% were uncomfortable with their interactions with other students at UT Austin. As one participant described, “It is difficult to be so much older

than other students. Forming study groups and making connections to help in classes is very difficult.”

Statement	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Responses (n)
My transition from military to campus life was smooth.	2	7	8	17
I feel welcome at UT Austin.	1	5	11	17
I feel comfortable interacting with other students at UT Austin.	2	5	10	17
I have developed a network of supportive friends at UT Austin.	3	6	8	17
I have a good relationship with a faculty or staff member.	1	8	8	17
I feel part of a group (social or academic, formal or informal).	3	8	6	17
My college life/experience is what I expected it to be.	3	3	11	17

Table 5. Participant perceptions about transition and engagement on campus.

Composite description of female student veterans at UT Austin.

In summary, questionnaire data suggest that, as a group, female student veterans at UT Austin are in their mid- to late twenties, are primarily Caucasian, are as likely to be single as married, and more often than not have dependents. While military service across this group was varied, the average term of service was six years, separation from the military was relatively recent, and participation in the Air Force was more common than other branches of the armed forces. Female student veterans at UT Austin were likely to have been deployed at least once, served abroad, and engaged in combat as other veterans (NCVAS, 2011).

In terms of their educational trajectories, most female student veterans at UT Austin earned college credits while in active service, though not while deployed, and nearly 90 percent have been utilizing veteran's educational benefits—the presence of which positively influenced a vast majority to enroll in college after service. Location was the strongest influence in participants' decisions to attend UT Austin, followed closely by institutional prestige. Most were enrolled full time, lived off-campus, majored in the liberal arts, and entered UT Austin as upperclasswomen. For many, academic major corresponded to work done in the military, i.e., a medic studied nursing, a translator studied language. In addition, a majority plan to graduate within the next two years and pursue a graduate degree. Most did not utilize the Office of Disability Services, but nearly all described high levels of satisfaction with the Office of Student Veteran Services, specifically the Student Veteran Center (SVC). For female student veterans at UT Austin, transitions to higher education were smooth, but connecting with others on campus—peers and faculty—was noted as a challenge.

Comparison of composite description with populations at UT Austin.

Unlike traditional undergraduates, recent research has suggested that student veterans as a whole align more with nontraditional or transfer students as a result of “the years spent serving in the military before enrolling in their current higher education programs” (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010, p. 1). In particular, student veterans overall are more likely to be 24 years of age or older, have a spouse or a child or both, and are more likely to be employed full-time—characteristics typically displayed by

nontraditional and transfer students (Johnson et al., 2009; Radford, 2009). What follows is a comparison of the participants' composite description, i.e., their shared demographic and educational characteristics, with the overall undergraduate student body at UT Austin, as well as with nontraditional and transfer student populations where data permit.

Demographic differences.

In terms of age, compared to the overall population of undergraduate students at UT Austin, whose average age was 20.5, participants were considerably older, in their mid- to late twenties, presumably a result of their military service and varied educational trajectories (IMA, 2013). However, of interest is participants' average age was also considerably older than that of UT Austin transfer students as well, whose average age was 20.7, down from 21.1 the previous year (IMA, 2013). In comparison to the nontraditional undergraduate student population—i.e., all students over the age of 24, participants' average ages aligned more closely with this population, which underscores the presumptions above which categorize veterans as nontraditional students based on age.

While participant's ages aligned with veteran populations and nontraditional students as a whole, some notable differences emerged between these two groups, namely distribution of participant ethnicities (see Table 6). Seventy-nine percent of the participants reported being Caucasian, a number considerably higher than in the overall undergraduate and transfer populations, 48.4% and 40.9%, respectively. Similarly, a considerably smaller number of participants reported being Asian, 6%, versus 15.4% and

12.7% of Asian students which comprise the undergraduate and transfer populations, respectively. Participants' distributions of Hispanic/Latina and Black/African-American ethnicities/races were similar to the ratios on campus: 21% reported being Hispanic or Latina, compared with 19.1% of all undergraduates and 20.9% of transfer students. Similarly, 3% of participants reported being Black or African-American, a number that was similar to the undergraduate and transfer populations, 4% and 3.7%, respectively.

	Participants	UT Austin undergraduate students	UT Austin transfer students	U.S. Veterans²	Female veterans
Asian ³	6	15.4	12.7	1.9	2.5
Black or African-American	3	4	3.7	10.8	20.1
Caucasian/White	79	48.4	40.9	79.1	66.9
Hispanic or Latino	21	19.1	20.9	6.0	7.8
Other/Multiple ⁴	3	2.3	3.3	1.4	2.7

Table 6. Comparisons of participant racial/ethnic distribution.

While the percentages of Caucasian and Asian participants differed markedly from these group's representation on campus, participants' ethnicities aligned with overall veteran's racial distribution, wherein 80% of all veterans nationwide were Caucasian, and approximately 4% were Asian or Native American/Pacific Islander (NCVAS, 2011). However, in terms of *female* veterans nationwide, the participant's racial and ethnic distribution did share this same affinity, as Caucasians numbered only 67% of the female veteran population. Of note is that 9% of participants reported more

² NCVAS, 2013.

³“Asian” includes “Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders.”

⁴ “Other” includes “two or more races.”

than one ethnicity/race, and while this population is a small fraction of the overall undergraduate and transfer population, 2.3% and 3.3%, respectively, it was considerably larger than the veteran and female veteran populations, 1.4% and 2.7%, respectively.

Educational trajectories and experiences.

In terms of educational trajectories, a nearly two-thirds of participants (62%) reported previous postsecondary education experiences, most commonly at community colleges, prior to enrolling at UT Austin; such experiences served to further separate them from the overall undergraduate population as well as from the nontraditional population, which is defined by age, and often marital status and presence of minor dependents. Conversely, the participants' prior educational experiences are similar to those of transfer students, who often bring a multitude of transcripts to bear on the enrollment process (Dunklin, 2012).

Seventy-one percent of participants reported being enrolled full-time, whereas 92.3% of the overall undergraduate body was reported as full-time students. A majority of participants were pursuing a liberal arts degree, which is also quite popular with undergraduate population as a whole; as such majors are second only to the natural sciences in terms of number of enrolled undergraduates. Of note is that a very small percentage of undergraduate students in a liberal arts degree program are enrolled part-time—a mere 10.1% of the nearly 8200 enrollees in the fall term of 2013, whereas a majority of the larger schools and programs had more favorable part-time to full-time ratios (IMA, 2013).

In terms of relative levels of satisfaction with campus setting, participants noted high levels of satisfaction with services offered, particularly those aimed directly at veterans. Though slightly dated, NSSE (2010) data provided a similar perception of institutional support via first-year undergraduate student respondents, as 90% reported “a favorable image of this institution,” and 91% noted they would “choose this school again if they could start their college career over” (NSSE, 2010, p. 2).

While participants reported difficulties in connecting with others on campus, citing challenges in becoming part of group and hosting meaningful relationships with staff or faculty members, NSSE data indicate that these challenges were also echoed in the overall undergraduate student population. Despite the favorable image of the institution as noted above, only 61% of first-year students characterized the campus environment as “supportive,” defined as providing support needed for students to succeed academically and socially, as well as to cope with non-academic responsibilities such as work and family (NSSE, 2010).

In summary, participants presented unique demographic and educational experiences when compared to those of the overall undergraduate population at UT Austin. Female student veteran participants demonstrated demographic characteristics such as age, marital status, the presence of dependents, and racial/ethnic distribution patterns which resonate less with the undergraduate student body than with its subset of nontraditional students and with the corps of veterans nationwide. The composite participant description, women in their mid- to late twenties, perhaps married, but most

likely single, commonly with minor dependents, and predominantly Caucasian, was at odds with the undergraduate student body, whose average age was 20.5, was overwhelmingly single and without dependents, and whose majority is not Caucasian.

Similarly, the participants' educational experiences were also unique. Their educational trajectories mirrored those of transfer students due to participants' prior encounters with postsecondary education before enrolling at UT Austin. Participants made selections of academic major in ways similar to undergraduates, but, as many nontraditional students do, they enrolled part-time in those majors in ways disproportionate to patterns of the overall undergraduate body. And while participants and undergraduates both reported high levels of satisfaction with the institution, they also reported similar challenges, primarily with regard to perceptions about levels of academic and social support provided by the campus.

Participant Profiles

In addition to data about female student veterans at UT Austin gathered via an online demographic questionnaire, interviews and focus groups were also conducted with questionnaire participants to provide individual-level data and robust descriptions of these experiences. What follows is an introduction of the demographic and academic characteristics of these interviewees whose experiences are analyzed in greater detail later in this chapter with respect to themes of college choice, transition to higher education, campus engagement, and persistence to degree. These analyses serve to

augment the composite view of female student veterans at UT Austin provided by the demographic questionnaire.

Participant profile summaries: Janna, Tracy, Maria, Irene, Molly⁵.

Janna, a single, Caucasian woman in her mid-twenties and without dependents, began preparing for her transition from the military to higher education two years before separating from the military, claiming that for this process, “planning and networking are vitally important.” This tenacity was evidenced in the high number of credits Janna amassed while serving in the Corps for 12 years, the accumulation of which allowed Janna to enroll at UT Austin as a junior. At the time of the interview, Janna was a senior.

Tracy, also a single, Caucasian woman in her mid-twenties and without dependents, “volunteered, worked seasonal jobs, and traveled extensively throughout 19 countries for 3.5 years” after she separated from the military and before she enrolled at UT Austin. Upon reflection, Tracy described her love of travel as stemming from her decision to join the military as a way to avoid being “‘stuck’ in my hometown,” a decision, which, in turn, contributed to her choice of major. At the time of the interview, Tracy was a senior.

Maria, also a single, Caucasian woman in her mid-twenties and without dependents, described the challenges of balancing full-time schoolwork with the demands of the active reserves, both of which, she noted, had provided “anxiety” and had been, simply, “a way of life.” At the time of the interview, Maria was a junior.

⁵ All names are pseudonyms.

Irene, a married, Hispanic woman in her early thirties with dependent children, lived outside of Austin, and commuted four hours per trip to campus, choosing “a quality education at UT, despite the distance.” Both she and her husband served in same branch of the service, marrying before the start of their military careers, their three children born during Irene’s years of service. A foreign language major, Irene was roughly a semester shy of graduation at the time of the interview, but an exact completion date was uncertain, due to the unpredictability of courses offerings and the paucity of demand for her specialty.

Molly, a divorced, Caucasian woman in her late twenties with dependent children noted, as did Irene, the challenges of balancing schoolwork with family, and described the importance of completing her degree as on par with that of securing childcare, as “taking care of my children and completing my degree are really one and the same thing.” Molly credited her work in the military for having influenced her academic major at UT Austin, and described the “contentment that comes from doing what you love” as having contributed to her commitment to complete her degree. At the time of the interview, Molly was a junior.

The experiences of these women’s transitions from the military to higher education were explored in one-on-one interviews and in focus group settings, the transcriptions of which were analyzed with regard to themes of college choice, transition to postsecondary education, campus engagement, and persistence to degree. Also included are examinations of participant identity development and perceptions of success

with regard to making the most of opportunities presented by higher education. From these analyses, robust descriptions of the participants' experiences at UT Austin emerge.

College choice.

Basically, I wanted to have a lot of value behind my education being that I was getting the GI Bill and using that. I wanted to make sure it would take me as far as possible, UT [Austin] being a very prestigious university.

The composite description of participants' college choice experiences suggested that location was the strongest influence in their decisions to attend UT Austin, followed closely by institutional prestige and receipt of the GI Bill. These understandings were borne out through interviews and focus group conversations, and additional nuance and complexity were brought to this conceptualization in the areas of value and quality.

In particular, the influence of location on college choice for participants is linked to veterans' educational benefits, as described by Maria,

I... wanted a good quality state school and it had to be in the state of Texas because of all of the benefits of the Hazelwood Act that I received here. So I had to be at a Texas school, and UT is one of the best schools in one of the best cities, so it was the environment and the name of the school that brought me here.

Similarly, Janna, noted the connection between location and benefits, as she "decided to attend UT Austin primarily because of the Hazelwood exemption," and went on to note that "Austin is such a great city, and my home state is Texas, and the university is very close to where I was from, which is Arlington [Texas]." Irene also described her selection of UT Austin in terms of benefits paired with location, "because of all of the benefits of the Hazelwood Act that I received here." She went on to weave

into this understanding of the connection between location and the notion of degree value,

Basically, I wanted to have a lot of value behind my education being that I was getting the GI Bill and using that. I wanted to make sure it would take me as far as possible, UT being a very prestigious university. And even though it was [a very long] commute and maybe not being able to attend every single day out of the week, still felt that was a lot more of a value than going to a community college where some of the instructors weren't really interested in the students or interested in teaching the actual material. So, those were the main reasons I chose to go to UT.

Irene went on to further connect her selection of UT Austin with perceptions of degree value, distinguishing it from that of a two-year institution,

So, you're trying to get as much quality out of that as much as possible, because whether I'm going to a community college or I'm going to UT, it's still pretty much the same type of effort, but very different in value.

Similarly, this notion of value also surfaced in conversations with Maria, who described selecting UT Austin as it was "a quality state school." Tracy also commented on the notion of value with regard to selecting UT Austin, specifically noting that value, for her, was not only found in "the better financial aid package [from UT Austin] than I was offered from [another university], but in the networking and opportunities for growth through my degree."

In addition to linking location with veterans' benefits and perceptions of value, participants also described the influence of the city of Austin in their college choice process. In addition to Maria's comment that "UT is one of the best schools in one of the best cities," others suggested that Austin played a role in their decisions to attend. Janna noted,

Austin, being such a great city, I had heard about it from friends who have visited. I've heard so many good things about Austin and what a great town it is, so I thought it would be a great fit for me. So all those things combined made it an easy choice for me to attend UT.

The benefits of living in the city of Austin were also described by non-Texans Tracy and Molly as playing a role in their decisions to attend UT Austin. For Tracy, Austin was “close to my home town [in Louisiana], but also far, and it's attractive—progressive, adventurous, which is what I was looking for.” Similarly, Molly noted, “the number one factor was location... but really just the fact that it's in Austin ... made me want to apply to UT.”

Following participants' conceptualizations of site via perceptions of degree value, concepts of school quality, and amid impressions about the overall attractiveness of Austin as a city, notions of institutional prestige also played a role in college choice. Maria noted, simply, “the name of the school” was a factor in her choice, whereas Irene shared that she “wanted to make sure it [my degree] would take me as far as possible, UT being a very prestigious university.” Molly described her impressions of institutional prestige as being slightly conflicted,

The prestige is what made me want to apply. I'm struggling about that because I see a lot of my friends online from the military how they're parenting and taking classes online. You get more respect if you have a degree from a better institution, I think, or if you say you went to...I think that's what all of the prestige is about.

Similarly, following the influence of institutional prestige, participants shared rationales for selecting UT Austin based on impressions of program strength. For Janna, noting that “the [her academic major] program at UT is one of the top programs in the

country,” it was “a natural fit” for her to attend UT Austin. Similarly, Irene also sought UT Austin for a particular program, commenting that her major is

...very unique, I think it’s [UT Austin] the only place in Texas that offers that degree, and I’m fortunate to only be within [commuting distance] of the UT campus. If I tried to pursue that [elsewhere], I would have to go out of state.

For Molly, the connections between her selection of UT Austin and her program’s strength or uniqueness was described as a reflection on her new abilities to practice her area of study with greater capacity due to her overall experience as a student. She reflects,

Having to take [core courses] like diversity... Sometimes it feels corny, but the slogan from UT, What Starts Here Changes the World, I really enjoy that motivation, that inspiration to take the world we live in and turn it into the world that you want to live in. For me that’s [program of study]... It’s much easier to do that when you can picture many different perspectives, even things you don’t have anything to do with you can still see why when there are differing views.

Participants also noted family as having a role in their selection of UT Austin, however, the influence of family on college choice was described as a result of conceptions about location. Janna’s choice was influenced by the closeness of the campus to her parents, as she was “from Arlington, Texas, so [UT Austin] being a three-hour drive away is really convenient to my family.” For Molly, choosing UT Austin was a shared decision made with her fiancée; the location of the campus mitigated distance between where each had lived previously as well as became the site of their future life together.

We were living in separate states and Austin was somewhere we both had been before, because we were both stationed at Fort Hood in Killeen, TX. We had

talked about living in Austin ultimately as a family before, and it was kind of a middle ground for us.

