

**DEPLOYED TO COLLEGE: ADAPTING TO UNIVERSITY
LIFE AS A STUDENT VETERAN**

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the adaptation process for undergraduate student veterans at a large research-intensive public university in the southwestern United States. The study of this adaptation process was driven by four key problems: (a) The rapidly increasing student veteran population differs from both traditional and nontraditional student populations, (b) student veterans face numerous challenges in their adaptation, (c) staff and faculty should seek to understand this process because they are key in student veteran success, and (d) the current literature misrepresents the student veteran voice and lacks insight into student veterans' agency in adaptation. This qualitative study utilized a constructivist paradigm of naturalistic inquiry and included 16 veterans who were undergraduate students, had served in the military after September 11, 2001, and self-described as having adapted to life as a university student. Key findings pointed to four major categories: (a) the role of environmental factors in the adaptation process, (b) the role of cognitive processes and personality in the adaptation process, (c) the role of behavior in the adaptation process, and (d) impediments to successful adaptation. Analysis of those findings led to four primary conclusions in response to the research questions: (a) Student veterans learn to adapt in a triadic, interactional manner and through observation, (b) behavior determines whether student veterans will adapt and changes in behavior indicate adaptation, (c) development of self-efficacy and agentic cognitive processes and personality traits supports successful adaptation for student veterans, and (d) environments that support

self-efficacy and are conducive for learning allow for successful student veteran adaptation.

DEDICATION

To Chris, thank you for loving me at my worst, for pushing me and believing in me, for sacrificing for our family, and for grounding us always in faith. Your sacrificial and unconditional love always leaves me in awe and points me to the Lord. Thank you for helping me to be patient as mountains moved. Thank you for encouraging my heart and sharpening my faith to act with courage and align my life to my values and true priorities. I love you and this beautiful life with which God has blessed us.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Student veterans learn to adapt to the college environment despite myriad challenges. This chapter offers an overview of the challenges that student veterans encounter as they enter university environments, an explanation of the context of the research, the problem statement and resultant purpose of this study, the research questions that the study was designed to explore, an argument for the significance of the research, a definition of terms, the theoretical framework that undergirded the research, delimitations, limitations, assumptions, a summary of the methodology and methods, the researcher's perspective, and an outline for the dissertation as a whole.

Overview

Learning, although it is often described as a mysterious and magical phenomenon, is a process that can be studied and taught; one can discover how to learn with greater rates of success (Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006). Moreover, contrary to popular belief, learning is not confined to the classroom but is a process that can be utilized throughout one's lifetime as one encounters new and challenging concepts. Learning to adapt to a new environment is one of the most difficult types of learning to think strategically about because it is typically considered an intuitive process. By studying how others learn to adapt, it is possible to identify strategies and practices that can then make adaptation a more attainable goal. The best practices of learning should be studied and broadcast widely to support success of others.

One population that lacks environment-specific guidance on the adaptation process is student veterans. Student veterans must learn to adapt to the higher education environment to be successful in their college career and beyond, but strategies and direction for doing so are lacking in the literature. Similarly, university administrators, staff, and faculty need to understand how to facilitate and recognize successful adaptation by student veterans, whose transition process differs in key ways from that of the traditional student population (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Student veterans are similar to nontraditional students due to age and marital status, but they cannot categorically be subsumed into the larger nontraditional student group due to their military service, with potential combat or deployment experience, enduring socialization to the military culture, and identity dissonance. Thus, this student population warrants focused research on their unique adaptive process rather than transposing similar bodies of research to be applied to their experience (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). This research provides a comprehensive portrayal of the process by which student veterans learn to adapt to the college environment through the lens of Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986) and identifies common strategies that emerged from the research.

Research Context

The context in which this research originated is the study of higher education, particularly from the perspective of a practitioner in the field of student affairs. Student affairs professionals strive to put the student experience first and to focus on overall well-being and its contribution to student retention and academic success. As such, it recognizes how marginalizing experiences and student identity issues can affect student

success. It emphasizes how the learning process is more expansive than what occurs in the classroom and how factors outside the curriculum and instruction of courses influence issues of retention and graduation.

Universities are coping with budget cuts, decreasing state support of higher education, and a critical audience that demands results in the form of more degrees, gained more quickly, with less funding. The state of higher education is in a crucible period in which tangible and proven results of student success are demanded, and the public critically examines the value and dividends of every dollar spent on education. Student veterans are funded federally and locally in their higher education pursuits, and their success matters. Their success matters not only because taxpayers want to see the positive fruition of their investment but also because the nation has expressed appreciation of a veteran's service and the need to repay the veteran for that service by setting up the veteran for success. Funding a veteran's college attendance is a positive step, but funding does not equal veteran success. Even as universities are seeing more veterans enroll, they are still struggling to support veterans.

Veterans face numerous challenges, including coping with a drastic culture shock as they make the transition to a new environment, and they may face a lack of preparation academically or a temporal gap in their education. They may have to find peace with their past experiences, their new identity, and more. Research on student veterans has been narrow and superficial in focus as higher education institutions have sought to understand this new and growing student population. This is the context from which I approached the research problem—as a student affairs practitioner working in a

period of funding cuts for higher education and high veteran enrollment. That context affected the questions that I posed, the environment in which I interacted with my participants, the findings, and my conclusions.

Problem Statement

College campuses focus much of their resources and support on traditional-age students (18 to 24 years). However, nationally, colleges are seeing an increase in attendance by nontraditional students such as student veterans (Kim & Cole, 2013). Veterans have been attending college in mass numbers, with more than 210,000 veterans attending college in Fall 2010 (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011). More than one million student veterans have enrolled in institutions of higher education since 2002 (Cate, 2014); in fact, the milestone of one million student veterans utilizing Post-9/11 GI Bill funds was reached in 2013 (Student Veterans of America [SVA], 2013). Therefore, as troop numbers continue to be reduced, the number of veterans qualifying for the Post-9/11 GI Bill could continue to grow significantly (Kirchner, 2015), especially with reports that approximately 73% intend to utilize those benefits (SVA, 2013).

These adult learners face difficulties that every new student faces in the attempt to adapt to and succeed in university studies. However, they are often doing so with the additional challenges of supporting a family and maintaining outside employment (Kim & Cole, 2013). Furthermore, universities are structured to support a younger, more traditional student demographic, and they struggle to support nontraditional students, especially student veterans. Thus, most student veterans are adapting to college with inadequate assistance for their unique needs (Kim & Cole, 2013) and lack support in

areas such as understanding the financial intricacies of securing funds from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), accessing disability and counseling services, creating social connections, engaging with faculty and staff without training to serve the veteran population, and more. They are entering an environment that is not only very different from military life but is geared to support young, single, 18- to 24-year-old college students who have recently graduated from high school, not older adults with unique life experiences and often with family responsibilities (Kim & Cole, 2013). The veterans' social interactions quickly shift from a highly unified camaraderie that was intensely forged through shared trials among pseudo family members to detached isolation in a group of younger peers who do not fully comprehend the experience of a veteran (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). They must also adjust from a highly structured environment led by other servicemen to a more self-directed pursuit (Kim & Cole, 2013) led by faculty and staff who are not aware of this important aspect of their identity or who may even openly disrespect it (DiRamio et al., 2008). According to Schlossberg's transition theory, the perception that a student veteran holds concerning these changes is instrumental in how the veteran adapts to the new role as a student veteran (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

It is vital that administrators understand how a veteran's experience in the institutional environment, the behaviors of peers and self, and social interactions as a college student interact and influence how they make the transition to life as a student veteran. Studying how student veterans experience the transition to campus life informs universities about how they can support the success of these students; it also provides

insight into how student veterans might or might not make a successful transition into the future workplace.