In summary, the composite description of participants' college choice experiences, which cited location as playing the largest role in their decisions to attend UT Austin, was borne out through interviews and focus group conversations. In particular, the influence of location on college choice for participants was found to be very nuanced, conceptualized via intersections of location with presence of veterans' educational benefits, which heighten perceptions of institutional value and degree quality. In addition, participants noted the benefits of living in the city of Austin as another, important facet in their college choice processes. Understanding of the role of institutional prestige and program quality or uniqueness in participants' college choice was also furthered, particularly as both factors stem from and strengthen participants' notion of institutional value and degree quality, decisions based initially on location. Similarly, participants also reported choosing UT Austin due to the campus location's capacity to serve family commitments.

Transition experiences.

So, I don't feel it's very welcoming of a transition. It would definitely be very difficult for somebody, in my opinion, who is going to university for the very first time.

As participants' perceptions of transition to UT Austin were varied, so, too, were the robust descriptions of these transitions as shared in interviews and focus group conversations. Several described their transitions as smooth, beginning with explanations

about why they chose to separate from the military. Janna's rationale was based in her desire to pursue the work she did in the military as a full-time career as a civilian:

When I first got out, it was like I was actually really happy...I had some really great friends in the [branch], but I knew that I wouldn't be able to do what I wanted to do if I stayed. You climb the ladder, the rank; you climb and get promoted and you get to do a lot less fun stuff... so I made the decision to go ahead and pursue my professional goals outside of the military.

Though she served twelve years, Tania also noted a smooth transition, describing her desire to separate from the military as stemming from a desire to be a 'lifelong learner,' and that, for her, school was always part of her plan. Similarly, Irene described her separation from the military as uneventful, simply the next step, as her service was merely a different way of "paying" for a future opportunity afforded by a college degree, noting that "there's no monetary amount for me to pay for tuition...but in order to get [the GI Bill] I had to serve six years of my life...you're still paying for tuition, but you use your life to pay."

Also present in the descriptions of smooth transitions were comments about taking time while on active duty to plan for enrollment after service, often coupled with a purposeful break of six months or more after separating from the military before enrolling. Janna, in particular, described her smooth transition as a result of planning her post-military academic career far in advance of her separation:

So when it did come time to apply, everything was really smooth. I applied about three months prior to the deadline, so that was a really smooth transition for me academically. Financially it was also pretty smooth...I pretty much saved all the money that I earned...to support me financially while I was going to school because I did not want to work, I wanted to focus on my studies...

Tracy also attributed her smooth transition to the presence of space and time after her service to lead what she called a “civilian life,” wherein she spent three and half years and “volunteered, worked seasonal jobs, and extensively traveled throughout 19 countries.” This experience, she claimed, allowed her to “not be overwhelmed like others [she had known] had been.”

Participants that described smooth transitions to UT Austin also noted an affinity between their military duties and their academic major or program. In particular, Janna and Irene suggested that the smoothness of their transitions were attributable to this shared characteristic. As described by Irene,

I have to say that my job in the military, which was an academic at-your-desk job, was a major factor in the ease of my transition from military to college. My major is just an extension of what I did while I was in the [branch]. The transition involved a small to moderate degree of change.

Similarly, Janna’s program of study focused on precisely the work she did in the military. Janna suggested that the largest difference was not *what* she was doing, but rather, *how*, as at UT Austin, instead of working autonomously as she had become accustomed, many of her courses required group projects. For her, the comfort and experience with her area of study mitigated the challenge presented by the need to transition successfully to this new setting:

I was a [profession] ...and a lot of the students didn’t have that same drive for deadlines as I did so it might take a little more pushing to get things done. But other than that I work fine with the students, I really enjoy working with them.

And while Tracy’s duties in the military offer only a modest affinity to her program of study at UT Austin, her years of extensive travel before enrolling provided

for her what she described as “a world-learning experience, which helped me to become more academic, more structured, more ready for UT.”

In addition to taking time to plan for the transition as well as having an affinity between military experience and program of study, participants who described smooth transitions also shared that they’d had prior experience with postsecondary education, which aligns with research on veterans and nontraditional students noting prior experience as a positive factor in transition and persistence (Barnhart, 2011; Bean & Metzger, 1985). However, a curious trend emerged as participants described these experiences: those who described smooth transitions to UT Austin described these past college experiences in *negative* terms. Janna described herself as “a terrible student” when she enrolled at the age of 18 prior to her military service, and relayed that that she “kind of ‘nickel and dined’ my education throughout my military career.” Similarly, Irene described her experience at a community college as being “completely the opposite” of her expectations, citing lack of quality instruction. Likewise, Tracy’s experiences in college before enrolling at UT Austin were described as “not noteworthy.”

Maria described a more neutral transition to UT Austin. While she did take time to plan for her subsequent enrollment during active service, unlike the other interviewees and focus group participants, Maria did not take time off between separating from the military before enrolling, noting that “when my deployment ended I went back to be a reservist and immediately went to becoming a full-time college student.” Also unlike many of the participants, Maria’s program of study does not align with her military

duties, nor did she bring prior college experience with her to UT Austin. Rather, Maria described her transition to UT Austin in terms of bringing past life and travel experiences to bear, noting that she didn't have much in common with students as "a lot of them go straight from living with their parents to living in a dorm, and I've been an adult for eight years now," and suggesting that "a lot of change happens in your late teens and early 20s, so, it's a little difficult to relate with them."

Molly described a more a challenging transition to UT Austin. Like several other participants, Molly took time during her service to plan her eventual enrollment at UT Austin, and did not enroll directly upon separation from the military. She also had prior experience in higher education—and, like her peers, that experience was not positive, as she "attended and dropped out of my local community college." Molly also described an alignment between her military duties and her program of study at UT, and shared, as did other participants, that she was "passionate for [her major] ...and it would be definitely difficult if somebody didn't have that passion and they were just trying to get a degree to use their GI Bill."

Despite sharing a similar trajectory with those who described smooth transition to UT Austin, Molly characterized her transition to the university as "definitely difficult and [filled with] many life changes," the most challenging "was the fact that I have children." As Molly is divorced with young children, of paramount concern was to find affordable housing and childcare near campus, so that she was "setting ... up in a place where you

have support...a routine with your children,” tasks that she noted as “difficult,” “stressful,” and “so much to worry about on top of doing well in school.”

In addition, Molly described the challenges associated with entering a four-year institution for the first time:

Just navigating, never having gone to a university...it seemed easier to enter a community college, and entering a university it seemed more daunting...I don't feel it's very welcoming of a transition. It would definitely be very difficult for somebody, in my opinion, who is going to university for the very first time.

In summary, as the composite description of participants' perceptions of transition to UT Austin was varied, so, too, were the robust descriptions of these transitions as shared in interviews and focus group conversations. Those who described smooth transitions noted taking time to plan for the transition, an affinity between military experience and program of study, as well as prior experience with postsecondary education. However, not all participants with these factors experienced similar transitions to UT Austin. In particular, participants who did not present these factors, or who presented them with additional factors, specifically single parenthood of dependent children, described more challenging transitions.

Institutional, social, and academic engagement.

Participants noted high levels of satisfaction with the institution and its structures of support, but also reported challenges in connecting with the campus, both socially and academically. These understandings were borne out through interviews and focus group

conversations, augmented by perceptions of access to veteran-specific needs, barriers to social engagement, and difficulties integrating academically.

Institutional engagement.

With regard to institutional engagement, the role of the Student Veteran Center (SVC) was noted by all interviewees as being of considerable assistance with regard to campus engagement. Janna described the center as “a one-stop-shop of veteran services to help with anything...looking for a job, looking for tutoring, my benefits are all screwed up, they can help you, and that’s a huge, huge help.” In particular, participants described the staff as being knowledgeable, “not just about UT student issues, but also with veteran issues,” as “they have ... very helpful folks, who are veterans themselves, who can answer questions and help veterans understand their benefits.” Irene described the SVC as “helpful,” “important,” and “thoughtful,” and Tracy noted the director of the center by name, describing him as “a great resource.”

Maria’s characterization of the SVC was unique, in that while she also noted its tactical, resource-laden value, she also described it in social terms:

I was happy to find the Student Veterans Services and Veterans Association at school so we’re all able to hang out with one another; [with] other veterans [to] have a social place to get together...we all work together and provide resources for each other...we all have ways to communicate with each other.

Molly, in particular, distinguished the use of the SVC as a resource center and not looking to it as a way to connect with campus socially, as she noted that “I haven’t been overly involved in any of the SVC or SVA affairs, but any time I’ve been in to talk to anyone, they’ve been more than helpful.” Similarly, Janna also described the center less

in terms of a social hub than as an appreciated resource, explaining that “every few months I’ll go and check in and see how they’re doing—if I have a question they’re super helpful.”

In addition to the SVC, participants also described other institutional features with regard to fostering engagement on campus with veterans. Molly recognized that resources in the Registrar’s office were mustered to the assistance of veterans, most likely due to advocacy from the SVC:

I think UT has done a great job in smoothing out those issues because I know the Registrar’s office, when there was a very big backlog, had added people to certify veterans for the GI Bill and tried to work really hard to smooth all that out. [The Director of the Student Veteran Center] had a big part in helping advocate for veterans and getting that going.

Similarly, Irene noted the child-friendly capacities of campus resources, in particular, the library:

If I do have to go to the UT library on the weekend, we actually make a big family trip out of it. On the top floor they have a kid’s library section with big colorful, large print books available for smaller kids, and they also have academic topics available in kid’s book... really good resource for kids on the sixth floor of the PCL.

However, both Molly and Irene also noted actions the university could take to improve the ways in which veterans could more successfully engage with the institution. Molly suggested that what she found lacking in the SVC could be created at UT Austin by following a model she experienced at a previously attended institution:

They had a veteran’s center that was a lot like a USO...it was a place that really gave a lot of incentive for veterans to be there. There were a lot of comfy chairs to study in, free computers, free printing, quiet study rooms...an entire kitchen, free sodas, coffee, a refrigerator to put your lunch...aside from all those cool things,

also a bunch of veterans would congregate in there, so it was easy to get help just very informally on how to do things through the university, like how to get your GI Bill started or, if you had a problem with something, how to fix it. Within each degree plan you could find another veteran who was on the same path as you and help navigate the classes and help each other out. They also had tutoring and support groups for like PTSD and things like that. So, there was a lot of support and it was very easy to walk with other veterans and feel there was a place for you in the university.

Molly also suggested that institutional engagement could be augmented for veterans if the university supported these students' specific needs via university housing and on-campus childcare, perhaps setting aside an allotment for this population, as that would be "helpful in terms of location and helpful in terms of not worrying about where your kids are going to school...I'd say that those resources are the best."

Further, Molly noted that priority registration for veterans might be beneficial for engaging this population but also ultimately helpful for overall persistence rates:

Veterans don't have priority registration at UT, and with the GI Bill being very strict about what classes you can take – only being able to take classes that relate to your degree plan – and having the scheduling at UT being so tight, having to be on a wait list for class or not even being able to get into a class, that can add a whole load of stress.

Irene also suggested actions the institution could consider to augment engagement with veterans, particularly around the areas of online courses and academic advising. A distance student in need of in-residence credits, Irene described her situation:

At this point I think I have 18 credit hours left but they all have to be in-residence...I would love to have a full semester where I could do stuff online but at this point I believe they're only offering one government course online, and I believe no courses [offered] online you [can use as] in-residence credit.

Irene went on to note the benefit that could come from the university offering those courses online or to publish online and in-residency course schedules farther in advance to allow students in her situation time to make plans. Further, Irene suggested that academic advisors could be tapped to play a larger role in helping to communicate to the university what distance students need, as well as help guide students like Irene on the best paths, as “[Name] is my undergrad advisor and... if I want to know if UT is going to offer more internet-based classes, she’s usually the person I will go to.”

In summary, participants reported considerable satisfaction with the SVC but for varied reasons. Further, participants noted opportunities to augment institutional engagement with student veterans, suggesting that access to housing, childcare, and priority registration be considered, as well as leveraging the relationship between distance students and academic advisors to increase persistence.

Social engagement.

Most participants reported age as a specific barrier to connecting with others on campus. Molly suggested that age was a barrier to connecting to others in general, noting that “here at UT, I don’t connect as much with peers or faculty, if there’s somebody who’s a non-traditional student, it’s easier to connect with them obviously.” Interviewees also described challenges in the classroom with younger peers, whom Tracy described as “kids.” She went on to explain that in the classroom, her age and vast travel experiences often placed her in a leadership role with other students, which she did not resent, but merely noted as “typical.” Similarly, Maria noted that “with peers, I’m a little bit older

and that kind of puts me into sort of a leadership position in relationships.” Janna explained a similar perspective, describing the intersection of working with younger peers and her past experiences in the military:

One of the biggest challenges for me is pushing a little bit of the control to other students who are younger than me...I have to force myself to be diplomatic in trying to finish the project on time, keeping everyone happy without going “[branch]” on anyone...I can’t do that anymore, so I sort of put on a happy face.

For Irene, age wasn’t as much a barrier to social engagement as distance, illustrated in a description of the difficulties in connecting with classmates:

As far as connecting with other students, it’s very nice to be invited to the group sessions that the classes have, but I was never able to go to one ‘cause they weren’t ever directly after class or during class or on a day that I was on campus. Some of us set up a Facebook group so that everyone...could interact with each other or share flash cards or something...it was a little more humanizing experience.

While Irene is the only participant who vocalized social engagement issues as a result of her distance from campus, these challenges may be applicable to others, as 80% of the sample reported living off-campus.

In addition to barriers of age and distance, participants also reported varied levels of engagement with other student veterans. Maria’s experience was unique in that she characterized her membership in the SVA as “automatic, right, because I’m a veteran?” and she interacted almost exclusively with other student veterans, noting that “there’s no question I would go to any other tailgate other than the veteran one.” Maria described her preference to connect with other veterans versus non-veterans as being a function of age:

I don’t participate in a lot of...things that my school has to offer because for the most part [the other] people [are] aged from 18 to 21, and though I’m not

significantly older than they are, a lot of change happens in your late teens and early 20s, so, it's a little difficult to relate with them, they're not really my peer group.

Conversely, other participants described very different interactions with student veterans. Janna refrained from social engagements with other veterans, and cited both a schedule that precluded time for socializing but also explained a purposeful separation from her military past:

But peers, as far as student veterans go, I don't really interact with them too much. They do little events where they go out and eat pizza and have drinks and that kind of thing, I don't participate in those, mostly because I'm really, really busy. But I don't know that I'd want to go. I love veterans, but spent so long being Staff Sergeant [Name] that I just want to focus on being Janna for now. I love the veterans but I don't really hang out with that clique on-campus so much as I do with my civilian friends for sure. I don't have a single military friend in Austin.

While not purposefully distancing herself from other veterans, Molly nonetheless described challenges in engaging with student veterans, specifically noting the campus environment, as she commented that "I'd like to say it's easier to connect with veterans, but honestly here at UT I don't think it's easy to connect with other veterans."

In terms of engaging with other students, Tracy shared that she is marginally involved with the SVA, but prefers to spend her time with students who share her major, which she hypothesizes is nearly devoid of other veterans. Further, Tracy also suggested that by affiliating with other non-veterans, her veteran status was "closed, not open, or apparent to others." Unlike male veterans, whose service, Tracy described, was "worn," by male veterans, seen in the way they carried themselves or wore their hair, she felt that she blended in with other students—and if her age was noted by peers, she felt that it

tended to be read by others as merely non-traditional, not “veteran,” which left the choice to identify as a veteran up to her.

Janna reported a similar distinction, relating that she was more open about her military service with students in courses in her major, such that “I feel like I can let them know all about me, and I’m a lot closer to those students too.” About a small class in her area of study, she noted:

There are only 20 to 25 students in the class so they know about my military background; I told them I was in the [branch] for 10 years, this is...what I did, I let them all in for that and they know all about it.

However, for classes outside of her major, Janna explained:

I’m much more closed off and don’t really talk to anyone. I don’t know why; it’s weird. Like I might talk to one or two people...and the class has 70 to 100 people, so I feel a lot more isolated in that sense... I’m much more reserved and don’t speak to other students as much.

Perhaps as a function of her distance from campus, Irene reported that she would like more “camaraderie among veterans on campus,” but recognized that both living far from campus and being in a very specialized major, the opportunities to connect with other veterans, particularly in her area of study, were small. As did Tracy, Irene described being able to “spot” male veterans on campus, noting that “sometimes you could tell by the type of backpack they had or ...by the way they carried themselves.” On those rare instances in which she found other veterans in her courses, she relayed thinking, “oh, ok, I’m not the only one in the room here that was in the military” and then shared that she would try to “link up with them,” to talk about the GI Bill or tuition.

In summary, participants reported varied challenges with regard to social engagement, including difficulties related to student age, challenges presented by distance, and unique patterns of socialization with other student veterans.

Academic engagement.

With regard to academic engagement, participants reported varied relationships with faculty and staff. Given her distance from campus, Irene reported that each term she would approach her professors and explain that she commutes to campus, the result of which was that “they’re a little more...catering to my situation, accommodating, and that’s really helpful.” Further, she described “contacting the librarian over email or chat or direct calling...just being able to have contact with those different people...some gave me their personal cell phone numbers and that was really helpful to me.” Irene went on to describe that:

...with faculty, you have to be face-to-face and try to find a convenient time to talk with them. I really enjoy that engagement... [they] were really interested in helping...when they find out I’m a veteran older student...sometimes they have questions about military service, what was it like, what was my occupation. A lot of times they are surprised.

Similarly, Janna reported that she made an effort to connect with a professor who teaches in her major, noting that:

... I’ve texted her and emailed her with questions about [the course] and it’s like an open door kind of thing. I’ve gone to see her and talk to her. I’ve worked with her on a [project] and it’s great. It’s a lot more of a copasetic relationship [than with] my other professors—I don’t go to see them during office hours and I don’t talk to them or email them. It’s like night and day; I’m not very engaged with non- [major] faculty.

While Maria didn't relate similar efforts to communicate with faculty, she shared that she felt an affinity with her professors based on life experiences, noting that as "they have already travelled or they have more life experiences...I feel like I can relate to them that way 'cause I've travelled to Iraq and I've lived abroad for long periods of time, multiple times."

Other participants had fewer connections with faculty. When asked about faculty relationships, Tracy reported that she didn't have any, but instead described having a "great relationship" with the staff of the SVC as well as with her advisor. Conversely, Molly reported that, in contrast to her experiences at a community college, "here, at UT, I don't connect as much with...faculty."

In summary, participants reported varied levels of engagement with faculty and staff, ranging from purposive contact for academic support, camaraderie, and shared interests, as well as reports of minimal faculty engagement.

Perceptions about persistence.

The most important thing for me is to finish my degree. It's the most important thing in my life, besides taking care of my children, but I kind of feel like they're one and the same.

The composite description of participants' ideas about persistence suggests strong certainty of graduation within the next two years, as well as belief in the attainment of advanced degrees. Through interviews and focus group conversations, additional understandings about levels and sources of participant commitment were discovered, in particular, agency and role of family.

While all participants voiced a high degree of certainty, characterizations of agency in those descriptions varied. Janna was the most vocal, beginning by explaining that “I have the ring! It says 2014, so it’s my little promise to myself.” From there, she described her path to this certainty and her role therein:

I like to finish what I start. By then it will have taken 13 years, but better late than never. In order to graduate in May...I had to take a Spanish class all summer, and that was six credit hours per class. It was everyday and very stressful because I’m terrible at Spanish, but I knew I needed to pass that in order to graduate. I’m very persistent.

Similarly, Tracy explained that she simply “will finish” when asked to describe her thoughts on persisting. She described herself as “goal-oriented,” and shared that she came from a military family, for whom goal attainment was very important, which underscored her commitment. Further, she defined herself as being “known as someone who gets things done,” citing her capacity to collaborate in the classroom and to bring projects to fruition.

Also expressing a high level of certainty, Maria claimed about her degree “I will definitely finish it at UT-Austin, and it has never been a question that I wouldn’t finish it.” She goes on to refute the question, noting that “it’s a crazy idea to even fathom the idea of not even finishing it,” and that the notion not to persist has “never popped into my head.”

For Molly, who claimed that persistence is “very important,” degree completion was inexorably linked to the caretaking of her family, as “the most important thing in my life, besides taking care of my children, but I kind of feel like they’re one in the same.”

She went on to describe herself as “determined,” and that “if you want something bad enough, and I want my degree... then there’s really nothing that can get in your way.” Toward the end of the conversation, perhaps realizing the bravada of such conviction or the realities of single parenthood, Molly injected some degree of uncertainty into her plans, at least with regard to institution, as she noted that she was “fairly certain that I will finish my degree at UT, probably 90%.”

While also describing a high level of certainty, Irene vocalized a commitment to completing her degree, but with less personal agency as the other participants. She noted that she “definitely will finish at UT Austin,” but then also considered her challenge as a distance student, cognizant that her final credits must be in-residence:

... even if something were to happen that would prevent me from graduating – and even with 18 credit hours left, it’s going to happen; it’s just a matter of what semester is it going to happen.

In summary, while all participants voiced a high degree of certainty with regard to their persistence to degree, characterizations of locus of control in those descriptions varied. In particular, new understandings about levels and sources of participant commitment were discovered via analysis of interview and focus group conversations, such as personal agency and role of family.

Aspects of identity development.

Through interview and focus group conversations, participants shared reflections about their identity, both in terms of self-perceptions as students but also about how they perceived their identities to have changed over time. Janna made the distinction that,

despite appreciation for her service, her current identity as a student is separate, noting that “I love veterans but spent so long being [Rank and Name] that I just want to focus on being Janna for now.” Tracy was similarly poignant about her current identity being separate from her military identity, as she explained that she was grateful for the chance to have “danced in three worlds: the military, traveling the world, and now school.”

Irene described her identity as a student at UT Austin not in terms of who she was on campus, but at home, with her children:

I’ve also been able to fulfill a role of teacher...sitting around the dinner table at night after a day’s work of classes...telling the kids all these interesting topics I’m learning. They take interest in that, so to be able to instruct the kids on certain topics that come up is really interesting.

Irene went on to add to that perception a description of herself in terms of her extended family, noting that “I would describe myself as a successful person,” and then explaining this statement in context of her brother’s college trajectory:

[in] his junior year, [he] decided ...he wasn’t going to graduate...personally devastating for me...it took away more funds from me and my kid sister to go to school and then he didn’t complete. It’s a big family topic, but the fact that I will be graduating soon is something worth celebrating, as well as saying okay, big brother, when are you going to graduate... I guess they’re using me as an example.

Maria described her student identity as one of agency with regard to her grades, as she noted “I realize that the grade I get at the end of the day and how much I learn from the class is going to be reflective of how hard I worked at that class.” She went on to strengthen this understanding, explaining that “[I’m] learning how to be dependent on myself, as far as time management and balancing the different aspects of my life and figuring out what’s important to me.”

Not all participants were as sure in their identities as students; Molly explained how hers was evolving:

There's definitely a mix, sometimes I feel very confident, sometimes I feel a lot of anxiety. And everything that I do at the university there's a little bit of hesitance, but as you gain more experience in being successful it's given me more confidence.

Molly went on to describe how her identity has been strengthened through her courses, as knowledge, has “helped me to become more resilient, more confident, and more capable.”

In addition to participants expressing self-perceptions about their identities as students, they also reported various ways in which they felt their identities had changed as a result of enrolling at UT Austin. Janna compared herself to the student she was when she first enrolled in college, noting that, “I would say that I'm different from the college student that I was when I was 18 or 19.” She went on to describe those differences in terms of when she imagined the change begun to occur, theorizing that it was during a time when she was focusing full-time on coursework that held significant interest, and that sparked new appreciation for completing this degree:

... when I attended [another university] and I got [on the]... dean's list for two semesters. That, when I was a full-time student, is when I really started to appreciate it even more so...over the course of a decade – it's a really long time to be a student... it's been like night and day; I appreciate it more, I'm more focused.

Janna went on to describe how she attributed this shift to her experiences in the military, linking this change to future capacity for degree completion:

...one of the biggest changes as a college student is because of my experience in the military. I'm very self-reliant. I'm very, very independent, very confident, and very competitive. I'm a busy gal. I really just want to finish and get that piece of paper...I will definitely be graduating next year.

Maria noted that she has "definitely become more confident," specifically about her reliance on her opinions and ideas, as college has made her thinking processes more informed, making her "opinion more relevant." Further, Maria felt that she had

...definitely grown a lot in my ability to get things done...the things that you get from college aren't just the material that a professor teaches you, it's your ability to gather information and direct your effort toward a specific goal, and I think that I've learned to do that.

Similarly, Molly explained that before college, her confidence in herself and her abilities were not as strong, sharing that

...there was less confidence as far as questioning yourself: 'Well, can I even do that? Can I get into college? Can I get into UT-Austin?' I really didn't think I was going to get in, but now you just go through the steps and [think] 'Oh, well, I *can* do that.'

Tracy described a change in her mindset, specifically not to "think of her co-students as 'kids' due to their age and experience levels," a shift that she feels helped her to step into the leadership roles that her peers would assign her in the classroom. For those opportunities, she expressed gratitude, if eventually, as her peers' regard for her age and experiences helped to underscore her own appreciation for her military service and travels.

Irene also described a change, though not one limited just to her own experiences as a student, noting that "my entire family's identity has changed...we've become more

academic as a family. If I do have to go to the UT library on the weekend, we actually make a big family trip out of it.”

In summary, participants shared reflections about their identity, both in terms of self-perceptions as students but also about how they felt their identities had changed over time, which included increased appreciation for their education, as well as greater confidence in their abilities.

Making the most of opportunities.

Through interview and focus group conversations, participants shared reflections about how they made the most of opportunities, what variables distinguish these opportunities, and the ways in which they define success. Tracy described opportunities in her past as well as those on campus, as “ripe for discovery,” and she mined them to “expose myself to what’s out there.” She described her years of extensive travel as being for her a “change agent,” and that “travel is the one thing you pay for that makes you rich!” On campus, Tracy explained that she took advantage of the myriad programs, events, and happenings in and around Austin, in particular, documentaries and lectures on topics about which she knew little, in an effort to continue her passion for lifelong learning.

Similarly, Janna narrated opportunities she had seized both on campus and before attending UT Austin. She described a yearlong on-campus internship at a four-year institution which took place about mid-way through her military service, as being cathartic as well as the impetus for eventually completing her degree:

... [That] experience is what's really got the ball rolling for me; it helped me have an appreciation for higher education...and that's when I got the taste in my mouth. I...was on the dean's list twice in a row, and I was like 'Wow! I would love to be able to do this fulltime and finish my degree already.'

On campus, Janna was a proponent of seeking help when needed, asking specifically for what she needed, an example being the call to the SVC to inquire about free math tutoring, and being pleasantly surprised at the resources offered. Similarly, Janna also described how she tapped into her military past to leverage her application to a specialized program in her major of study:

...being a student veteran and being a woman veteran really distinguished me...[and] served me well...America likes the idea of supporting the troops, and I kind of took advantage of that...I wanted [my work] to speak for itself, and then I thought 'why hide the fact that you're a veteran, 'cause it's a great story.'

Janna went on to describe how her acceptance into the program prompted her to reflect on her military service and its lasting influence on her life:

I'm just very, very grateful for that experience and for everything I learned while I was in the military...I'm very proud of that veteran status and it's a big part of my life to this day, even though I'm no longer in the military.

When asked about how they made the most of opportunities in their lives, both Maria and Molly noted lessons learned in the classroom. Maria suggested an opportunity she seized was her realization that "how much I learn from the class is going to be reflective of how hard I worked at that class," underscoring personal agency in effort and commitment. Similarly, Molly ventured that she took advantage of listening to her professors, specifically noting that "usually they'll tell you how to succeed in that class, and [I] try to follow that, and just looking through what everybody else does to be

successful, taking what applies to me and what I can use.” Through observation, Molly considered what around her would lead to success, which allowed her to capitalize on those observations.

Irene had unique conceptualization of seizing advantages and opportunities, perhaps borne of her distance setting. When asked about making the most of opportunities, she reported that “graduation is still a big goal for me.” Given that Irene involved her family in this journey—i.e., family trips to the campus library on weekends, dinner table lessons on what she learned in class, perhaps making the most of an opportunity was defined through this ongoing integration; involving the family to mitigate the drawbacks of her commute to campus and distance from supports and services therein.

Participants also reported varied ways in which they defined success. For Tracy, “success to me is academics...so few in my family have degrees, so it’s important that I complete mine.” Tracy also defined being successful as being “author” to one’s own goals, noting that “if my goals are my own, then I am successful.”

Molly described that for her, success entailed the word “contentment,” i.e., being content or happy in your work translated to success. She went on to align her idea of success in ways similar to Tracy’s, relating success to education and degree attainment, not only for the personal accomplishment, but also for the societal benefit:

[what would] make me feel as though I were successful is to be educated, probably beyond a bachelor’s degree, and to use that to help other people and to make a difference... being a part of making the world better, in whatever way you think is better, would be success.

Janna also noted that for her, success is related to contentment, specifically “doing something you’re passionate about,” and from that, mastery in that skill will allow her to “be paid to do what I love,” suggesting that “the money will catch up to my passion and I know I’ll be successful that way.”

For Maria and Irene, success involved an intersection of their military experiences with lessons learned on campus. Maria explained that success for her consisted of

...learning to hone different skills...[to] combat weaknesses, and how to put my strengths toward something useful...even after being in the military, there’s still always going to be room for improvement for those particular aspects, and I think even if I were to go back and do some of the things....in the military...again, I would be able to do them better now that I have a college education.

Irene suggested that a description of success was found in the character of other women she met in the military, specifically the degree to which they were “very vocal,” and as such, they would be “definitely...involved in their education and what they’re learning,” suggesting that success in education is aligned with a capacity for resilience.

In summary, participants described ways in which they made the most of opportunities, which included utilization of on-campus resources, bringing past military experiences to bear on current situations, leveraging veteran status and classroom lessons to achieve goals, and integrating family into the journey. In addition, participants defined success in various ways including self-authorship, degree completion, engaging in work that benefits society and provides personal satisfaction, and the characteristics of lifelong learning and resilience.

Summary

This study examined the lived experiences of female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). To gain a deeper understanding about female undergraduate student veterans in higher education data were gathered in quantitative and qualitative modes. An online demographic questionnaire served to produce a baseline or composite description of those who have experienced the phenomenon of being a female student veteran at UT Austin. In addition, interviews and focus groups with questionnaire participants were also conducted to provide individual-level data and robust descriptions of these experiences.

This chapter presented a composite demographic summary of the over fifty questionnaire participants and profiles of five interviewees and focus group participants, including descriptions of the experiences of this audience with regard to themes of college choice, transition to postsecondary education, campus engagement, and persistence to degree. Also included are descriptions of participant identity development and perceptions of success with regard to making the most of opportunities presented by higher education.

While findings are varied and manifold, participants presented a unique demographic makeup as well as educational trajectories and experiences. Further, participants reported complex patterns of college selection, transition to UT Austin, modes of campus engagement, and overall persistence behavior, which proved unique in comparison to the population of UT Austin students. In addition, data also presented perceptions of identity development and conceptualizations of success.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Female student veterans present a “distinctive subpopulation of women on our campuses” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 5). As a group, female veterans make unique choices concerning college selection, enrolling in two-year institutions more frequently than male peers, opting for the convenience offered by two-year colleges rather than the prestige and robust veteran services found at most four-year institutions, often denying themselves the longer-term security of a four-year degree and access to adequate academic and mental health resources (Lolatte, 2010).

Current research suggests that, once enrolled in college, female student veterans exhibit engagement patterns which are distinctively different from male veterans, shunning organizational structures which are hierarchical and male-dominated, often avoiding other veterans, due to reticent in drawing attention to the their veteran status, instead preferring to connect with other women veterans (ACE, 2010; Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Demers, 2013). In addition, research concerning female veterans’ patterns of persistence to degree is limited and what does exist is contradictory, suggesting that female veterans exhibit a unique set of factors which influence their academic outcomes (Baechtold & DeSawal, DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Hamrick & Rumann, 2012).

Recognizing these characteristics, Hamrick and Rumann (2012) advocate that “colleges and universities should be aware of the potential implications for women veterans and servicemembers who subsequently enroll in college” (para. 2). This study,

therefore, aimed to contribute to the inappropriately small body of knowledge of female military veterans' experiences in higher education (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2011).

In light of the growing population of female student veterans, this timely study conceptualized this population's experiences with regard to themes of college choice, transition to campus, institutional engagement, and student persistence. By utilizing a transitional theory framework, this study advanced the research on the particularly complex educational trajectories of female student veterans (Hamrick & Rumann, 2011).

As this study employed a phenomenological approach, it brought a close examination of the experiences as described by participants, which allowed me to better understand the complexities and nuances of the phenomenon (Lolatte, 2010). Such an approach allowed this study to distill respondents' experiences into a composite description of their experiences, which will inform both the campus community as well as the military—particularly those involved in counseling outgoing servicemembers, about this growing population.

Students were recruited via multiple efforts, on campus and via social media; the efficacies and limitations of these efforts are discussed in the next chapter. An online questionnaire was used to gather demographic data; analysis of which permitted the construction of a composite description of those who have experienced the phenomenon of being a female student veteran at UT Austin. In addition, interviews and focus groups were conducted to provide individual-level data and robust descriptions of these

experiences in the participants' own words. To capture my own ideas about these women's experiences, I employed a field journal during the interviews and focus groups in which I annotated my observations. Once interview and focus group data were gathered, they were transcribed and shared with participants for accuracy. Following review, transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose, a mixed-media, web-based data analysis platform which allowed me to examine these data in multiple modes.