An abundance of literature exists regarding the challenges that student veterans face during the transition to civilian and campus life (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006; Lapierre, Schwegler, & LaBauve, 2007; Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). That literature clearly outlines the barriers that must be overcome. However, there is a paucity of literature regarding whether student veterans are actually adapting and how they learn to do so. Another gap in the knowledge base for this population is how the college environment, the behaviors of those on campus, and the social interactions that are unique to university life influence the adaptation process in light of the student veterans' own active agency.

Emerging from the literature is also a pattern of a deficit-based perspective and regard for student veterans as passive entities (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Brown & Gross, 2011; Grossbard et al., 2014; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Ramchand et al., 2010; Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011; Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011; Widome, Laska, Gulden, Fu, & Lust, 2011). One would assume that adult learners, as a whole (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) and especially student veterans, would express a different polarity of agency. Adult learners as a group exhibit an active and purposeful determination in their pursuit of an education (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The nation attributes great strengths to veterans but the literature suggests an absence of study of the role that a veteran plays in his own adaptation. Faculty and staff should be informed about how to support veterans in their role as principal agents of

adaptation; without this key element, efforts to support this student population will be lacking and may even make the student veteran feel misunderstood. This research will help faculty and staff to understand the adaptation process for student veterans so that efforts to support them can be intentional, effective, and empowering.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the adaptation process for undergraduate student veterans at a large research-intensive public university in the southwestern United States. The study of this adaptation process was driven by four key problems: (a) The rapidly increasing student veteran population differs from both traditional and nontraditional student populations, (b) student veterans face numerous challenges in their adaptation, (c) staff and faculty should seek to understand this process because they are key in student veteran success, and (d) the current literature misrepresents the student veteran voice and lacks insight into student veterans' agency in adaptation.

Research Question

The study addressed the following as the central research question: *How do student veterans learn to adapt to the higher education environment?*

Three subquestions were also explored:

1. How does behavior play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?
2. How do cognitive processes and other personality characteristics play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?
3. How do environmental factors play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the adaptation process for undergraduate student veterans at a large research-intensive public university in the southwestern United States. Utilizing Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986), I looked at student veterans' processes of adaptation to university life. I examined (a) the strategies, behaviors, and outlooks that were implemented to support their adaptation; (b) the environmental factors, behaviors of others, and social interactions that helped them to learn to adapt; and (c) the key resources or support that were most valuable in their adaptation. This study was also designed to discover distinguishing personal or environmental characteristics that enabled student veterans to make the transition with ease and what factors greatly influence a veteran's ability to adapt.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research is that student veterans are a population with dramatic growth and substantial challenges; simply providing services and funding without guidance and direction will not suffice. Higher education must become more intentional and informed about practices with regard to student veterans. This calls for further study, especially of the ways in which universities can create support systems and policies that increase retention of these students. Focusing on the social cognitive learning process, this research can inform colleges about how they can assist student veterans in the development of individual agency, self-reflective behaviors, and self-determined actions that will ultimately help them to succeed. This research could lead to

more informed practice and knowledge without adding another expense line to an already overextended budget.

Definition of Terms

A central term to define from the outset is *student veteran*, a descriptor that can be understood in various forms. Student veterans are typically defined as “anyone on active duty, in reserve or National Guard status, retired from the military, or who has completed military service and participates in post-secondary education” (Kirchner, 2015, p. 117). An overview of military jargon cited in excerpts from participant interviews includes the following:

Arty/artillery: Class of weapons or a unit in the military that operates long-range, powerful weapons, often used in support of troops on the ground.

BAH: Basic allowance for housing.

BAMCIS: Acronym for those who are leading troops, involving the following: begin planning, arrange for reconnaissance, make reconnaissance, complete the plan, issue the order, and supervise.

Boot camp: Training camp for new military recruits.

Camo ball: Ball cap style hat with a camouflage design.

Cement feet: Slow, lifeless, or lacking in motivation or vigor to move forward.

Civilians: People who are not members of the military; sometimes, more specifically, people who have never been members of the military.

Close air support: Provision of precise airborne firepower to protect military members on the ground who are operating in close proximity to the enemy.

Company commander: A leadership position of command of a company-sized military unit.

Deployment: The transfer of a military member from their home station to a temporary duty location often in closer proximity to a war zone or combat situation; receiving orders to leave station and go where one is told to go.

Frontline: Being in close proximity to the enemy.

G.I. Bill: Law that provides a range of financial, educational, and job training benefits for military veterans.

Gear: The basic equipment and supplies issued to members of the military.

Intel: Common abbreviation for military intelligence, specifically key information regarding military plans or knowledge of the enemy.

Military buddies: Close friends from military service.

Moto T-shirt: A motivational T-shirts worn by military members to prepare them for battle or to do challenging things.

OODA loop: A strategy that entails these steps: observe, orient, decide, and act.

Paratrooper: Member of the military specially trained to parachute into an operation.

Patrol: Common activity in which service members survey or monitor a specific geographic area.

PT: Physical training.

PTSD: Posttraumatic stress disorder.

ROTC: Reserve Officers Training Corps.

Special Operations: Units of the military that are unconventional and carry out operations requiring particular skillsets.

Staff Sergeant: A rank of noncommissioned officer in the military.

Subordinates: Members of the military under the authority of members with a higher rank.

VA: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Veteran friendly: Describes an atmosphere, culture, or experience that is supportive and appreciative of veterans and fosters student veteran success.

Warfighter mentality: Mindset fixated on killing or destroying opponents; mindset focused on winning at all costs.

Warrior Scholar Project: A transition program for enlisted veterans that supports student veteran success at leading 4-year universities.

Overview of Theoretical Frameworks

When I began to examine the experience of student veterans, Schlossberg's theory of transition (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition were the first theoretical frameworks that I utilized; however, I became intrigued by the underlying story beneath the experience. Perhaps due to my background as a teacher and coach and my work in counseling students, I was drawn to how they learned to adapt and why some adapted and some did not. I also had a desire to help these students learn to adapt. Key frameworks that influenced this research were theories regarding motivation, learning, grit, resiliency, and transition.