The previous chapter presented themes found in these data as well as descriptions of participant identity development and perceptions of success with regard to making the most of opportunities presented by higher education. Presented in this chapter is a summary of the study's major findings as well an analysis of these findings via DiRamio and Jarvis' (2011) adaptation of Schlossberg's transition theory, the theoretical framework which undergirds the study.

Discussion of Key Findings

Key findings of this study are comprised in three areas: distinct patterns of demography, unique educational experiences and trajectories, and conceptions of identity and success.

Distinct patterns of demography.

Findings suggest that, as a group, female student veterans at UT Austin comprise a distinct demography, based on unique factors of race, marital status, and presence of dependents.

Unique ethnic/racial distribution.

As displayed in Table 2, study data revealed considerable disparity with regard to the distribution of participants' ethnicities when compared to the university and veteran populations. While the percentage of Caucasian students in the sample was comparable to the overall veteran population, it was 15% higher than the Caucasian female veteran population and 38% higher than the Caucasian undergraduate student body at UT Austin. Put another way, the number of Caucasian students in the sample was disproportionately greater than the total number of Caucasian female veterans and the number of Caucasian undergraduate students at UT Austin.

This disparity may signal access as an issue, particularly for female minority veterans, as it suggests that upon separation from the military, Caucasian female veterans may be entering four-year institutions at a greater rate than their minority peers. Of note is that this disparity may be the most pronounced for Black or African-American female veterans, as merely 3% of the sample identified as such, whereas the population of Black or African-American female veterans nationwide is 20.1%.

Conversely, while not a sizeable part of the sample, the percentages of Hispanic/Latina and Asian participants were considerably greater than their comparable representations in the female veteran population. Twenty-one percent of the sample was Hispanic/Latina, 63% larger than the percentage of female veterans nationwide (7.8%), whereas 6% of the sample was Asian, a 58% greater representation than the overall population of female veterans (2.5%).

In this way, the sample's ethnic makeup revealed race as a potential agent of access for female veterans, augmenting or magnifying access for Caucasian, Hispanic/Latina, and Asian students, potentially constricting it for Black or African-American students. While sample size and the lack of other indicators such as socioeconomic status or academic readiness make generalizations difficult, such cursory findings demand further attention to the notion of race's affect on access, especially given the societal benefits linked with a four year degree (Bowen, 1977; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Also of note are the participants' own conceptions about race with regard to access. As suggested by Dill, McLaughlin, and Nieves (2007), conceptualization of lived experiences must recognize the dual influence of both gender and race, meaning that this finding—the disparities across racial distribution for members of the sample, suggest the lenses of race and gender are particularly salient when considering access to postsecondary education. Further, Iverson and Anderson (2012) call for the “interlocking hierarchies that sustain difference based on gender and race” to be examined, particularly as they relate to female veterans' transition from the military institution to that of postsecondary education (p. 96).

While mirroring neither the greater population of female veterans nor the undergraduate body of UT Austin, participants' ethnic distribution revealed particular disparities, which may denote issues of postsecondary access. These disparities served to

underscore the uniqueness of the sample, which, as this population grows, so, too, does the need for greater attention to its diversity.

Marital status and presence of dependents.

Nearly half of the sample (47%) was single, never married; a slightly smaller number, 41%, were married or engaged to be married. Twelve percent reported their marital status as divorced, and no participants were widowed or legally separated. In comparison to the overall female veteran population, members of the sample are as likely to be married as other female veterans, and nearly half as likely to be divorced, but nearly three times as likely to be single, never married. This finding, that the sample contained such a high percentage of single female veterans, stands out as unique to both overall veteran and female veteran populations, suggesting a new conceptualization of marital status for female student veterans both in terms of educational trajectories and veterans' educational benefits usage patterns.

Also of note is that 65% of participants reported having minor dependents, compared to 30% of the veteran population and 39% of female veterans. Thus, despite the high number of single, un-married participants, data indicate that a large number of these students—nearly two-thirds, are also balancing parenthood, many without the support of a spouse. Thus, in terms of marital status and presence of dependents, members of the sample again displayed unique demographic characteristics, underscoring their separateness from both the undergraduate population and the female veteran population at large.

In particular, this finding suggests at the very least a need to examine the housing and childcare needs with which this population undoubtedly wrestles when transitioning from the military to campus. Of note is that this conceptualization, i.e., the high propensity for female veteran students at a four-year, research institution to be single and also have minor dependents, is also at odds with descriptions of the campus setting from members of the sample themselves. In particular, Molly described a situation at UT Austin which for parents was quite challenging, including years-long waiting lists for university-sponsored childcare and family housing, noting that finding information about these resources was “obscure,” and that this uncertainty can “add a whole load of stress with going to school at UT and being a veteran.” With this in mind, as well as Hamrick and Rumann’s (2012) suggestion that the time restrictions placed on GI Bill funding prompts college decisions to be made hurriedly upon deployment, which may preclude for female student veterans any options which don’t readily offer childcare, the characteristics of this study’s sample are therefore even more unique.

While all parenting veterans may wrestle with childcare, women servicemembers are more likely than male peers to be sole caregivers of children after separating from the military (Demers, 2013). In addition, participants were also more likely to be single, making convenient childcare a potentially central concern in terms of college choice, transition, and completion (Foster & Vince, 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2012; Iverson & Anderson, 2012).

In summary, female student veterans at UT Austin comprise a distinct demography, based on unique factors of race, marital status, and presence of dependents. In terms of race, disproportionately high numbers of Caucasian and Asian students in the sample, paired with disproportionately low numbers of Black/African-American students, suggest that race is a key factor in access for female student veterans at this institution. Members of the sample were also predominantly single and more likely to have minor dependents, suggesting a new conceptualization of student needs and college choice, with ramifications for the educational trajectories for female veteran students at UT Austin.

Unique educational experiences and trajectories.

Findings suggest that, as a group, female student veterans at UT Austin display unique patterns of college choice, transition to postsecondary education, levels of campus engagement, and persistence to degree.

College choice.

The presence of the GI Bill was found to have positively influenced 68% of the sample's decisions to attend college, aligning with recent research on veterans as a whole, which suggested that the presence of the bill positively influenced veterans toward choosing college over entering the workforce after deployment (Steele et al., 2010). Further, 40% of the sample noted the presence of the bill as a major factor in selecting UT Austin, specifically.

However, while the GI Bill played a role in these students' college selection processes, as Radford (2009) suggested, educational decisions aren't solely based on

financial considerations or economic models. A particularly nuanced conceptualization of location was found to be the strongest influence in participants' decisions to attend UT Austin, which supported ideas about value, quality, prestige of school/program, and suitability to family. Students described wanting "a good, quality, state school," to utilize state-specific benefits for veterans. They described selecting UT Austin as the convergence of quality, location, and prestige, noting that "UT is one of the best schools in one of the best cities...it was the environment and the name of the school that brought me here." Further, participants described the location of UT Austin as being "near family," and having access to good schools for their school-aged children, elevating the notion of location in its capacity to sustain relationships and family members' needs.

Participants' creation and use of such a complex and nuanced construct as location in their decisions is at odds with other models used to describe veteran's college selection processes. In particular, these findings refute choice paradigms which define location merely as a convenience factor, and note factors such as course delivery modes or word of mouth from other veterans as playing major roles in their choices. While Field (2008) suggests that female veterans select two-year colleges at greater rates than male peers for reasons of convenience, this understanding is not borne out with regard to this sample and its experiences with choosing a four-year institution.

These findings also call into question the applicability to female veterans any models in which college choice is a function of social reproduction or military socialization, which suggest that four-year institutions are selected less frequently by

veterans due to lower levels of access and lack of confidence in their academic skills as a result of their service (Lolatte, 2010; McNealy, 2004). While the study did not capture data about participants' socioeconomic status, participants—at least two of which were first-generation college students, described perceptions of self that were positive, confident, and committed to their degree completion. Further, when describing their college selection process, participants noted wanting UT Austin as it was “the best [school],” and “it [would] have a lot of value,” notions that are at odds with the deficit perspective of social reproduction or military socialization choice models.

In summary, while college choice is certainly related to levels of benefits for female veterans (Steele et al., 2010), their educational decisions aren't solely based on financial considerations (Radford, 2009). My findings suggest that female veterans approach college choice in more nuanced ways than current models allow, in particular, conceptualizing the influence of location in robust ways. Similarly, such findings refute the applicability of college choice models for female veterans that give primacy to factors of convenience, social reproduction, or military socialization.

Transition.

Findings corroborated the current speculation that in contrast to male veterans, female veterans enrolled in postsecondary education are younger, are more often single, are deployed fewer times, and experience combat less frequently than male peers—characteristics that, separately, have the potential to positively influence the transition process from the military to higher education (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis,

2011; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2011). And yet, research examining the specific transitional experiences of female servicemembers, particularly those at four-year institutions, is limited, precluding the data crucial to understanding the specific ways in which this growing population functions as they move from the military into postsecondary education.

In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding about female undergraduate student veterans at UT Austin, participants were asked to describe their transitions from the military to college. To this end, findings of this study form a potential primer or blueprint for describing successful trajectories of female servicemembers as they make the transition from the military to postsecondary education, particularly to four-year, research institutions (Persky, 2010).

My findings suggest three factors common to participants who described smooth transitions to UT Austin: taking time to plan for the transition, having an affinity between military experience and program of study, and having prior experience with postsecondary education. However, these results also suggest that more information is needed to fully understand this relationship, as not all participants with these factors experienced similar transitions to UT Austin. In particular, participants who did not present these factors in tandem, or who presented them accompanied with additional factors or stressors, specifically single parenthood of dependent children, described more challenging transitions.

What can be surmised from these findings is as follows: in this study, the presence of these factors (time to plan, program affinity with military duties, and prior [negative] postsecondary experience) may positively influence transition for female veterans at UT Austin. Conversely, the absence of one or more of these factors can negatively influence transition to UT Austin for female veterans. Of note is that this model suggests that the presence of additional, mitigating factors, such as single-parenthood, can diminish or negate the positive influence of the initial factors, which may indicate that these characteristics hold different weights or strengths, as their presence or combination may have varying influence on student transition.

It is also possible that these results may enable us to connect this new understanding about female student veteran transition to postsecondary education with their perceptions of persistence to degree. Participants who described a smooth transition also noted confidence in their capacities to persist. Of note is that participants who described a neutral or a difficult transition *also* noted confidence in their capacities to complete, suggesting that successful transition and confidence in persistence, for this audience, are not as linked as for others. Further, while discussed at greater length elsewhere in this chapter and in the next, findings suggest participants presented unique conceptualizations of overall persistence, which serves to further underscore the need to more closely examine this population's educational experiences.

In summary, results of this study present new ways of understanding the transitions of female student veterans as they separated from the military and enrolled at

UT Austin, most notably by isolating three factors common to participants who described smooth transitions: taking time to plan for the transition, having an affinity between military experience and program of study, and having prior experience with postsecondary education. However, findings also suggest that more information is needed to fully understand this relationship, as well as the relationship between transitioning from the military to postsecondary education and perceptions of persistence to degree.

Engagement: institutional, social, academic.

Results include high levels of satisfaction in terms of participant engagement with the institution and its structures of support, but also difficulties in connecting with the campus, both socially and academically. In terms of institutional engagement, these findings suggest that female student veterans at UT Austin displayed unique patterns of interaction. Participants denoted high levels satisfaction with various institutional structures, particularly the Student Veteran Center (SVC), which was at odds with recent research suggesting that female student veterans eschew such male-dominated institutional structures (Demers, 2013; Hamrick & Rumann, 2011; Iverson & Anderson, 2012). Similarly, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) identified that female student veterans' "reluctance to seek help," can negatively influence their levels of engagement (p. 77-8), whereas several participants of my study shared that they not only seek and receive help from various resources on campus on a regular basis, that help is often sought specifically from resources at the SVC, but also includes academic advisors and faculty members.

Conversely, my findings also suggest that female student veterans do, in fact, perceive institutional barriers present in the hegemonic setting of higher education (Demers, 2013; Iverson & Anderson, 2012). Participants suggested opportunities to augment institutional engagement with student veterans, prioritizing among them particular supports that resonate with this audience, namely increasing options for childcare and family housing, needs that are not demonstrated to the same degree in the male student veteran population.

With regard to social engagement, my findings suggest that female veterans at UT Austin hold unique patterns of socialization with other student veterans. In contrast to Demers' (2013) assertion that, like their male peers, female student veterans seek out others with military experiences for networking and camaraderie rather than nonveterans, the participants displayed notably contradictory behavior and socialization preferences. While one interviewee reported that she interacted almost exclusively with other student veterans, her experience was anomalous in comparison to the other participants. Further, she defined her preference to connect with other veterans versus non-veterans as a function of seeking to connect with students of a similar age more so than those with whom she shared a common history or set of experiences.

Conversely, nearly all other participants described very limited interactions with student veterans, ranging from difficulty in simply finding other veterans on campus, to purposeful separation from their military past in terms of current friendships. Despite the paucity of female veterans on campus, which Demers (2013) and Hamrick and Rumann

(2011) suggest creates for female veterans an even more pronounced need to congregate, findings revealed that a majority of female veterans at UT Austin, social engagement was not found with other veterans, male nor female.

In addition to being described in interview and focus group conversations, this finding—that most participants did not pursue contact with other veterans, was also demonstrated by the inability for this study’s sample to coalesce by means of a “snowball” method, which relies on word of mouth between participants who share a social circle. In particular, this result calls into question recent research which suggests that such a social circle exists, i.e., that social engagement among female veterans on campus is strong due to their paucity in a university setting and shared desire to congregate as a way to ameliorate the affects of male-dominated military socialization (Hamrick & Rumann, 2011).

In terms of academic engagement, women veterans have been described as having the tendency to “disappear on college campuses” (ACE, 2010, p. 6), and to be less comfortable than their male peers in interacting with faculty in the classroom (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Smith, 2012). Results of this study, to some degree, have borne out such characterizations, as participants have described settings in which they purposefully withhold their veteran status as well as refrain from engaging with other students or faculty while in the classroom. However, while such reticence is common, findings also support participants’ intrinsic motivation for academic success, which can be seen as superseding this population’s preference to remain disengaged from the typically

hierarchical and male-oriented structures of higher education (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009).

In summary, results of this study presented new understandings of the myriad ways in which female student veterans engage with campus and others at UT Austin. Of note is that participants displayed a surprising pattern of institutional engagement via high levels of satisfaction with male-oriented structures like the SVC. In terms of social engagement, also surprising was the finding that participants did not engage socially with other veterans—male or female, in ways predicted in the literature. Corroborating existing patterns of academic engagement, female student veterans were found to disengage with other students and faculty in the classroom with few exceptions, suggesting difficulties with academic integration.

Persistence.

Participants' strong degree of certainty with regard to their persistence to degree and high levels of personal agency in terms of their commitment to completion with broad research noting that female students tend to display high levels of persistence in traditional and four-year institutions (Boice, 2007). For female student veterans at UT Austin, sources of participant commitment were deeply rooted in strong personal locus of control as well as descriptions of familial expectations for completion.

Participants' high perceptions of persistence may also be considered as a function of enrollment, as a majority of the sample (70%) were enrolled full-time, which corroborated Barnhart's (2010) assertion that for veterans, persistence was positively

influenced by enrollment intensity. Similarly, strong perceptions of personal capacity and agency may be seen as positively influenced by the large percentage of the sample having dependents, as Bean and Metzner (1985) found that for nontraditional students, heightened goal commitment, which augments persistence, can be a result of having family responsibilities. In addition, the sample's strong degree of certainty with regard to persistence corroborated research which found that female servicemembers are less adversely affected by the stressors of deployment length than male peers, which Adler et al., (2005), suggest is manifested in a strong capacity for resiliency; such capacity is borne out in the sample, as a majority reported being deployed and nearly half were actively engaged in combat.

The sample's strong perceptions of persistence were also seen as a function of affinity between military duties and academic major or program, as a large number of participants noted selecting an academic major that closely related to the work done in the military. Results of this study suggested that confidence in persistence to degree stemmed from contentment with academic major coupled with plans to practice their chosen field after graduation, which called into question socioeconomic models as incomplete, as they depicted female veterans as disadvantaged in the labor market and omit the affect of degree completion in their trajectories (Holder, 2010; Kleykamp, 2013).

In summary, participants' strong perceptions of their capacity to persist, related to high degrees of personal agency were aligned with existing research supporting overall

female student persistence. Factors of enrollment status, presence of familial responsibility, and deployment experience were found to positively influence participants' perceptions of persistence, suggesting alignment with nontraditional student completion models. However, this study's findings also suggest heightened persistence due to the sample's high number of affinities between military work and academic major, which don't align with current research concerning female veterans' socioeconomic trajectories after graduation.