Central Theory

The central theory that provided the most structure to the conceptual framework of this research and influenced the interview protocol was social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). Social cognitive theory suggests that one way in which people gain knowledge is by learning from each other. They acquire knowledge by utilizing observation, imitation, and modeling in social interactions and other experiences and through exposure to various media sources (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1986) illustrated the importance of environment as people learn by observing. This learning is internal and the behaviors may not reflect the learning that has occurred; however, they learn, whether or not they act on it. They do not need to experience the consequences directly; they can learn through vicarious experiences of observation.

Bandura (1986) also recognized the complex interactional dynamic between environment, behaviors, and personal factors in learning through the concept of *triadic reciprocal determinism* (p. 23), a dynamic that is not necessarily balanced or equal in the strength of any one aspect at any given moment. Four key components of this theory are the concepts of modeling, outcome determinants, self-efficacy, and identification (Bandura, 1986, 2004). Motivation is also key in learning, and in this theory, Bandura (1986, 2004) posited that one's goal directs behavior and that people self-regulate their behavior to meet their goals. This connection to motivation and goal direction is essential in learning. The central concept of motivation connected all of the utilized theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

At the core of this theory are the fundamental ideas of human agency and human capability. Human capability includes the following five capabilities that are essential to understanding how one can learn through the lens of social cognitive theory: vicarious capability, forethought capability, self-regulatory capability, symbolizing capability, and self-reflective capability (Bandura, 1986). Human agency, or one's perception of control over one's fate (Bandura, 2001), is an essential aspect of learning and a tenet upon which social cognitive theory is founded. This agentic perspective represents a balanced belief that acknowledges that some things are out of one's control, just as there are many areas wherein one can exert influence in pursuit of one's goals. Agency is characterized by self-reactiveness, forethought, self-reflection, and intentionality (Bandura, 2001). The three modes of human agency—individual, proxy, and collective—are the ways by which a person can work toward a given goal (Bandura, 2001). For example, a person exerts personal agency by planning, self-regulating behavior, and reflecting (Bandura, 2001). A review of current literature indicates a gap in the research designs of studies examining student veterans: the capability of student veterans to demonstrate agency in their transition. This agentic perspective, along with the fundamental process of learning that ground the social cognitive theory, made it attractive for analyzing the research question proposed: How do student veterans learn to adapt to the higher education environment?

Supporting Conceptual Frameworks

Three interrelated and important conceptual frameworks that undergirded this research were grit, growth mindset, and resiliency. Grit, a concept that Angela

Duckworth (2016) shared in her research, is “passion and perseverance for long-term goals;” it is stamina, a commitment to one’s future on a daily basis (p. 233). Hard work, effort, and self-control are key characteristics of grit. Those with a gritty approach to life see their world and experiences from a growth mindset; it is the idea that things are not fixed or permanent but that one has the ability to change circumstances, situations, and self with effort (Dweck, 2006). Gritty people approach life like marathon runners; they recognize that they have to make sacrifices and do tough things, but they do it because they are driven to reach their goal despite the distance to it. Grit seemed to suit the student veteran who adapted successfully because it combined all of the traits that they displayed in the higher education arena: resiliency, hard work, motivation, determination, direction, perseverance, and mental toughness.

Grit, resiliency, and the growth mindset are quite compatible with social cognitive theory. For example, Dweck (2006) identified goal setting, feelings about social connection, self-regulation, and one’s beliefs about self as central to the grit of a student. Grit is connected to the goal-oriented motivation, social connection, and self-regulation that are necessary in learning to adapt. Resilience is the skill that allows someone to cope or adapt in difficult circumstances (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000); it is how well someone copes with stress (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Resilient students do not let failure have the final say; they have a healthy sense of agency and can alter their course of action and do difficult things; ultimately, they do not let defeat set in. Those who demonstrate resilience have a positive attitude, regulate their emotions, and frame the concept of failure as a learning or growth opportunity (growth mindset).

Resilience and the growth mindset are connected to social cognitive theory in its self-regulation and agentic perspective that is necessary for learning to adapt. The bottom line is that success in most things, including learning to adapt to the college environment after military service, demands the ability to persevere in the face of adversity, which is why resilience, grit, and the growth mindset served as essential elements in the conceptual framework of this research.

Ancillary Theories

These theories were ancillary to my research and helped me to understand the student population and the phenomenon of student veteran adaptation. Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) is a manner of examining transitions and supporting people in their ability to manage a major change by analyzing the transition through the following four lenses: situation (perception of transition), self (perception of self, awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, and a sense of efficacy), support (available sources of support), and strategies (processes to prompt the consideration of different coping behaviors; Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995).

The transition itself is divided into three stages: "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out" (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995, pp. 1, 73, 233). In these respective stages, an individual begins or prepares for a change, engages in the new situation, and then concludes the transition or prepares for a new transition (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995). In examination of transition and adaptation, this theory provides an accessible framework for analyzing key predictors for success. For example, how one perceives the

transition and whether or not it is a desirable and beneficial change can play a major role in the transition itself.

Two other concepts that were influential in this research were Anzaldúa's border crossing theory and Knowles's adult learner theory. Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of border crossing to understand one's identity is often employed in situations in which a cultural collision is occurring. I utilized this framework to understand the student veteran experience, which includes the collision of cultures, the experience of otherness, and belonging to neither culture. The concept demonstrates that, somehow, those who persevere can forge an identity and force that is stronger than either of those parts alone. Knowles's (1973, 1980) adult learner theory was helpful in describing a student veteran's characteristics in light of the more general status as an adult learner or nontraditional student. This theory describes adult learners as a subpopulation characterized as internally motivated, autonomous, and self-directed (Knowles, 1973, 1980). It promotes the idea that adult learners should be valued by universities for their ability to apply life experiences and knowledge to academic contexts. Due to the orientation of adult learners toward goals and relevancy, curriculum designed with these orientations in mind can pique interest and motivation. These concepts and others, such as the social need of adult learners to be respected, develop the field of andragogy, the science of helping adults to learn.

Summary of Methodology and Methods

This study was a qualitative study utilizing a constructivist paradigm of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were initially selected based on

purposive sampling; inclusion in the study was based on likelihood of providing useful data or information-rich cases (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990). Criteria included the following: undergraduate students at a specific large research-intensive public university in the southwestern United States (herein assigned the pseudonym Southern Veterans State University [SVSU]) who had served in the military after September 11, 2001, were no longer considered to be on active or reserve duty, and self-described as having adapted to life as a university student. Participants had to have begun their undergraduate studies no more than five years after separation from the military.

Demographic information about the 16 participants is provided in Table 1.

Each of the 16 interviews was approximately one hour in length and semistructured in nature, which means that there was a combination of structured and unstructured interview questions, with the priority being flexibility (Merriam, 2009). Each interview was audiotaped, and each interviewee chose a pseudonym or asked me to choose one. In addition, I engaged in two observation experiences by attending university-run student veteran orientations in the fall and spring semesters to triangulate the methodology and provide a supplementary viewpoint to data collection.