My findings suggested that, as a group, female student veterans at UT Austin displayed unique educational trajectories, evidenced in their patterns of college choice, transitional experiences, modes of engagement, and persistence to degree. In particular, female veterans at UT Austin approached college choice in nuanced ways, conceptualizing the influence of location more robustly than current models are able to describe, which call into question the applicability of college choice models for female veterans that posit economic needs, convenience, social reproduction, or military socialization as major influences of choice. Further, my findings suggested that particular factors such as time to plan, affinity between military experience and plan of study, and prior college experienced positively influenced transition to campus for female veterans at UT Austin, yet those factors were also found to be mitigated by other stressors, calling for a closer examination of this population's transition experiences. Participants displayed surprising patterns of institutional and social engagement, behaving in ways not predicted by the existing literature. Further, my results corroborated suspected difficulties

in academic integration faced by female student veterans. While participants' strong perceptions of persistence and the presence of related success factors were found to align with existing research on female student completion research as well as with nontraditional student persistence models, findings also suggested that persistence for female veterans is not adequately addressed in existent socioeconomic models.

Conceptions of identity and success.

My findings suggest that female student veterans at UT Austin conceptualized their current identities with little regard for their military backgrounds. While noting pride in and deep appreciation for their military experiences and histories, participants nonetheless described their current identities in terms of being students, not as former servicemembers, suggesting that the connection between military service for female veterans "may or may not relate to how they make meaning of their experiences as college students" (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009, p. 38). Perhaps a function of what for many of them was the passing of a year or more since separating from the military, this understanding of participants' identity aligns with Rumann's (2010) conclusion that such a period of time "helped ease [veterans'] transitions ... into the college environment" (p. 152).

Not unlike other college students, participants also described changes in their concept of identity since enrolling at UT Austin, which aligned with a process Evans et al. (2010) described as having short- and long-term effects on students' lives. Such changes are not at odds with literature regarding veterans' identity development, which

also report that student veterans, “in important ways, [are] not the same people they were before” (Rumann, 2010, p. 22).

In terms of making the most of opportunities, participants shared experiences which included utilization of on campus resources, bringing past military experiences to bear on current situations, leveraging veteran status and classroom lessons to achieve goals, and integrating family into the journey. Paired with findings from the study, these observations augment our understanding about female veterans at UT Austin. In particular, these variables suggest that this audience is particularly resourceful, utilizing a variety of tools to foster success, an impression which resonates with what Adler et al. (2005) denote as female veterans’ heightened capacities for resiliency.

Similarly, participants described success in terms of self-authorship, the ability to engage in post-graduation work that benefits society, and characteristics of lifelong learning and resilience. Such a conceptualization, which suggests a strong personal locus of control and self-agency, is particularly salient with regards to findings related to persistence which align with Bean and Metzner’s (1985) and Barnhart’s (2010) models of nontraditional student success, which denote the role of personal agency.

In summary, participants’ notions of identity as students were not unlike those of non-veterans, and included recognition of developmental changes since enrollment, but, unlike male veterans, were not dependent upon past experiences in the military. Perhaps this is a result of participants’ often lengthy separation period from the military before enrolling at UT Austin. Concepts of resourcefulness and self-agency were found to be

common across the sample in terms of the ways in which participants seized opportunities and defined success, which resonated with current literature concerning female veteran resiliency and persistence.

Analysis of Key Findings via Transition Theory

A particularly advantageous way to frame an examination of student veterans' experiences, Schlossberg's theory of transition is used to undergird this study, as it provides a mechanism by which individual-level strengths and needs can be understood (Anderson et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2011). Recognizing the unique transition experiences of student veterans, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) introduced an adaptation of the 4 S Model (Figure 3) in which each of the components of situation, self, support, and strategies, is configured for the "population of student who have served or are serving in the military...elements are particularly germane to the transition of students from the military to college" (p. 12).

What follows is an analysis of the study's key findings via these adapted components, as they facilitate what Smith (2012) describes as "an understanding of adults in transition and [their] coping strategies for better management of the transition process" (p. 37). Of note is that as most of the participants have not recently moved from the military to college, transition for this audience may be understood both narrowly, i.e., to describe the discrete changes experienced as when moving from military service to enrolling at UT Austin, but it may also be conceived of in broader terms, encapsulating their over-arching experiences at the institution as a whole. In such a view, transition is

seen holistically as “a student veteran’s postsecondary educational journey” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 17).

Assessment (situation).

Assessment—adapted from “situation,” refers to the ways in which a person’s immediate state is shaped by internal and external characteristics. Playing a key role in participants’ assessment was the high degree of *control* they described, which, in turn, affected various other elements of participant situations. Participants described separating from the military as a conscious choice, made deliberately, the separation date planned well in advance, the result of which was the instigation of their transitional *trigger*, a specific life event which precedes a transition, which “stimulates individuals to look at themselves and their lives in a new way” (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 68). Similarly, their enrollment at UT Austin was intentional and planned, and though some expressed anxiety about whether they would be admitted, each noted a high degree of purpose with which they entered the institution. From this, participants described similar control over the *timing* of their progress as students, noting steps taken to manage the pace at which they moved through courses, including “trying to balance all the different aspects of my life in that I’m a full-time student,” and enrolling in summer term in order to ensure spring graduation, despite the intensity and it being “very stressful.” Further, participants reported attempts to manage areas in which control was not easily gained, such as an unexpected financial issue (“I have a plan for that...”) or the influence of unpredictable schedules of online courses (“almost there...”).

By exerting control over situational triggers as well as issues of timing, participants demonstrated high levels of self-agency, which underscored this study's findings with regard to persistence to degree. In this way, participants' situations were aligned with broad research noting that female student commitment to degree completion was found to be deeply rooted in strong personal locus of control (Boice, 2007).

Also related to participants' persistence is the role played by having *previous experience* in similar situations, such as prior college enrollment. A vast majority of participants noted having transferred to UT Austin credits earned at other institutions or for military skills, which doubly influences persistence, as it both assists with matriculation but also signals past experience with an educational institution, a factor which aids persistence for nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Another key role in participants' assessment was played by what DiRamio & Jarvis (2011) noted as "*concurrent stress*," or "*stressors*," factors which can negatively affect a person's functioning (p. 13). Across the sample, financial issues were noted as playing a role in shaping participants' situations, varying in degree and *duration*, but most stemming from problems related to gaining access to funding via the GI Bill. Participants described isolated challenges with "the whole paperwork bureaucracy of getting certified," but that "I've figured it out now," as well as more long-term sources of stress such as the lack of disposable income, noting that the "paycheck in the military was nice but I do enjoy the freedom I have now as a civilian." Dealing with such situational factors required participant capacity for resourcefulness, which underscored this study's

findings with regard to resiliency. In this way, participant's situations were aligned with findings that linked the ways in which participants maximized opportunities with resistance to stressors (Adler et al., 2005).

Analysis (self).

Analysis—adapted from “self,” refers to the qualities individuals bring to a transition, *assets* or *liabilities*, which play an important role in how they cope with change. Playing a key role in participants' analysis of self is the presence of the asset of self-efficacy, defined in this context as “being prepared, both financially and mentally for enrolling in school,” as well as “self-reliant...independent...deadline-driven...persistent,” and “someone who gets things done.” Participants also described being committed and persistent, noting a desire “to finish what I start, better late than never” and “I ...went back and retook the course I bombed when I was 18...,” and expressing tenacity, “I'll do [something] for as long as it takes.” In addition, participants described a high degree of self-confidence, noting that “[in school] I think I've definitely become more confident,” and “I feel very confident,” and “not finishing my degree has simply never popped into my brain as ... an option.”

Presence of assets such as self-efficacy and confidence underscored this study's findings regarding persistence, in which participants' strong sense of capacity of self was linked to commitment to degree completion. Such a conceptualization, which suggests a strong personal locus of control and self-agency, is particularly salient with regards to findings related to persistence which align with Bean and Metzner's (1985) and

Barnhart's (2010) models of nontraditional student success, which denote the role of personal agency.

On the other hand, participants' liabilities also played a key role in analysis of self, defined in this context primarily in terms of feelings of anxiety, yet tempered by optimism. Participants voiced concerns about being admitted, wondering "Can I get into college? Can I get into UT Austin?" I really didn't think I was going to get in...and then I thought, 'I can do that.'" Others voiced concerns about their ability to succeed in class, questioning "well, can I even do that?" and "so, I deployed to Afghanistan and I'm more afraid of *math*, but I'll get through it, I have to."

Anxiety over financial challenges associated with GI Bill funding also played a role in constituting participants' analysis of self, particularly with regard to the liabilities which would result if such challenges were not resolved quickly. Participants described worries about the government shut-down, noting that "I got the [interim] loan from UT, but I was still short for that month and...was worried about rent," and "you can't attend classes if your child isn't in day care... and that's so much to worry about."

While worry about admission and academic success is common to all undergraduates, this study's findings suggest that a sense of self which denotes such liabilities are of particular concern for female student veterans, as this population may find it difficult to integrate academically. In addition, presence of liabilities such as anxiety about financial stability and dependent care relate to this study's findings regarding both persistence and demography of female student veterans, the latter

underscoring the need for a new conceptualization of student needs which may include a need for stronger institutional support with regard to funding, given this population's high levels of institutional engagement.

Participants also described as a liability their difficulties in relating to other, non-veterans in the classroom, in terms of both relating to “kids,” as well as recognizing that “a lot of the students didn’t have that same drive for deadlines as I did so it might take a little more pushing to get things done.” Such need to reexamine priorities or consider a change in role, moving to a peer relationship despite age differences, signals for participants a potential liability. The presence of a liability such as difficulty relating to others is underscored this study’s findings regarding engagement, in which participants described challenges with connecting with other students (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009).

Assistance (support).

Assistance—adapted from “support,” refers to the relationships participants have with those around them which, in turn, aid in their transitions. Playing a key role in participants’ concepts of assistance are the relationships they described with institutional structures such as the SVC, described as “great,” and “very helpful,” as well as “[staffed by] folks who are veterans themselves, who can answer questions and help veterans understand their benefits.” Further, this support was described as “all-around helpful,” “open anytime,” and as a “one-stop shop,” suggesting that participants found the SVC’s level of resources and responsiveness to be invaluable. Additional sources of institutional

assistance included the libraries, particularly for distance students, which included Irene but was also noted by others in the sample who had studied abroad.

In addition, while instances were limited in the data, participants did describe support they received from other student veterans, particularly those they encountered via engagement with the SVC, noting that “when someone has a problem, we help figure it out as a group...we have ways to communicate with each other.” Similarly, Tracy noted getting “great advice” from a graduate student at UT Austin who was a veteran she had met before enrolling. And yet, assistance from peers is limited in the data to these few references, underscoring my study’s findings which suggest participants faced challenges with regard to engaging the campus socially.

Participants also described assistance in terms of their families, some of whom provided financial resources as they were able, as “another resource is my grandparents, who give me gas money—stuff like that,” and “my dad was able to give me a small loan when I needed it.” When financial assistance wasn’t possible, veterans noted personal support, such that “my family is supportive in the decisions that I make, but they’re not able to be supportive financially or anything like that.” Further, participants noted broad familial support in terms without ties to finances, noting “I definitely have the support of family, as far as my parents go,” and “being from a family who respects military service helps.”

The presence of assistance via institutional structures resonates with this study’s findings that female veterans at UT Austin engaged with the campus in unexpected ways,

signaling the need to better understand this population's unique characteristics. Further, by considering the ways in which participants depend on support from relationships with their families—what Goodman et al. (2006) described as intimate relationships of support—additional context for understanding participants' experiences are provided.

Action (strategies).

Action—adapted from “strategies,” refers to the ways in which participants cope or manage a transition. Playing a key role in participants' action is the method of *seeking information*. Not surprising, participants sought information from the staff at the SVC, for “veterans' stuff,” as well as to learn more about academic resources like tutoring. In addition, participants sought information from their professors, noting that “usually they'll tell you how to succeed in that class,” and “they [professors] want you to be successful in their class...there are lots of resources just through your professor...they'll help you if you're willing.” Participants also described seeking information from university staff, noting advisors and library personnel in particular, as “[Name] is my undergrad advisor and ...she's usually the person I will go to regarding class or academic questions,” and “the library [staff] can show me how to access...they're very helpful.”

While few participants noted that they turned to other students to gain information, noting “[I] kind of mingle with other people and go ‘Oh, what do you do? What do you use?’ sort of thing,” most participants described being self-reliant, which is not surprising given this study's findings. These strategies are described as “I've read books on how to be a straight-A student,” and “I do a lot of my own personal research as

far as how to be successful.” Similarly, female veterans at UT Austin described seeking information through observation, by and “looking through what everybody else does to be successful and taking what applies to me.”

Participants also described the action of *making plans* and *formulating direction* as they described the advanced planning involved in making their educational journeys. One participant shared “I had planned my transition for about two years...and planning and networking are vitally important,” as well as “I knew I was getting out in two years and I wanted that time to be prepared and have a solid plan.” Similarly, another participant described needing to “make preparations now...getting all my transcripts from all the schools I’d been to,” and “even before I got out, I had started to do my research on what schools I wanted to attend, specifically [area of study] schools.”

Participants’ descriptions of coping methods such as seeking information and making plans resonate with this study’s findings about female student veterans’ transition experiences, specifically results which link a smooth transition to postsecondary education with participants’ taking of time to plan for such a journey.

Also playing a key role in terms of participants’ actions are the ways they *modify a situation* or *reframe a problem*. Participants described adjusting their schedules to balance existing commitments with school, one of the reservists noting that “I had to do night classes because I was on active duty,” as well as a distance student reconceptualizing her summer plans, as “that’s something I had to do...become a

research assistant... [even though it was] just one college credit hour...you still get to use the library, and you still get the perks that come with the undergrad or writing center.”

Participants also described how they adjusted their expectations of self, noting augmented self-reliance and independence, as “part of being in college is a combination of figuring out things independently and being dependent on yourself instead of other people.” Similarly, one participant described, “My strategy has changed...now I would say my strategy is just learning how to be dependent on myself, as far as time management and balancing the different aspects of my life and figuring out what’s important to me.”

Participants also described adjustments to their approaches to studying, as ways to maximize their abilities via “learning how to hone different skills, figure out what I’m good at, what my weaknesses are, and how to combat those weaknesses.” Similarly, participants described “learning how I could actually try and teach myself things ... analyze things on my own, because the class time was limited,” allowing her to attempt to make the best use of time.

Participants’ myriad accounts of utilization of various resources for coping with transition resonates with what Adler et al. (2005) denote as female veterans’ heightened capacities for resiliency, as well as this study’s findings concerning concepts of resourcefulness and self-agency. Strong capacity to modify and reframe situations in response to challenges suggests what Rumann (2011) noted as “internal changes in motivation” to succeed (p. 172-3).

Summarizing participants' experiences via transition theory.

In summary, analysis of this study's key findings via transition theory provided an additional lens through which composite and individual experiences of the phenomenon of being a female student veteran at UT Austin may be understood. By utilizing an adaptation of the 4 S Model (Figure 3) in which the components are configured for student veterans, results of such analysis are particularly salient.

In terms of an assessment of their situation, by exerting control over situational triggers as well as issues of timing, participants demonstrated high levels of self-agency, which may positively influence persistence (Boice, 2007). Further, a vast majority entered UT Austin with credits from other institutions, which doubly influences persistence, as it assists matriculation but also signals past experience with an educational institution, a factor which aids persistence for nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). By navigating challenges posed by stressors such as financial challenges resulting from difficulties in processing GI Bill funding, participants maximized opportunities (Adler et al., 2005).

With regard to an analysis of self, a high degree of confidence and self-efficacy are assets which signal strong personal locus of control and self-agency, and as such, align with nontraditional student persistence models (Barnhart, 2010; Bean & Metzner, 1985). Conversely, these positive factors may be mitigated by the presence of liabilities such as anxiety about financial stability and dependent care. In addition, challenges faced

by participants with regard to integrating socially and academically may also serve to negatively influence persistence.

In terms of assistance, participants described strong levels of support from their families as well as the institution, in particular, veteran-specific services. Conversely, participants do not, as a whole, describe other students or other veterans as a source of support, adding context to our understanding of female student veterans' patterns of social engagement (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

By seeking information and making plans, participants' actions augment their capacity to transition smoothly, which, together with demonstration of strong capacity to modify and reframe situations in response to challenges, is linked to resiliency and persistence. A visualization of these patterns is presented in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: Summary

Following military service, female veterans experience campus differently than their male peers. Female veterans are less likely to use educational benefits (DeFleur & Warner, 1985; NCVAS, 2011; U.S. Department of Defense, 2007). Once they make the decision to enroll in postsecondary education, female veterans experience the transition to campus differently than male peers, often retaining connections to pre-service faculty or mentors, initiating communication with these individuals, depending on previously-established networks rather than developing new ones for assistance as they adjust to campus (Ackerman et al., 2009; Hamrick & Rumann, 2011). And unlike male veterans, female veterans on campus are less likely to find same-gender role models, which compounds issues associated with establishing a civilian identity (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

From this, Hamrick and Rumann (2012) suggest that “colleges and universities should be aware of the potential implications for women veterans and servicemembers who subsequently enroll in college” (para. 2). As Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) note, “when the structured military community is removed, the individual is forced to again redefine who she is as a civilian, a veteran, a female, and a student” (p. 40).