I implemented the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009) throughout the data analysis phase, which means that I continually analyzed and compared data. I also tested and repeatedly modified categories in order to move forward with the most representative perspective of the data. I categorized the data in groups, identified multiple topical themes, and then further refined the themes and subthemes. I worked to

Table 1

Demographics of Study Participants

Pseudo- nym	Age	Gender	Race	Marital status	Children	First genera- tion
Allen	32	Male	White	Divorced	0	Yes
Bob	31	Male	White	Single	0	No
Carolina	28	Female	Hispanic	Divorced	2	No
Chris	27	Male	Asian American	Single/Engaged	0	No
David	30	Male	White	Divorced	1	Yes
Eric	26	Male	Hispanic	Single	0	Yes
Greg	31	Male	Hispanic	Married	0	Yes
Logan	24	Male	White	Married	1	No
Mac	34	Male	Latino	Married	1	No
Raoul	30	Male	White	Divorced	0	No
Rudy	38	Male	Hispanic	Married	2	Yes
Ryan	28	Male	White	Single	0	Yes
Susan	46	Female	White	Single	0	No
Tia	28	Female	African American	Married	0	Yes
Tom	29	Male	White	Divorced	0	Yes
Travis	27	Male	White	Single	0	No

establish trustworthiness through the tenets of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and invested a significant amount of time in validating the data in the manner that Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested.

Key findings of this study pointed to four major categories: (a) the role of environmental factors in the adaptation process, (b) the role of cognitive processes and personality in the adaptation process, (c) the role of behavior in the adaptation process, and (d) impediments to successful adaptation. Analysis of those findings led to four primary conclusions related to the research questions: (a) Student veterans learn to adapt in a triadic interactional manner and through observation, (b) behavior determines whether student veterans will adapt, and changes in behavior indicate adaptation, (c) development of self-efficacy and agentic cognitive processes and personality traits supports successful adaptation by student veterans, and (d) environments that support self-efficacy and are conducive to learning lead to successful student veteran adaptation. These findings and conclusions are discussed in Chapters IV and V, respectively.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

As with most qualitative studies, this methodological choice has its particular limitations. For example, this study captured 16 participants' individual interpretations of their experience at a particular point in time, which limits the ability of other researchers to replicate the findings or to generalize to a larger population, as one might be able to do with a quantitative study. This limitation was addressed by making credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability

(reliability), and confirmability (objectivity) priorities of this research. Extensive peer reviews, member checks, thick description, reflexive journaling, documentation of researcher perspective, and other standard processes for ethical qualitative research were implemented throughout the study. A qualitative study was the appropriate methodological choice because a quantitative study could not address the research question of *how*.

Another limitation was that alternate explanations of how student veterans adapt cannot be eliminated because this approach only illuminates the experiences of those who met the study criteria. While some may question the honesty and forthrightness of participants in self-reporting their experience as a limitation of the study, the interviewer worked to establish trust and a safe space to explore sensitive matters; no apparent incentive or consequence existed to motivate false reporting.

There are limitations of a qualitative study in that it utilizes a human instrument, and as such, bias is an accepted aspect of the research process. However, those limitations are addressed by acknowledging those influences openly in efforts to be transparent about the tool of research itself. Therefore, I acknowledge that, as a woman who was interviewing a predominately male group of students, my gender may have challenged my comprehensive understanding of their experiences. I am not a student veteran, which means that I will always be an outsider looking in on their world and making interpretations about what I perceive to be their reality and experience. Many of these veterans expressed distrust and frustration with people who think that they understand but really do not, so it was essential for me to be very open about my

nonveteran status. It was also vital for me to check continually with participants throughout the process in order to validate emerging conclusions. Some conclusions and themes may not accurately reflect all student veterans because each veteran is unique. However, I made every attempt to validate the research as thoroughly as possible, acknowledging from the onset my position as an outside observer.

Delimitations

A single institutional setting, SVSU, was studied due to the limited time, financial resources, accessibility, and human resources of the researcher. However, studying this one setting in such depth provided insight that can be used as a foundation for studies of a wider scope. The choice of the school was intentional in that it is widely recognized as a popular institution for veterans to attend. It must be acknowledged that findings bound within a single institution are suggestive of what one may experience at other college campuses similar to the one studied but may not be reflective of the experience due to other factors that alter the experience for student veterans. For example, many participants shared stories of other student veterans who had had more challenging transitions in attending a comparable school in the state. Those participants attributed a major difference to the strong and robust student veteran support programs, the political views, and the culture of military appreciation that this institution has and that the other institution lacks. A thick description of the environment is provided so that readers can make judgments about the applicability of findings to their particular setting.

Student veterans include those still in the National Guard and those who are serving on active or reserve duty. However, for the purpose of this study, the participant

pool focused on those who had completed their military service, rather than those who were considered to be on active duty, reserve duty, or in the National Guard. The intention was that, although continued duty with the military combined with simultaneous attendance at a university is difficult, student veterans with continued duty still are anchored in the military world and have the benefit of those ties. Student veterans who have completed their service may or may not wish to perpetuate their primary identity as military, but they are left with little choice and experience more pressure to adapt, with little alternate recourse.

This study focused on student veterans who began their university studies no more than five years after separation from the military. This criterion was important because veterans who leave the military but do not enter school within five years most likely undergo a separate adaptation experience to civilian life as a veteran. This criterion allowed the focus of the study to be specifically on those students who had to navigate the transition from the military to college.

Finally, I sought student veterans who self-described as having adapted to life as a university student. This choice was intentional in that it provided an opportunity for participants to examine the adaptation process, to reflect on successful strategies, and to consider factors that supported their adaptation. One participant declared his successful adaptation before the interview began; however, during the interview, he acknowledged that, despite his external signs of adaptation (e.g., graduation that semester), he had not adapted. His inclusion in the study validated this delimitation because he had difficulty in answering the interview questions. He had not reached the point in the process where

he could offer insight on what worked because he was still burdened with the overwhelming challenge of the dramatic change. However, his participation was of great value because he served as an exception or negative-case example to study in comparison to the other participants.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is composed of five chapters. Chapter I provides an introduction to the research topic. Chapter II presents a literature review about the relevant research regarding student veterans. Chapter III explains in detail the research methodology and methods utilized in the study. Chapter IV summarizes key findings of the research. Chapter V presents an analysis of those findings through discussion, pertinent recommendations, and conclusions. Appendices are attached for reference purposes.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student veterans have become an increasingly popular topic in the higher education arena; as the research on the topic begins to reach a critical mass, it is vital that researchers become aware of their blind spots and biases. Despite the surge of research on student veterans during the past few years (Bellafiore, 2012; Currier, McDermott, & McCormick, 2017; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliott et al., 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; Morris, Gibbes, & Jennings, 2018; Nichols-Casebolt, 2012; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Thomas et al., 2018), the approach and focus have been narrow in examining the challenges that student veterans face and how universities should help them.

The initial rush to publish research in this area originated from mental health and psychology experts who were spurred on by questions of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Hoge et al., 2006; Lapierre et al., 2007; Milliken et al., 2007). Perhaps because the study of this population began from a deficit perspective or a narrow focus on what is wrong or the challenges that this population may face, the literature has continued along this trajectory even as it has expanded. For example, most research has utilized a deficit frame to examine student veterans' proclivities for suicide (Rudd et al., 2011), alcohol abuse (Grossbard et al., 2014; Widome et al., 2011), depression (Thomas et al., 2018), isolation (Brown & Gross, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann et al., 2011), and PTSD (Ackerman et al., 2009; Ramchand et al., 2010; Rudd et al., 2011). The danger of this trend in student veteran literature is that the prevalence of deficit-framed

research has begun to define this population based on weaknesses rather than strengths, and it stereotypes all veterans as wounded or disabled (Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Osborne, 2014). This stigmatization can be a subtle psychological response that originates from a helping orientation; however, it can result in behaviors and thoughts that overemphasize weaknesses and drown out the individual's unique strengths (Bonar & Domenici, 2011). It also paints student veterans in broad strokes, ignoring the diversity of this population's experience and composition (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). This study's orientation was asset based and focused on how student veterans learn to adapt and thrive. The methodological decisions prioritized the diversity of the student veteran experience and preserved the authenticity of the student veteran voice.

Legislative History and Current State of Affairs

The challenge of how best to serve military veterans on college campuses is not a recent issue, and it is important to understand the legislative history and current state of affairs in order to understand the adaptation process of student veterans. The question of how best to serve student veterans originally arose in response to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill, by which eight million World War II veterans were granted education or job training in appreciation of their military service (Elliott et al., 2011). At that time, colleges across the nation scrambled to adapt their institutions to accommodate these veterans, and the nation has seen a similar focus on student veterans in recent years in response to the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Kirchner, 2015).

A long list of educational benefits has been offered to veterans since 1944, beginning with the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (for veterans of World War II), the Korean GI Bill, and the Vietnam Era GI Bill (Mercer & Skinner, 2008). These initial three benefits programs focused on support for war veterans, but the Post-Vietnam Era Veterans' Educational Assistance Program (VEAP) was a landmark program not only because it provided educational support for non-drafted military personnel not serving in a war but also because its benefits began to be utilized as a mechanism to recruit servicemen (Mercer & Skinner, 2008). The Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB), which followed those bills in 1985, was divided into the MGIB-Active Duty, MGIB-Selected Reserves, and the Reserve Educational Assistance Program. The act was designed to attract quality recruits and benefit a variety of military personnel and improve their retention (Mercer & Skinner, 2008). Advocates of these bills hoped that this legislation would aid veterans in their transition from military life to civilian life, increase employability of veterans, and compensate veterans with education and training that their service had prevented them from obtaining (Mercer & Skinner, 2008). Although veterans have been eligible for an array of benefits for their service, educational benefits have been a key component both as an avenue to ease the transition of veterans into the economy and as a vehicle to allow veterans to advance their employability and compensate them simultaneously.

With the surplus of veterans expected to return to civilian life after deployment due to wars related to the 9/11 crisis, the government prepared an expanded and revitalized benefits package for this new veteran population and their families. The Post-

9/11 GI Bill, signed into law in 2008, offered veterans a wide range of educational benefits and was intended “to enhance the nation’s competitiveness through the development of a more highly educated and productive workforce” (McGovern, 2012, p. 1). The Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits attracted veterans to campuses across the nation in record numbers, with more than 555,000 beneficiaries in 2011, a dramatic explosion from 35,000 in 2009 (McGovern, 2012). Those figures include only the Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries, as the total number of veterans receiving other educational benefits was 925,000 in 2011 (McGovern, 2012). The current population of student veterans is increasing rapidly. In the period from the bill’s inception to 2014, more than one million veterans had accessed a college education via the Post-9/11 GI Bill (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2014). It is expected that, in the next 20 years, this population will experience continued growth, with approximately 3.6 million veterans by 2019 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015).

This legislation has greatly increased enrollment of student veterans, especially with the housing allowance and book stipend (Eckstein, 2009). Such rapid growth in the student veteran population required time, staffing, and expertise, stimulating changes in the administrative structure of universities across the nation (Kim & Cole, 2013). To handle the benefits processing and policy alone, additional staffing was vital, but these students had additional programming and support needs that eventually led to creation of stand-alone centers to serve them (Brown & Gross, 2011).

Although the public received the Post-9/11 GI Bill favorably, administrators were challenged as institutional management of the benefits resulted in a 50% to 200%

increase in the administrative workload for colleges (Kim & Cole, 2013; McGovern, 2012). Daly and Garrity (2013) argued that, despite the increase in services for veterans (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014), the changes were not enough. McBain, Kim, Cook, and Snead (2012) pointed out that, while services for student veterans seem to have expanded, they found in their survey of veteran student services that only 37% of the studied institutions provided services that supported a veteran's transition.

There is currently a major effort calling for universities to designate personnel in career services, counseling, and academic advising to specialize in the veteran population; however, all of these initiatives only increase the financial investment by colleges to maintain or obtain a military-friendly status. Numerous programs, such as the Wounded Warriors Initiative from the Office of Civil Rights, have been created to encourage universities to incorporate policies, approaches, and practices that support student veteran success (Monroe, 2008). The financial investment in veterans is high (Barr, 2015) and the dividends of student veteran graduation and success should be high as well. Unfortunately, higher education may be still be missing a key component to student veteran success—understanding student veteran adaptation to the higher education environment.

Commonly Referenced Attributes of a Student Veteran

Despite the evolution of student veteran literature, its foundation remains rooted in a deficit bias as studies continue to identify the challenges that these students may face and to determine how to help them. Understanding how student veterans are portrayed and viewed is integral to understanding the adaptation process of student

veterans because it provides the context of external identity and environmental influences. One study published statistics that indicated that 18% of veterans of the war in Iraq and 11% of veterans of the war in Afghanistan suffered from PTSD (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). Another study, conducted in 2011, reported higher numbers, with 24% and 46% respectively; however, the study combined depression and PTSD as a single category (Rudd et al., 2011). Widome et al. (2011) characterized student veterans as having a significantly higher tendency to exhibit heavy drinking, substance abuse, and driving under the influence as a means to cope with the effects of PTSD and depression. Specifically, Widome et al. (2011) noted that “approximately one in six military personnel is likely to be a heavy drinker” (p. 101), and the VA diagnosed “approximately 800,000 military members with substance use disorders” (p. 102). Moreover, Rudd et al. (2011) found that 46% of a sample of 420 student veterans were likely to experience suicide ideation.