To gain a deeper understanding about female undergraduate student veterans in higher education, the following questions guided the study:

- 1) What are the experiences of female undergraduate student veterans at a large, four-year, research institution, particularly The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin)?

- i. How did female student veterans choose this institution?
 - ii. What are female student veterans' experiences with regard to making the transition from the military to this institution?
 - iii. In what ways and to what degree are female student veterans engaged (socially, academically, and institutionally) with campus?
 - iv. What are the characteristics of female student veterans' persistence to degree at this institution?
- 2) How do female undergraduate student veterans navigate identity development in this context?

In addition to broad questions about female student veterans' experiences and identity development in the context of higher education, this study also sought to understand more specifically how this sample makes the most of the opportunities presented by post-secondary education and what variables are associated with these successes. To this end:

- i. In what ways do female student veterans make the most of opportunities presented by post-secondary education? What variables distinguish these opportunities?
- ii. In what ways do female student veterans define academic, career, or personal success?

To address these questions, data were gathered in quantitative and qualitative modes. An online demographic questionnaire served to produce a baseline or composite

description of those who have experienced the phenomenon of being a female student veteran at UT Austin. In addition, interviews and focus were also conducted to provide individual-level data and robust descriptions of these experiences.

Presented in this chapter is a summary of the study's results by research question, followed by discussion of a visual representation of participants' experiences. From this, a review of the study's limitations is presented, which brought considerable influence on the results of this study. Implications of the study and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

Results Summarized by Research Question

- 1) What are the experiences of female undergraduate student veterans at a large, four-year, research institution, particularly The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin)?

Under this broad question about experiences of female undergraduate student veterans at a UT Austin, several sub-questions were asked.

- i. How did female student veterans choose this institution?

Results of this study suggest that while the presence of the GI Bill positively influenced participants to consider college, female student veterans at UT Austin based their choices on a nuanced understanding of location. For them, UT Austin's location presented access to state-based Hazelwood Act benefits, allowing participants to pursue a highly valuable degree in an attractive city that, for many, was also near family. Such a conceptualization of college choice, described as "location" by participants and defined

by notions of access to value, suggest that for female veterans existing models which base choice on socioeconomic or convenience factors, social reproduction, or effects of military socialization are irrelevant.

- ii. What are female student veterans' experiences with regard to making the transition from the military to this institution?

Results from this study suggest that a series of factors positively influence a smooth transition to UT Austin, namely taking time to plan for the transition, to have an affinity between military duties and academic major, and to have prior postsecondary education experience. The confluence of these factors are found in this study by participants who described "smooth transitions," however, of note is that the presence of other variables, such as minor dependents, may serve to suppress this positive influence, suggesting that more research is needed to fully understand this phenomenon.

- iii. In what ways and to what degree are female student veterans engaged (socially, academically, and institutionally) with campus?

My findings suggest that female student veterans at UT Austin presented high levels of institutional engagement, connecting with structures such as the SVC. Conversely, most participants did not engage socially with other veterans, male or female, nor did they display strong patterns of academic engagement in the classroom or with faculty, suggesting difficulties with social and academic integration.

- iv. What are the characteristics of female student veterans' persistence to degree at this institution?

Results of this study included strong participant perceptions of their capacity to persist; such high levels of confidence, along with other factors such as enrollment status, familial responsibility, and deployment experience, suggest alignment with nontraditional student models of persistence. While persistence over time can't be measured by a study of this design, findings did suggest that persistence for female student veterans is heightened by affinities between military duties and academic major.

In addition, a series of sub-questions were also posed to support our understanding of female student veterans.

- 2) How do female undergraduate student veterans navigate identity development in this context?

My findings suggest that female student veterans at UT Austin do not conceptualize their identity as a function of their military backgrounds, perhaps due to the length of time since separating from the military. Rather, they described their identities in terms their trajectories and capacities as college students, which was inclusive of descriptions of changes how they viewed themselves since enrolling, i.e., typical of traditional college student identity development (Evans et al., 2010).

- i. In what ways do female student veterans make the most of opportunities presented by post-secondary education? What variables distinguish these opportunities?

Results of my study suggest that female student veterans at UT Austin are particularly resourceful, utilizing a variety of tools to foster success. In particular,

participants leveraged their military backgrounds and veteran status when advantageous, capitalized on classroom lessons from peers, and integrated their families into their educational journey.

- ii. In what ways do female student veterans define academic, career, or personal success?

Concepts of resourcefulness and self-agency were found to be common across the sample in terms of the ways in which participants seized opportunities and defined success, which resonated with current literature concerning female veteran resiliency and persistence.

Visual Representation of Participant Experience

Affinities emerged between this study's findings regarding participant persistence and the results of analysis of these findings via the DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) adapted 4S Model based on the components of situation, self, strategies, and support. Factors such as prior educational experience, time to plan, and affinity between military experience and academic major were found to relate to high participant perception of persistence. Similarly, analysis of participant experience via the adapted 4S Model yielded comparable understandings with regard to participants' situation, in particular, timing of transition to UT Austin as well as previous similar experiences were seen as indicators of capacity to complete. This analysis also introduced the notion of participant control over situational triggers and issues of timing, which suggests high levels of self-agency, which, in turn, may positively influence persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985). In this way,

the positive influences of prior educational experience, time to plan, and affinity between military experience and academic major are leveraged, i.e., magnified, by the participant's capacity to control timing. Conversely, the presence of stressors, suggested by findings as presence of dependents and/or financial anxiety, may serve to diminish to the participant's control over her situation, i.e., negatively influence persistence.

In addition to situation, other components of the adapted 4S Model can be integrated into this understanding. In particular, with regard to the component of self, the capacity for resiliency, in this study defined as participant maximizing opportunities via resistance to situational stressors, is augmented by the control over situational triggers and timing demonstrated by participants. Resiliency is further strengthened by particular strategies these veterans employed, namely to seek information and utilize the tool of observation, both of which serve to augment capacity to resist situational stressors. These efforts gained support from various structures, notably participants' families and the resources provided by the SVC. A visualization of the relationship such analysis suggests is found in Figure 4.

In summary, by exerting control over situational triggers as well as issues of timing, participants demonstrated high levels of self-agency, which may positively influence persistence, signaled by factors such as the presence of time to plan, prior postsecondary experience, and program affinity with military duties. Capacity to maximize opportunities via resistance to situational stressors, i.e., resiliency, is

augmented by strategies such as seeking information and observation, as well as supports found in family and campus services.

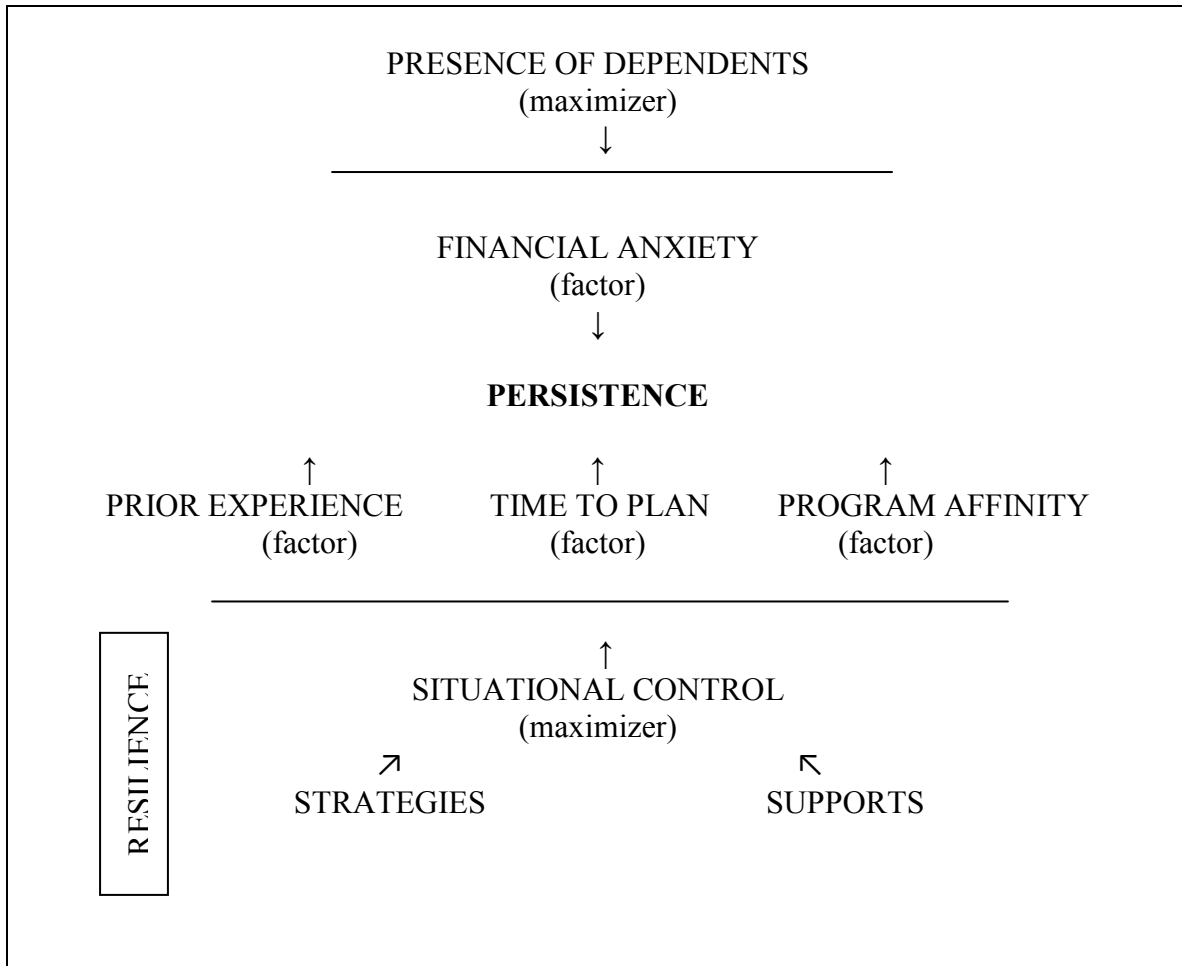


Figure 4. Visual representation of participants' persistence experiences.
Source: Heitzman, 2014.

Limitations

A number of limitations were encountered with regard to participant recruitment, sample representation, and data collection—particularly with the focus group measure, all of which stand to provide important context for understanding the study's findings as

well as for the experiences of female student veterans writ large, and as such, necessitate discussion.

Participant recruitment.

As no list of female student veterans exists, identifying participants to invite into the study was not only challenging, it was, in this particular instance, also without precedent. Initial strategies for identifying and communicating with this audience relied heavily on current veteran studies as well as my own past research experiences with veterans—both of which were based on samples comprised almost entirely of male veterans. Given the dearth of research on the unique experiences of female student veterans, I had little choice but to begin recruitment based on the presumption that behaviors exhibited by male veterans would be applicable to this subset of female student veterans. In particular, several studies have noted that veterans both tend to identify to others on campus as well as seek out other veterans, socially (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). To this end, initial recruitment efforts included contacting officers of the campus chapter of the Student Veteran Association (SVA) and the staff of the Office of Student Veteran Services (SVS) in the middle of the fall semester. While responses from both were sluggish, information about my study was eventually promised to be shared in early January: the SVS to share print flyers at events in early January, the SVA to post information about my study on their members-only social media outlets.

These belated responses may have been a result of the timing of my overtures as they occurred near the end of the semester, overlapping with finals and seasonal holidays. However, also of consideration is the possibility that the lack of initial support for my recruitment efforts by campus veterans groups was less a result of inability or unwillingness, but was perhaps more indicative of the characteristics of the female student veteran population. Results of my study suggest that female student veterans do not behave in ways similar to their male peers, rather, members of this population do not readily identify as veterans to others—even to peers, and, thus, recruitment efforts based on such a presumption—i.e., those with a veterans group at their core, will fail. More specifically, my request for help in identifying female student veterans may not have been *able* to be operationalized—regardless of desire to assist—due to this population’s reticence in self-identifying as veteran or in gathering, socially, as a group.

This understanding was borne out further as I contacted members of the staff and faculty for help in identifying female student veterans. Of the responses, several faculty members claimed not to know any veterans, male or female. Some faculty members who responded to my overtures were uncertain as to how I might proceed in identifying female student veterans on campus, suggesting that I contact the SVS or the Registrar; overtures to the former were initially unheeded, and my request to the latter was dismissed as a request for a “non-public access list.” Adding to the challenge of identifying this population, professional contacts of my own with potential for connections to female student veterans were unable to assist with recruitment efforts as

their work with the Austin VA Outpatient Center carries with it the preclusion, understandably, for contacting veterans or sharing veteran contact information with anyone outside the purview of a VA-approved study.

Based on this developing characterization that female student veterans were not readily identifiable, I augmented my recruitment efforts to comprise campus avenues with a broader, but perhaps more shallow reach, such as event list-serves (“Know Events”) and email lists maintained by the College of Liberal Arts of undergraduate students in the Women and Gender Studies program. The latter, interestingly, provided initial resistance to my request to share news of my study, as the female student veteran population was “a very specific population,” and, as such, broad messaging to the campus community was deemed not of interest. Similarly, requests to share news of my study via DigiKnow screens in the unions and Student Services Building were denied, as my study was deemed too restrictive, open only to a very small, particular—perhaps unknown, audience.

In addition, I promoted news of my study via print flyers posted in approved locations across campus such as the Main and Union Buildings, and the Peter T. Flawn Academic Center, as well as through advertisements in the print and online issues of the *Daily Texan*. Though these outlets and the list serves noted above provided broad messaging, the efficacy of these efforts remains unknown.

Given this paucity of appropriate on-campus outlets, I augmented recruitment efforts to include off-campus avenues, to address the growing understanding that this

population may be neither visible on campus nor identifying as veterans to others, and thus, not gathering as a group in any tangible or regular mode. As Austin is in close proximity to both Ft. Hood and the VA Outpatient Center, several veterans' organizations are present in the area; recruitment efforts included sharing information about my study with TexVet, host of the online Veterans Services Provider Network, the Offices of Disability Rights Texas, host of events that provide disability resources to local veterans, and the Texas Veterans Commission. In early December, an on-campus visit proved heartening, as I was able to visit in person with staff of the SVC. Through this effort, several additional contacts for Austin-area veterans' organizations were gleaned, including the Wounded Warrior Project.

In addition, social media were used to identify members of this population, and via a Facebook presence and geo-targeted advertisements, interest in my study was increased. While efficacies of these broad, off-campus, and social media overtures aren't easily separated from other, more targeted, campus-based efforts, as Facebook interest increased, so, too, did the number of respondents to my online demographic questionnaire—i.e., the entrance to my study, suggesting that social media played at least some role in building this sample.

Sample representativeness.

The sample itself presents a series of important limitations. While nearly reaching the initial goal of including in the demographic questionnaire ten percent of the estimated female student veteran population at UT Austin, the sample is nonetheless small in

comparison to the campus body and to the growing population of female student veterans nationwide. As such, while the results of this study will serve as an important step toward benchmarking the demographics and experiences of this audience, they are not intended to be representative of female student veterans as a whole.

Similarly, while the sample is comprised of female undergraduates at one institution, their experiences will not, nonetheless, be universal, and although there are similarities across the population, it would be unwise to suggest that they represent all female student veterans' views on higher education and the navigation of personal identities on and off campus. Of particular note is that in terms of race and ethnicity, the sample does not mirror the racial and ethnic makeup of the campus, rather it echoes the diversity of the national population of female veterans. Coupled with the sample size and the knowledge that the scope of the female student veteran population at UT Austin is simply unknown, much care must be taken with generalizing these findings.

Data collection and measures.

In terms of the online demographic questionnaire, though it had a strong total number of participants (51), not all questions were answered, and the non-open text questions averaged $n=26$. Validity of results were further threatened as the questionnaire was open to the public, accessible via Facebook, presenting the possibility that a respondent may not be a female student veteran enrolled at UT Austin.

While the reliability of the questionnaire was augmented by its long window of availability (14 weeks) and lack of edits or changes made to the questions once launched,

several factors nonetheless may have negatively affected the measure. While the survey was open a lengthy amount of time, its overall window coincided with the end of one semester and the beginning of another, as well as seasonal holidays, busy times of the year, which may have served to narrow the pool of possible respondents or perhaps rushed the responses of those who participated. Similarly, the most successful avenue into the questionnaire, and, thus, the interview and focus group invitations, was social media, which results in a presumption across the participants of technological savvy. In addition, by relying heavily on social media for attention, the questionnaire may have served to limit the age range of participants, as recent research suggests that, while usage trends of this new technology continue to evolve, a majority of Facebook users are below the age of 29 (Pew Research Center, 2013).

In terms of the one-on-one interviews, of particular note is the desire by participants for technology to mitigate distance from campus. While efforts to amend the study to permit phone or web-based participation in interviews and focus groups were initially made to accommodate distance and study-abroad students, such modes were quickly adopted by all interviewees to support busy schedules. As a distance student myself, I appreciated the opportunity to include in the study women who met the criteria regardless of location.

And yet, even mitigated by technology, conversing with participants proved challenging, and focus groups in particular presented a significant limitation, due, I feel, to a presumption made in my study's design. Based on previous research experience with

male veterans in which focus groups provided a low-stress space to support participants' shared construction of meaning surrounding their experiences at UT Austin, as well as Creswell's (2007) description of the robust, collaborative meaning-making that stems from participants' conversation with each other, two focus groups were held in early December, hosted at convenient times, in accessible locations on campus, and advertised on Facebook. Despite these considerations, only one participant attended each of the focus group meetings, and thus, while each attendee was more than gracious, and we proceeded with the protocol of open-ended questions, the turnout was nonetheless disappointing.

From this experience, I attempted to host a focus group via Skype, so that the same conveniences provided by phone interviews could be leveraged. Similar results ensued: one participant attended the scheduled, advertised, Skype-based focus group. While the use of such technologies presumes of participants a certain technological savvy and high level of resource access, the preference for an off-campus, technology-enabled conversation was based on direct experience with study participants. The ultimate realization that even technology could not mitigate the difficulties this study faced in creating one, small group conversation was sobering.

My presumptions that this audience would behave similarly to their male veteran peers was based on past experience wherein I observed male veterans congregating in a public setting, communicating with each other readily. Further, these students relayed

that they were able to “spot” each other on campus, based on physical characteristics such as their haircut, or the way they carried themselves, or the way they sat in class.

Conversely, it seemed, female veterans did not congregate in the same ways—demonstrated in my findings as not readily identifying as “veteran” in and out of the classroom, perhaps not presenting physical characteristics as their male peers did, and thus, were difficult to “spot” by other female veterans, or by faculty, staff, or other students. This understanding was borne out by one of the study’s participants, Janna, who in our interview noted that “you know, the guys [male veterans] have that look—you can spot them a mile away, the hair, the attitude, the way they act in class.” Further, when I asked if she might share a flyer of my study or tell another female veteran about the upcoming focus group, she admitted that “aside from Tracy, who you’ve already talked to, I don’t know any other female vets on campus.”

Similarly, when I asked other participants, the response was the same, aside from one other, whose female student veteran circle was limited to one woman whom she credited with convincing her to come to UT, but whom had just graduated from the institution. Additional limitations also influenced data collection, including cost. Promoting the study’s Facebook presence through boosting page reach and geo-targeted ads resulted in “likes,” which I could then invite into the study if participant criteria were met. However, these efforts came at a cost, as did placing ads in the *Daily Texan*, copying and mailing flyers, and printing UT Austin business cards for myself to hand out on campus. While these efforts were instrumental, I feel, in cultivating participants, the

financial costs—particular of the social media efforts, must be weighed against the quality of returns. Were social media less expensive, I am nearly certain I would have continued efforts for a longer stretch of time, investing more into each particular ad to broaden the study’s reach. However, as the ratio of “likes” made by users who met the study’s criteria began to decline by early January, the efficacy of using Facebook to source this audience seemed to wane and efforts were halted by mid-January.

Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice

The following section presents implications for theory, policy, and practice.

Theory implications.

The use of transition theory to undergird the study, as it employs a phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis, allowed attention to be given to what Rumann and Hamrick (2010) note as “personal-level transitions,” the individual experiences unique to this population which are essential for educators and researchers to better understand in order to serve this growing audience (p. 432). More specifically, by utilizing transition theory’s 4S conceptualization as adapted by DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) for use with student veterans, analysis of this study’s findings were particularly salient. Further, this adapted model provided a lens by which participant perceptions of persistence could be more closely examined, providing the basis upon which a deeper understanding of how factors influencing transition and persistence can be seen in tandem for this audience.

Of note is that, despite the saliency of analysis provided by transition theory as this study's theoretical framework, there may be other, more appropriate tenets upon which future examinations of female student veterans may be based. As most of the participants of this study were found to have not recently moved from the military to college, transition for this audience was conceptualized in broad terms, encapsulating their educational journeys as a whole. In such a view, other frameworks may prove useful, perhaps, given this audience's strong institutional affinity amid challenges with social and academic integration, frameworks which address patterns of engagement could prove useful. Similarly, persistence models based on nontraditional audiences may also prove salient, given this population's demographic characteristics.

In terms of identity development, conceptualizations of identity which supported integration of military and student cultures were found to lack saliency with this audience. Perhaps as a result of the often lengthy separation periods between military service and enrolling at UT Austin, participants' notions of identity as students were not unlike those of non-veterans, and included recognition of developmental changes since enrollment, but, as they were not described in terms of past experiences in the military, did not align with current theories about student veteran identity development.

Policy implications.

As this study was focused on a single site, implications for policy stemming from its findings are most acute for this particular institution. Paramount among implications for policy is the university's support of student veterans with regard to the GI Bill. Across

the sample, participants shared not only that they had challenges with “getting it [funds from the bill] started,” and with certifying each semester in a timely manner, but, perhaps of even more importance, all participants also expressed deep anxiety stemming from these challenges. Given this universal experience, coupled with the influence such anxiety may have on students’ capacities to persist (Figure 4), and the populations’ strong institutional affinity, an institutionally based solution is wise.

While efforts designed to orient student veterans to the complexities of the GI Bill funding process may exist, my results suggest that more is needed, perhaps from a systemic rather than an *ad hoc* approach. While participants described considerable staff responsiveness to their needs when presented at the SVC, for which they expressed deep gratitude, of note is that findings also suggest the opportunity for a more proactive tact. To this end, reforming institutional policy such that all aspects of student veteran financial aid, including GI Bill processes, be centralized and stewarded by a cohesive staffing unit is wise. As suggested by DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), such a shift will align with student veteran preferences, as “institutional assistance is integral to aid students in transition and a holistic approach to that assistance is preferred” (p. 16).

Similarly, a continued commitment to the rationale, need, and existence of the SVC is underscored by this study’s findings, as it functions as a “one-stop-shop,” and student veterans’ focal point for navigating the logistical aspects of their campus experiences. Of note, however, perhaps stemming from findings which suggest that this population does not engage socially as other veterans do, is that absent from this call is a

unified need for the center to be a social hub. To this end, continued funding for the SVC and its staff is borne out by this study, but with regard to serving student veterans' logistical needs, not in terms of social engagement.

My findings also suggest a new demography of the female student veteran population, which, unlike male veterans, tends to be single, yet, unlike other undergraduates, tends to have minor dependents. With regard to this distinctive demography, institutional policy concerning housing and childcare may have significant influence on student persistence. In particular, augmenting options for on-campus family housing or subsidized off-campus housing, "where you have support," as a participant described, could considerably ameliorate the financial anxiety female student veterans face "on top of doing well in school."

In addition, as dependent care is imbued in the decision-making paradigm female student veterans' use to select college, the presence of institutional support with regard to housing and child care could have the capacity to help more female veterans select four-year institutions. Such a shift could begin to address the inequities which result from the current state wherein female veterans select two-year colleges more frequently than their male peers, which, in turn, denies them and their dependents the longer-term security of a four-year degree and access to adequate academic and mental health resources (Lolatte, 2010).

Of particular consideration is the implication for admission and recruitment policies with regard to the finding which revealed that race augmented access for

Caucasian, Hispanic/Latina, and Asian students, potentially constricting it for Black or African-American students. While sample size and the lack of other indicators such as socio-economic status and college readiness make generalizations difficult, such cursory findings demand further attention. Of note is that the veteran minority population is growing; nearly 20% of female veterans are non-Caucasian (compared to 9% of male veterans), and that number is expected to increase to 30.4% by 2040 (NCVAS, 2013). Such population shifts, coupled with potential access issues for minority female veterans as suggested by this study's findings, may call the university to more closely examine recruitment and admissions structures in order to address possible inequities for this audience.

Similarly, given the limitations of the GI Bill in terms of benefit duration, challenges for female veteran students learning at a distance may become more common. Completing a four-year degree under the bill's 36-month cap is aggressive for any student, but for female veterans who may also be balancing family commitments, persistence may be particularly threatened. Compounding this challenge are residency requirements, which, for a distance student such as Irene, may also negatively affect persistence. With this scenario in mind, the university is wise to consider its approach to distance learning in a holistic way, the needs of female veteran students learning at a distance a key component of that strategy.

Implications for practice.

Neither like other undergraduates nor like male student veterans, female student veterans at UT Austin are predominantly Caucasian, single, and have minor dependents. This distinct demography, coupled with the growth expected for this population nationwide, presents for the campus a need for the use of a “new framework for understanding how this student population views their collegiate experience and meaning making” (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009, p. 39).

While salient for all members of the campus community to understand this new framework, it makes sense to share these demographic findings first with staff and faculty of the divisions which work directly with incoming students such as Academic Affairs (admissions, academic advising) and Student Affairs (orientation, Student Veteran Services). Such efforts can serve to address the typical stereotyping of student veterans, which Iverson and Anderson (2012) describe as sustaining “structural barriers that hinder the acculturation of and success of women veterans” (p. 105). While it is likely that these efforts will have the immediate effect of fostering a more welcoming atmosphere for female student veterans, they could be particularly important for long term female student veteran engagement, as this population brings “reluctance to seek help, hesitancy to self-disclose, and tendency to conceal distressing or negative personal information,” which, combined with institutional barriers as described above, can negatively influence student persistence (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, pp. 77-8).

In addition to new understandings about this population's demography, findings about female student veterans' educational experiences and trajectories also have myriad implications for practice. In terms of college choice, female veterans at UT Austin approached their decisions via a complex conceptualization of location, which they linked to an optimization of benefits and resources related to family. With this in mind, the university could imbue more clarity about family housing and childcare options in admissions materials and recruitment/new student programs in an effort to lessen what participants described as "difficulty finding affordable housing...especially if you have children." Such a practice can serve to not only help female student veterans make a smooth transition to the university, but by helping this population manage their family commitments, this audience's persistence is also augmented.

From this, rather large implications may stem. Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) suggest that female veterans select schools where they are more apt to see other female veterans; at schools where female veteran enrollment lags behind the overall veteran population, such as at four-year institutions, the cycle is perpetuated. By understanding what female student veterans seek with regard to selecting colleges and bringing those items to the fore for their consideration, the university may begin to positively influence more members of this population toward selecting four-year institutions and the economic stability that can result from a baccalaureate degree (Lolatte, 2010; Lopez, 2011).

Similarly, transitions to the university could be made smoother and overall persistence could be augmented if academic advisors were made aware of the positive influence that may stem from female veteran students' selection of an academic major that shares an affinity with her military duties. Given the degree to which participants noted their advisors as a source of information, imbuing counselors with findings about this particular audience, specifically with regard to course selection is wise.

Increasing flexibility with which courses are scheduled, i.e., creating more evening and weekend options, as well as extending options with regard to residency requirements would permit greater balance between what this population described as the need to "make working while in school more feasible." As many members of this audience noted family or work commitments, course schedules which reflect this population's need for flexibility is wise. Similarly, institutional engagement could also be strengthened through additional and more robust benefits counseling upon admission, as most participants described not fully understanding their options when first enrolling in the university. This population's strong engagement with the SVC in terms of logistics could be leveraged toward this purpose, perhaps in the form of new veteran student orientation sessions, held at convenient times and including childcare.

A result of their paucity on campus as well as, for some, a purposive distancing, female veteran at UT Austin do not engage socially with other veterans, male or female. While participants did not describe this in terms of a deficit, several noted a desire to know other female veterans on campus, perhaps through a mentoring program, or, at the

very least, suggested “circulating a list,” as a way to get to know other veterans, which, as a participant shared, “did not seem to happen in my first semester.” These efforts might be situated within the activities of the SVC, but more as a function of the center being a convenient place where participants gather useful information, rather than as a social hub.

A similar approach may prove useful in terms of augmenting academic engagement for this population, as several noted difficulties integrating into the classroom. With this in mind, a faculty-student veteran mentoring program may serve to augment levels of comfort in the classroom, dispelling the tendency for female student veterans to “disappear on college campuses,” (ACE, 2010, p. 6), and to be less comfortable than their male peers in interacting with faculty in the classroom (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009; Smith, 2012). Such a practice may also align with what aspects of the population’s former military culture, as one participant suggested, “...mentorship was a huge reason why I was extremely successful in the Air Force, and it is the one aspect of the military I miss the most.”

Suggestions for Future Research

The female veteran minority population is growing; nearly 20% of female veterans are non-Caucasian (compared to 9% of male veterans), and that number is expected to increase to 30.4% by 2040 (NCVAS, 2013). With this in mind, the ethnic/racial distribution of this study’s sample is indeed curious, signaling a potential access issue for minority veterans at four-year institutions. Future research might examine more closely the ethnic/racial distribution of female student veterans across

larger samples, perhaps initially via a state-wide or regional study, as such efforts could allow for the triangulation of data, providing a clearer understanding of current college-going female veterans.

Further, in considering the intersection of race with access, other factors such as students' socioeconomic status and past history of family educational attainment could be supremely helpful. While the presence of the GI Bill does positively influence college attendance, the strength of these other factors cannot be presumed to be mitigated by the presence of tuition remission (Field, 2008; Radford, 2009). Similarly, distribution of veterans' educational benefits usage by race as it intersects with gender could be useful to attempt to better understand issues of access and college choice for this audience (Steele et al., 2010).

Of note is that this study, as it created a temporal, snap-shot of the characteristics of this population at UT Austin, lacks the predictive capacity that a longitudinal study may provide. To this end, future research of a longitudinal nature could prove useful, particularly with regard to persistence as well as to allow to deeper scrutiny of issues of access and completion for this audience over time. Of note is that no large-scale studies of female student veterans exist. While single-site, state- and regionally-based studies are certainly needed and of value, the predictive capacity provided by examining this population writ large could be invaluable, particularly in terms of influencing policy at the federal level.

Perhaps a result of the length of time since separating from the military, participants of this study did not present particularly salient comments with regard to what Baechtold and DeSawal (2009) and DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) have suggested are unique mental health needs and gender identity development issues for female student veterans. Of note is that several expressed appreciation for services that “other vets” might need from the institution, specifically those housed in the Office of Disability Services, but, curiously absent from this study are descriptions of participant experiences with this office or regarding mental health or gender development issues. Rather than presuming that for this audience such issues do not exist, more information is needed, and, perhaps, future research may comprise measurements designed to bring to light these particular areas in order to provide sufficient guidance to the higher education community writ large.

In terms of persistence, while the visual representation presented in this study, which elides factors of persistence with an adaptation of the 4S model for veterans, deepens our understanding about female student veterans at UT Austin, it is far from complete. More research is needed, specifically to examine the connections between the factors outlined by the model, namely the degree to which maximizing and mitigating certain situational opportunities and stressors leads to the augmented resilience the model suggests is at the root of increased persistence. Similarly, the connection between past military experience and program affinity has considerable potential for academic advising, and more research is needed to confirm such concepts, as it is for the role of

military credits and PLA (prior learning assessment) as they relate to matriculation and degree completion in the context of four-year institutions (ACE, 2010). It is conceivable that the strong participant perception of capacity to complete is linked to the ease of which past educational experiences and credits are transferrable to a four-year institution, but such articulations and paths remain largely unexamined (Barnhart, 2011).

The unique social patterns of female student veterans at UT Austin found by this study suggest a need for deeper understanding about how, exactly, this audience engages with others and the university at large, as engagement has ramifications for degree completion (Astin, 1977, 1985; Kuh, 2003; Merriam et al., 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Of note is that several participants expressed surprise when I explained the challenges encountered in finding other female veterans to invite to the study, describing this surprise as “because a lot of the females I have met in the military...they’re very vocal...very involved in their education and involved in what they’re learning.” The question then remains, how will future research, the need for which is heartily demonstrated by this study, locate these populations on campus when, for all intents and purposes, they do not appear to self-identify, nor to congregate as a group or connect with each one another?