The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2013) reported that, in the 2007-2008 school year, more veterans disclosed having a disability (5%) than did their civilian peers (3%). Church (2009) pointed to the various visible and invisible wounds of war that manifest in student veterans: extensive physical disabilities, depression, anxiety, traumatic brain injuries, difficulty in concentrating, memory loss, mental health complications, and irritability. Implications of these wounds of war encompass diverse experiences from anxiety in crowded environments and lecture halls to feelings of isolation (Elliott et al., 2011).

Gonzalez and Elliott (2016) attributed the myriad psychological, emotional, physical, and learning disabilities that a student veteran may experience as an explanation for comparatively poorer academic performance by student veterans. Durdella and Kim (2012) reported that veteran status was negatively associated with grade point average (GPA), with the mean GPA of 3.03 for student veterans and 3.11 for nonveteran students. However, Durdella and Kim (2012) identified choice of more difficult majors, experiencing a lower socioeconomic status of families, and engaging in significant hours of off-campus employment as potential rationale for the lower GPA for student veterans.

The amassed research focusing on these traits (Hoge et al., 2006; Lapierre et al., 2007; Milliken et al., 2007) has created a mental model of who veterans are and what they need. The strong psychological association of veterans with PTSD, substance abuse, depression, and suicide has narrowed the research and influenced assumptions made by the researchers who have examined this population. Although it is important to serve and support students in need, researchers who do not acknowledge this deficit perspective may lose sight of what these students can offer to institutions and the capability of student veterans to adapt. The abundance of literature on veterans and PTSD has made a connection between the two almost instinctual, and many veterans report anecdotes in which professors who discovered a student's veteran status assumed that the students also had PTSD (Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2011). While faculty and staff should consider the invisible wounds of student veterans, such negative stereotyping of veterans can be isolating and can create a distance that makes seeking

help difficult (Livingston et al., 2011). The stereotyping also lumps student veterans together, rather than recognizing each veteran's unique experiences and identity. The literature seems to make clear that deployment has numerous effects on veterans, ranging from psychological health and relationships to work and academic success (Spelman, Hunt, Seal, & Burgo-Black, 2012), but the abundance of the deficit-framed studies point to a very different veteran than the one who is lauded by society.

Nontraditional Students

Although the above traits garner attention, another significant aspect of the student veteran experience is the nontraditional student experience as it illuminates the significantly different manner in which student veterans experience campus life and their adaptation process. Traditional students are 17 to 24 years old, whereas student veterans, like other nontraditional students, tend to be older (Bean & Metzner, 1985). For example, Radford and Wun reported in 2009 that 84.5% of student veterans were older than 25 years, while Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, and MacDermid Wadsworth (2013) reported that the average age of student veterans in 2013 was 33 years. Not only are nontraditional students older; they often live off campus, have lower rates of campus engagement, demonstrate a higher priority for coursework (Bean & Metzner, 1985), and utilize campus services less than traditional-age peers (Wardley, Bélanger, & Leonard, 2013). Student veterans are often married (47.3%), frequently have dependents (47%), and often work off campus, adding responsibilities in addition to classwork and changing the way in which they manage time and approach university life (Kim & Cole, 2013; Radford & Wun, 2009). An additional aspect that exerts an impact on their

experience is that student veterans do not reflect the traditional student population, as student veterans are more diverse (Kim & Cole, 2013). The population as a whole does not reflect the traditional student demographics, so student veterans may feel marginalized on campuses that lack diversity.

Another interesting demographic is that the percentage of females in the student veteran population is lower than in the overall college student population (Kim & Cole, 2013). However, although females compose a small percentage of the student veteran population, they are actually overrepresented in that population with 26.7% of student veterans identifying as female (Kim & Cole, 2013), compared to 14.6% in the greater military population (U.S. Department of Defense, 2013). Female student veterans often express frustration from not being recognized or respected as student veterans, the complex identity issues, and microaggressions (Iverson, Seher, DiRamio, Jarvis, & Anderson, 2016).

One of the most significant aspects for researchers to note in examining adaptation experiences of student veterans is that they report in greater numbers than the typical college student to be first-generation college students, at 61.8% (Kim & Cole, 2013). In addition, 84% of student veterans enroll initially in a 2-year institution (Kim & Cole, 2013) and they are more likely to be transfer students, commuter students, or online learners (Radford & Wun, 2009). These characteristics often present retention and transition issues because many first-generation students lack “intergeneration benefits of information about college,” which “makes participation in college a particularly formidable task” (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 409).

Transfer, commuter, and online students, which are intersecting identities that student veterans often hold, tend to engage with the university less and have a weaker connection and identity as students. The likelihood that student veterans would identify with numerous individual identities that higher education recognizes as at-risk populations makes it especially difficult for universities to engage student veterans in a consistent and positive manner. Each of these identities often feels overlooked, underserved, and marginalized by the university environment. These identifiers are often characterized as lacking a sense of belonging to the campus, and research calls for institutional, programmatic, and other changes to support retention efforts of these students.

Universities may recognize the importance of addressing gaps in their services, but funding, staffing, and connecting with these students are common challenges for universities. One of these identities in isolation presents challenges to general student retention and degree completion, but the multiplying effect of potentially identifying as married, having children, nontraditional, first generation, working and living off campus, and being marginalized by one's cultural and veteran identity seems daunting. However, this combination is quite common among student veterans. Even more so, the student veteran population is not homogenous, so even veteran-specific offices must be adept at understanding and addressing the multiple identities that affect a student veteran's experience and success at the university.

Understanding the nontraditional student population is an important aspect of understanding the student veteran population, but student veterans are not stereotypical

nontraditional students (Southwell, Whiteman, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Barry, 2018). Student veterans have distinct experiences originating from their military culture and service that distinguish them not only from their traditional-age peers but also from their civilian nontraditional peers (Vacchi, 2012). The effect of this differentiation manifests in many forms. Specifically, Southwell et al. (2018) noted that student veterans report even lower rates of interaction with campus entities, faculty, and staff than either set of civilian peers (traditional or nontraditional). Student veterans are described as more mature and possessing a starkly different outlook on life than the traditional-age college student due to their military service and life experience, which influences the manner in which they interact with peers, faculty, and the university environment (Kim & Cole, 2013). Their nontraditional status (being older, having outside responsibilities, and potentially identifying as a marginalized population) and their military service compound the challenge of university life and differentiate this population's manner of engaging with the university environment. Social support from the university environment is important for adaptation and student success, but student veterans are less engaged than their traditional and nontraditional peers (Southwell et al., 2018), constituting a key hurdle for the university to help student veterans to succeed.

Outcomes

The outcomes and success of student veterans are relevant to understanding the adaptation process of this population because institutions of higher education often equate successful adaptation with academic output, such as GPA and graduation rates. Student veterans are stepping onto college campuses in growing numbers, but a recent

media trend is to question the level of academic success by student veterans despite the higher rate of enrollment. It is valid to want to know whether the nation's steep financial investment is paying dividends for these recipients.

Unfortunately, quality data regarding student veterans' success rate is difficult to find and can seem contradictory due to the challenges inherent in studying this population's academic outcomes. In fact, President Obama signed Executive Order 13607, calling for better communication, data sharing, and consistent methods of data collection to improve the ability of researchers to evaluate the academic success of student veterans (Cate, Lyon, Schmeling, & Bogue, 2017). Many reports and studies have offered simplified and conclusive evaluations of the academic outcomes of student veterans, but this is a complicated issue. If one reads closely the studies cited for those conclusions, it is clear that this question has not been answered conclusively.

Some of the issues that complicate matters are the loose and ambiguous ways in which researchers refer to student veterans. The chosen definition of *student veteran* or a specific cohort of veterans (e.g., war or period of service engagement) can lead to seeming contradictions in the literature. For example, historically, student veterans of other wars were found to perform at comparatively equal or better rates than their peers (Olson, 1974); however, a study of veterans from 1966 to 1981 found that the veteran population as a whole completed fewer years of education than the civilian population as a whole (Teachman, 2005). It should be noted that Teachman (2005) was looking at educational attainment by all veterans, not student veterans. His study examined the years of education completed for a sample of Vietnam era veterans, yet some have

extrapolated his research findings to indicate poorer performance by all student veterans. Being specific in references to veterans, student veterans, or military affiliated and acknowledging the diversity among cohorts of veterans is vital to avoid misapplication of findings and confusion about this population of students.

Another issue precluding a conclusive answer to this question is that most studies have been able to analyze these issues only by examining subsets of the population, such as older cohorts of veterans from the Korean War or students at a group of institutions in the Midwest. One study found that student veterans reported lower GPAs than their nonveteran peers (Durdella & Kim, 2012), but another study reported higher GPAs (Lang & Powers, 2011). The problem with this contradiction is that the studies did not compare GPAs but simply reported that, at universities with a strong veteran support, student veterans reported high average GPAs of 3.04 (Lang & Powers, 2011) and 2.98 (Lang & O'Donnell, 2017)—not necessarily higher GPAs than those of their nonveteran peers. Despite failure to make the comparison, the researchers concluded that student veterans were performing better than their peers. There appears to be impatience to put the issue of comparative academic performance to bed; the aim to compare student veterans to their peers conclusively may cloud good judgment and research practice.

While the data is not yet clear, the stakes related to this conclusion are high. With a deep investment in student veterans, careful scrutiny of the data is warranted. For many student veterans, these findings are offensive and do not reflect what they consider to be the truth. They view the available data to be unfairly skewed and misrepresentative.

Researchers such as Vacchi and Berger (2014) have adamantly refuted reports of poorer performance by pointing out that typical completion studies did not account for the stop-out and transfer patterns of most student veterans and that data from cross-sectional studies are not sufficient to substantiate the claim. The researchers who saw the flaws in the data samples (Cate, 2013, 2014, 2017; Vacchi & Berger, 2014) offered explanations of these findings of poor academic performance and completion by pointing to the errors in the data and nuances of student veteran enrollment due to redeployment and frequency of transfers, which may extend student completion beyond the 6-year tracking criterion.

To date, the most relevant and cited data regarding student veteran outcomes comes from reports by Chris Cate and his work with the Million Records Project (Cate, 2014) and the NVEST Report (Cate et al., 2017). Cate has led the way in advocating for better data sets and more data to evaluate this issue (Cate, 2013, 2014, 2017). Cate has pointed out that typical evaluation standards of degree completion are not the best way to evaluate student veterans (Cate, 2013, 2014, 2017).

Cate et al. (2017) provided the most conclusive evaluation of student veteran outcomes to date in their NVEST Report. The NVEST Report (Cate et al., 2017) defined the success rate of student veterans as the combination of degree completion rates and persistence rates. The success rate of student veterans in the period 2009–2013 was reported at 71.6% (53.6% degree completion and 18.0% persistence), with a 28.4% attrition rate (Cate et al., 2017). This report suggests that student veterans complete at higher rates than nonveterans of similar age groups, or nontraditional students, but it

specifies that “only by comparing similar cohorts can a definitive comparison be made” (p. 48).

However, many have used this report to make definitive comparisons and reach conclusions. One report briefly summarized the findings of the NVEST report, using demographics to highlight false stereotypes of veterans, and it emphasizes the comparison of veterans to nonveterans among others (SVA, 2017). It also claimed a final say on the GPA debate, with a report that student veterans outperformed their peers with a 3.34 GPA compared to a 2.98 GPA of nonveteran students (SVA, 2017). The source of the GPA findings pointed to the 2016 SVA Census and U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. The SVA Census is a self-reported web survey conducted by SVA in which participants are selected through SVA chapter databases (Cate & Davis, 2016). By comparison, the National Center for Education Statistics collects information directly from institutions (Cate, 2017). Self-reports of GPA may be higher than what institutions are providing, and the SVA Census sample included only those who voluntarily completed the survey. There should be better validation of these data and a more objective reporting mechanism for GPA, or at least a more comparative one. Again, despite efforts to address this question definitively and provide attention-grabbing sound bites, these reports are not conclusive. Reports and studies indicate different outcomes. It is clear from available data in the peer-reviewed literature that this issue is not settled.

The question of how well student veterans perform compared to their peers has not been clearly decided. However, this may be the wrong question. The focus should

not be on whether student veterans are outperforming peers; the focus should be on the return on investment. Those numbers are clearer. Cate et al. (2017) demonstrated professional research restraint and did not extrapolate beyond the data, nor were they distracted by media buzz. They focused on the more important issue of return on investment—the impact of the nation’s investment in student veterans. The argument in the media and with SVA is about what can make headlines or refuting what feels untrue, but the data is not clearly indicative. However, the data does indicate that investment in student veterans is producing significant impact. To quantify that impact, 453,508 postsecondary degrees and certificates have been earned, and that number should only increase as 100,000 degrees are predicted to be added annually (Cate et al., 2017).

Cultural Collision

Central to a veteran’s adaptation process is the cultural collision that a student veteran experiences when departing from the routine, culture, and customs of the military to engage in the life and routine of a college student (McBain et al., 2012).

Strom et al. (2012) indicated that, “among veterans, shared values stem from service to one’s country, shared training experiences, and shared mission, namely preparation for war/and or national defense” (p. 68). *Culture*, as defined by Schein (2004), is

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 17)

Military culture is strong and boasts a long-lasting effect on military personnel with even the briefest of careers. The strength of its transferability extends to family members, who also ascribe to the tenets, values, and behavior in myriad ways (Redmond et al., 2015). The beliefs of the military can be seen clearly in the behavior of those who are currently serving, as well as in veterans. The values of this culture are not only ingrained in its members; they are externally displayed through various facets. Military culture is something that even outsiders can describe with specificity. The attitudes of this culture, despite its broad spectrum of diverse entities, share a sense of commonality that spans generations and military branches. Understanding the military's shared values leads to understanding of the military culture and illuminates the challenge of cultural collision in student veteran adaptation.