Future research may also entail a closer examination of the pathways between the military and postsecondary education. Given the high percentage of participants who served in one particular branch, the Air Force, an understanding of this trend may illustrate ways to more successfully shepherd servicemembers from the military to using

their veteran's educational benefits at four-year institutions. Future research may find that certain branches better orient their outgoing members toward benefits utilization, or perhaps some branches have higher percentages of women who successfully complete tours of duty, both of which may serve to augment the number of female veterans who select four-year institutions.

Similarly, future research may examine the benefits of deeper alignment between academic programs with military needs; as such a pipeline was described by a participant whose major was one of those no longer offered to incoming students:

...so when I graduate from UT, I might be the last [foreign] language and literature major...which is a little disconcerting seeing as how we are trying to establish better relationships with [cultural group]. Those [efforts] will actually be diminished because of the language barrier, and the best way to overcome that barrier is you learn that language.

In addition to the potential for increased persistence to degree by female student veterans who select an academic major which closely relates to their military duties, such a pipeline may offer societal benefits.

In summary, future research involving female student veterans is warranted, given their increasing numbers and complex educational trajectories, but such effort also has the capacity to augment persistence rates across institutions and provide societal benefit.

Conclusion

My study, via a phenomenological approach, brought a close examination of the experiences of female student veterans at UT Austin, resulting in a composite description

of this audience, their educational trajectories and experiences, and the ways in which they navigate identity and define success.

Findings support a new conceptualization of demography for this audience, based on unique factors of race, marital status, and presence of dependents. Results of this study suggest that female student veterans at UT Austin selected college based on a nuanced understanding of location permeated with ideas of value, quality, and familial support. Transition to the university was positively influenced by having taken the time to plan for the transition, having had an affinity between military duties and academic major, and to have had prior postsecondary education experience; presence of stressors such as financial anxiety and presence of dependents was found to negatively influence transition. Further, female student veterans at UT Austin presented high levels of institutional engagement, yet most did not engage socially with other veterans, male or female, nor did they display strong patterns of academic engagement. Results included strong participant perceptions of their capacity to persist, along with presence of other factors such as enrollment status, familial responsibility, and deployment experience, which suggest alignment with nontraditional student models of persistence.

Participants' notions of identity as students were not unlike those of non-veterans, and included recognition of developmental changes since enrollment, but, unlike male veterans, were not dependent upon past experiences in the military, perhaps a result of participants' often lengthy separation period from the military before enrolling at UT Austin. Concepts of resourcefulness and self-agency were found to be common across the

sample in terms of the ways in which participants seized opportunities and defined success, which resonated with current literature concerning female veteran resiliency and persistence.

In terms of policy implications, these findings call for increased institutional support toward centralizing financial aid processes for veterans as well as continuing to fund the SVC, but as a logistical platform rather than as a social resource. In addition, policies surrounding admissions and recruitment are called to more keenly understand the needs presented by female student veterans, manifest in augmented family housing, childcare, and distance education options, as well as potential access issues based on race. For practitioners, these findings suggest that orienting staff and faculty to the particular characteristics of this population may serve to foster smoother transitions and more productive academic advising, the results of which may be increased classroom engagement and degree persistence, which, in turn, may serve to augment this population on campus, as Baechtold and De Sawal (2009) suggest that female veterans select schools where they are more apt to see other female veterans.

Appendix A: Recruitment Materials

Email to Potential Participant
Campus Flyer
Advertisements (2)
Language for Student Veteran Association Site

Email to Potential Participant

Requestor: Amy Heitzman, doctoral candidate (The University of Texas at Austin)

Population: Female student veterans enrolled at The University of Texas at Austin

Communication date: ongoing; fall semester, 2013

Purpose: To invite female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin to participate in one or both components of a research study: demographic questionnaire and/or a focus group meeting.

Sender: heitzman@utexas.edu

Subject Header: Female Student Veterans study at The University of Texas at Austin

Message: My name is Amy Heitzman and I'm a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration program at The University of Texas at Austin. My dissertation focuses on examining the unique experiences of female student veterans in higher education, particularly those at a large, four-year, research institution such as The University of Texas at Austin. To this end, I am seeking participants for a research study who are female veterans enrolled in the fall term of 2013 as undergraduates. Participants of this study will be asked to complete a short, online demographic questionnaire, and to consider participating in an individual interview and to partake in one focus group meeting on campus of approximately one hour each. Participation is voluntary, however participants who complete all three measures (questionnaire, interview, focus group) will receive a \$25 gift card to a site/location of her choosing from a provided list (i.e., Amazon, Target, etc.).

For more information, or to participate in this project, please contact Amy Heitzman at heitzman@utexas.edu or 214.475.0571.

Campus Flyer

Are you a female student veteran or do you know a female student veteran at UT?

Undergraduate female student veterans enrolled in the fall term are sought for a dissertation research study on the unique experiences of female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin.

Participants will be asked to complete a short, online demographic questionnaire and to partake in one focus group meeting on campus of approximately one and a half hours with a small group of other female student veterans.

At the conclusion of the study, each participant will receive a \$25 gift card to a site/location of her choosing from a provided list (i.e., Amazon, Target, etc.).

For more information, or to participate in this project, please contact Amy Heitzman at heitzman@utexas.edu or 214.475.0571.

Advertisement: Campus Newspaper

Are you a female student veteran or do you know a female student veteran at UT?

Undergraduate female student veterans enrolled in the fall term are sought for a dissertation research study on the unique experiences of female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin.

Participants will be asked to complete a short, online demographic questionnaire and to partake in one focus group meeting on campus of approximately one and a half hours with a small group of other female student veterans.

At the conclusion of the study, each participant will receive a \$25 gift card to a site/location of her choosing from a provided list (i.e., Amazon, Target, etc.).

For more information, or to participate in this project, please contact Amy Heitzman at heitzman@utexas.edu or 214.475.0571.

Advertisement: Online Classified Advertisement

Female Student Veterans sought for research study. \$25 gift certificate. Contact Amy Heitzman at heitzman@utexas.edu.

Language for Student Veterans Association (SVA) Site

Female Student Veterans: click here to learn about a research study examining the unique experiences of female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin.

Undergraduate female student veterans enrolled in the fall term are sought for a dissertation research study on the unique experiences of female student veterans at

Participants will be asked to complete a short, online demographic questionnaire and to partake in one focus group meeting on campus of approximately one and a half hours with a small group of other female student veterans.

At the conclusion of the study, each participant will receive a \$25 gift card to a site/location of her choosing from a provided list (i.e., Amazon, Target, etc.).

For more information, or to participate in this project, please contact Amy Heitzman at heitzman@utexas.edu or 214.475.0571.

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Consent

I understand that I am being asked to participate in a study examining the experiences of female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) conducted by Amy Heitzman, whose contact information is heitzman@utexas.edu, 214.475.0517. As a participant, I will complete a short, online demographic questionnaire, and I have the opportunity to partake in one individual interview with the researcher and one focus group meeting on campus of approximately one hour with a small group of other female student veterans, and I will review a transcription of the interview/focus group discussion and offer corrections or additional feedback as desired.

I understand that there are no known risks for participating in this study. The data collected in this study may serve to inform institutional policy and practice with regard to female student veterans and in this regard, may or may not indirectly or directly affect participants. There is no compensation for this study, but at the conclusion of the study, each participant will receive a \$25 gift card to a site/location of her choosing from a provided list (i.e., Amazon, Target, etc.).

I understand that participation is entirely voluntary and I may refuse to answer any question or choose to stop participation at any time without impact on current or future relationships with the university. Participants will be provided with a pseudonym and data presented in this study will not contain identifying information. The records of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential.

Under these conditions, I agree to participate in this study.

- Agree
- Decline
- Name
- Email address

Amy Heitzman, Investigator
636 Crocus Drive
Rockville, MD 20850

Patricia Somers, Dissertation Chair
The University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX

Demographics

- Age:
 - 17-22

- 23-25
- 26-29
- 30-33
- 34-37
- 38-41
- 42 years of age or older
- Ethnicity/Race: (more than one box may be checked)
 - Asian
 - Black or African-American
 - Caucasian/White
 - Hispanic or Latino
 - Native American/Pacific Islander
 - Other
- What is your marital status?
 - Single, never married
 - Married
 - Legally separated
 - Divorced
 - Widowed
- Do you have any dependents?
 - No
 - Yes; how many

Military Service

- What prompted you to join the military?
- In what branch did you serve?
 - Coast Guard
 - Air Force
 - Army
 - Marines
 - Navy
 - National Guard
- Where did you serve?
- What was your length of service?
- How many times have you been deployed?
- Were you engaged in combat?
- How long has it been since you separated from the military?
- Are you currently receiving VA educational benefits?

Education

- Did you attend college pre-deployment? For how long/how many credits earned?

- Did you enroll in college and/or earn college credits while deployed?
- Describe why you decided to enroll in college post-deployment:
- Did the GI Bill influence your decision to enroll in college?
- What were the major factors influencing your choice to attend The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin)?
 - GI Bill educational benefits
 - Location
 - Prestige
 - Programs offered
 - Family/friends
 - Other:
- Do you live on or off-campus?
 - Yes
 - No
- Are you enrolled full- or part-time?
- What is your major?
- What is your grade point average (GPA) at UT Austin?
- When is your estimated date of graduation?
- When enrolling at UT Austin, what was your class standing:
 - First-year student
 - Sophomore
 - Junior
 - Senior
- What is the highest level of education you expect to complete?
 - Associate's degree
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Master's degree
 - Doctoral degree
 - Professional degree
 - Other
 - Unsure at this time

College Experience

- Please indicate your overall satisfaction with the following services at UT Austin:
 - Office of Admissions
 - Office of Financial Aid
 - Academic Affairs/Counseling
 - Office of Disability Services
 - Student Health Services
 - Student Veterans Center
 - Student Veterans Association

- Career Services
- Please list three on-campus services you feel are most important in helping veterans achieve academic success:
- As a veteran student, what would have made it easier to feel connected to UT Austin?
- Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:
 - My transition from military to campus life was smooth.
 - I feel welcome at UT Austin
 - I feel comfortable interacting with other students at UT Austin.
 - I have developed a network of supportive friends at UT Austin.
 - I have a good relationship with a faculty or staff member. I feel part of a group (social or academic, formal or informal).
 - My college life/experience is what I expected it to be.

Concluding Thoughts

- Is there anything in particular about your transition from the military to college or about your experience at UT Austin that you'd like to share?
- Would you be willing to tell other female student veterans at UT Austin about this study?
 - Yes
 - No
- Are you willing to share an hour of your time participating in an individual interview this fall, in which you'll answer open-ended questions about your experiences at UT Austin?
 - Yes
 - No

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Facilitator: Amy Heitzman

Interviewee: _____

Date/Time: _____

Location: Student Services Building

Recording: Digital voice recorder

Background: The goal of this study is to conceptualize the experiences of female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin. In an individual interview, questions are posed to elicit participant responses with regard to major themes of college choice, transition to campus, institutional engagement, and student persistence. Additionally, participants are asked to describe their experiences in terms of identity development and concepts of personal, academic, and career success. From these data, a composite description of the population's experiences can inform faculty, staff, and administration.

Opening Comments: As indicated in email exchanges, I'm conducting a research study with female student veterans who are enrolled as undergraduates at The University of Texas at Austin. The goal of my study is to understand the experiences of female student veterans, specifically with regard to their college choice processes, their perceptions about their transitions from the military to college, the ways they connect and engage with those on campus and with the institution itself, as well as their persistence or degree completion. Please allow me to thank you in advance for sharing your experiences with me. Information shared today will remain confidential. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

1. Choice:
 - a. How did you choose to attend The University of Texas at Austin? What were the major factors in that decision?
2. Transition:
 - a. Describe your transition from the military to college: feelings or reflections, most notable differences, challenges.
3. Engagement:
 - a. Describe the ways in which you connect with peers and faculty in and out of the classroom.
4. Persistence:
 - a. How important to you is it that you finish your degree? How likely is it that you'll remain at UT Austin?

5. Situation:
 - a. Can you describe your situation as a college student? It is one of confidence or one of anxiety? Have you faced a role change as a result of enrolling? Have you experienced a similar type of situation or transition in the past?
6. Self:
 - a. What are some of the personal resources you have which help you navigate college?
7. Support:
 - a. Describe the kinds of support you count on as a college student (family, friends, financial support, etc.).
8. Strategies
 - a. Describe some of the ways in which you navigate college; do you feel that you manage change successfully?
9. Identity:
 - a. Describe your identity before college and after enrollment; are these the same or have ideas of self changed?
10. Success:
 - a. Describe the ways in which you define academic, career, or personal success.
11. Is there anything in particular about your transition from the military to college or about your experience at UT Austin that you'd like to share?
12. Are you willing to share an hour of your time participating in a focus group with other female student veterans this fall, in which you'll answer open-ended questions about your experiences at UT Austin?

Closing Comments: Thank you for your participation in this study. Later this semester I'll share with you a transcript of this discussion for a chance to review and offer corrections and/or additional feedback. Thank you again!

Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol

Facilitator: Amy Heitzman

Attendees: _____

Date/Time: _____

Location: Student Services Building

Recording: Digital voice recorder

Background: The goal of this study is to conceptualize the experiences of female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin. In a small group setting, questions are posed to elicit participant responses with regard to major themes of college choice, transition to campus, institutional engagement, and student persistence. Additionally, participants are asked to describe their experiences in terms of identity development and concepts of personal, academic, and career success. From these data, a composite description of the population's experiences can inform faculty, staff, and administration.

Opening Comments: As indicated in email exchanges, I'm conducting a research study with female student veterans who are enrolled as undergraduates at The University of Texas at Austin. The goal of my study is to understand the experiences of female student veterans, specifically with regard to their college choice processes, their perceptions about their transitions from the military to college, the ways they connect and engage with those on campus and with the institution itself, as well as their persistence or degree completion. Please allow me to thank you in advance for sharing your experiences with me. Information shared today will remain confidential. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Questions:

1. Choice:
 - a. How did you choose to attend The University of Texas at Austin?
2. Transition:
 - a. Describe your transition from the military to college: feelings or reflections, most notable differences, challenges.
3. Engagement:
 - a. Describe the ways in which you connect with peers and faculty in and out of the classroom.

4. Persistence:
 - a. How important to you is it that you finish your degree? How likely is it that you'll remain at UT Austin?
5. Overall reflections:
 - a. Would you describe what it's like to be a female student veteran at UT Austin?

Closing Comments: Thank you for your participation in this study. Later this semester I'll share with you a transcript of this discussion for a chance to review and offer corrections and/or additional feedback. Thank you again!

Appendix E: Consent Form

Consent to Participate

Identification of Investigator and Purpose of Study

You are invited to participate in a research study, entitled “Choice, Transition, Engagement, and Persistence: The Experiences of Female Student Veterans at The University of Texas at Austin.” The study is being conducted by Amy Heitzman, Department of Educational Administration of The University of Texas at Austin, College of Education, Sanchez Building, 1 University Station D5400 Austin, TX 78712, 214-475-0571, heitzman@utexas.edu.

The purpose of this research study is to examine the experiences of female student veterans at a four-year, flagship, public research university. Your participation in the study will contribute to a better understanding of a worrisome trend: female student veterans select four-year, research institutions less frequently than their male peers and nonveteran women, despite the presence of educational benefits provided by military service and the GI Bill, the robust veteran student services more often found at four-year institutions, and the long-term personal economic benefits that come from completing a four-year degree.

You are free to contact the investigator at the above address and phone number to discuss the study. You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

If you agree to participate:

- The online questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes of your time.
- You will complete an online questionnaire containing broad, demographic questions designed to provide more detail about the personal and background characteristics of female student veterans at The University of Texas at Austin.
- You will be asked to contribute to an optional in-person, telephone, or Skype interview or focus group session
- You will not be compensated.

Risks/Benefits/Confidentiality of Data

There are no known risks. There will be no costs for participating, nor will you benefit from participating. Your name and email address will be kept during the data collection phase for tracking purposes only. The study has only one investigator; this is the sole person with access to the data during data collection. Identifying information will be

stripped from the final dataset.

Participation or Withdrawal

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question and you have the right to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas in anyway. If you do not want to participate either simply stop participating or close the browser window.

If you do not want to receive any more reminders, you may email me at heitzman@utexas.edu.

Compensation

Participation is voluntary; however, participants who complete all three measures (questionnaire, interview, focus group) will receive a \$25 gift card for Amazon.

Contacts

If you have any questions about the study or need to update your email address contact the researcher Amy Heitzman at 214-475-0571 or send an email to heitzman@utexas.edu. This study has been reviewed by The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board and the study number is 2013-09-0038.

Questions about your rights as a research participant.

If you have questions about your rights or are dissatisfied at any time with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Thank you.

Please print a copy of this document for your records.

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