Although it is vital never to lose sight of the individuality of the veteran, it is important to understand the potential cultural implications of military service. The culture of the military could have epistemological implications, as veterans may prefer a hierarchical and external authority (Hall, 2008) and present a more dualistic manner of thought (Amy, 2010). Cultural norms such as the warrior mentality of aggressive, male-dominated behavior (Soeters, Winslow, & Weibull, 2006) may interfere in the formation of relationships with civilians. Military culture as exhibited by the pride in belonging and the uniform dress could also have implications for a sense of identity as military culture creates an expectation for subordination of individual identity to that of the group (Soeters et al., 2006). The military makes this collective identity (Soeters et al., 2006) essential to survival, as service men and women must learn to fit the norms and

prescriptive ideals. Student veterans may concurrently crave the kind of belonging that they enjoyed in the military and reject the concept of assimilating to a new culture that is usually perceived as lesser (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

One of the key differences between college culture and military culture is that the military culture imposes a strict structure, provides specific training and checklists, values respect for authority, and attempts to eliminate ambiguity; the college environment, on the other hand, is characterized by a lack of structure, an overt mandate to manage oneself and one's time autonomously and resourcefully, and a value for ambiguity and questioning (Bellafiore, 2012; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rumann et al., 2011). Student veterans may struggle with internal motivation in the college culture as they move from a team-first cultural perspective in which the mission has grave consequences to a culture that is individualistic and in which the mission leads to a seemingly inconsequential piece of paper (Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Osborne, 2014).

The collision of military culture with that of university life is interesting to consider because, historically, the cultural components of military culture and college culture outwardly seem in direct tension. These cultures are especially important to study in light of the student veterans who come to campus, no longer active military personnel but certainly with the lasting effects of military culture, who may be students in name but unfamiliar with and at times feeling ill suited to the characteristic mold of the college culture (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rumann et al., 2011).

Student veterans may experience “learning shock” or “feelings of frustration and possible disorientation” due to this collision of cultures as they move from a highly structured learning environment where a sense of communal identity and accountability are ingrained in everyday minutiae to a learning environment with less readily apparent shared attributes, values, or culture (Blaauw-Hara, 2017, p. 2). The role of the student in the college environment and the behaviors that are required to gain respect are not explicitly delineated (Blaauw-Hara, 2017).

Immersion in any new culture is challenging, but it is especially so when the cultural differences are not anticipated by the interloper. Culture is a key consideration in examining student veteran adaptation because “culture as a set of basic assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations” (Schein, 2004, p. 32). Culture is an underlying influence behind why some veterans focus on specific aspects of the college experience that others ignore, why they may interpret an experience differently from their peers, and why they feel affirmed or rejected and experience a sense of belonging or frustration with an environment, all of which informs how they respond to situations (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rumann et al., 2011).

Transition and Identity Dissonance

Not only are student veterans navigating the cognitive dissonance of this intense cultural collision as they seek congruence and belonging; they are also coming to terms with new role identities as they seek to manage intersecting identities (DiRamio &

Jarvis, 2011). This identity dissonance is key to understanding the adaptation process for student veterans. As with all transitions in life, student veterans are adapting—a process that “requires letting go of aspects of the self and former roles and moving toward a new emerging identity and roles” (Anderson & Goodman, 2014, p. 43). They are dealing with issues of belonging and mattering, undergoing a major life transition, and concurrently managing a diverse array of social identity dimensions and roles (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Transitional challenges are essential to consider because they play a major role in student veteran success, retention, and graduation (McBain et al., 2012).

Using Schlossberg’s adult transition theory as a framework for understanding the student veteran transition, DiRamio et al. (2008) described a student veteran’s separation from the military as the “move out” phase. Unfortunately, the programs that exist to prepare military personnel for separation do not focus on the transition to a student role, which means that students face issues as they “move in” to the role of student (DiRamio et al., 2008).

Due to the gap in preparation during the “move out” phase, universities must increase their support during the “move in” phase by implementing institutional policies and structures; enhancing the quantity, quality, and training of personnel and services; and expanding social and cultural support for student veterans (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). However, Griffin and Gilbert (2015) advised that institutions should consider whether these efforts help student veterans to employ the resources that they bring to the campus. Using the fundamental tenets of Schlossberg’s adult transition theory, Griffin and

Gilbert (2015) advocated for approaches that foster a sense of control, especially in the areas of finances and academic credits. Key strategies for campuses to implement include evaluating the helpfulness and quality of training of staff, creating policies that make the transition less stressful for veterans, ensuring a common understanding of policies, streamlining efforts and communication for consistency, and designating individuals who can spearhead initiatives for campus (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

Many veterans are not given adequate benefits to pay for their entire education and must learn to balance working and going to school during their transition (DiRamio et al., 2008). It is not surprising, then, that student veterans report that financial management is one of the most stressful aspects of the transition because so much of the benefits process is out of their control, unpredictable, and confusing, while having dramatic consequences for their well-being (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). According to Kirchner, Coryell, and Yelich Biniecki (2014), for many student veterans, the experience of becoming a university student is equitable to the stress of deployment as they struggle to grasp how to adapt to an environment that is drastically different from their military lives; they are essentially deploying to a new environment, the college campus, without the extensive deployment training that they would typically receive in the military.

Student veterans experience difficulty in multiple aspects of their lives during their transition to college after deployment. Unfortunately, most on-campus veteran support offices focus only on the financial aspects of a veteran's transition, ignoring other important issues (DiRamio et al., 2008). Students also encounter other transitional

challenges, such as navigating the academic aspects of the classroom. As most veterans have been out of the classroom for some time, their skills in mathematics and writing have regressed (DiRamio et al., 2008). Student veterans must also resolve the tension and complexity of various facets of identity, such as being both student and veteran, by processing their military experience and defining their role as a student simultaneously (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). They must address stereotypes, as civilian students who may purport to have extensive military knowledge question the veterans' identity or stereotype them by labeling them as heroes or killers (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). These veterans must engage in reflection and seek to accept how "roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions have changed as a result of" military experience (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 9). Rather than regressing fully into the fold of other veterans or avoiding the issue completely, engagement with traditional-age students may help to resolve and come to terms with the new role, even finding fulfillment in it (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). The identity dissonance that student veterans face is not only challenging but can influence how student veterans adapt to the college environment (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Feelings of Isolation and Invisibility

Feelings of isolation and invisibility are typical experiences of student veterans in transition as a core aspect of their identity seems to be stripped away or is not identifiable to strangers (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Exacerbating these feelings, many student veterans seek to remain unnoticed and do not ask for support (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011). While the lack of social connection plays a key role, the

sudden transition from wearing the uniform of a military unit to civilian garb can be a subtle but prominent psychological factor for student veterans. The military uniform has served as an external indicator of an internal identity, whether positive or negative, for many years; although this may be liberating for some, it can be uncomfortable for others (Brown & Gross, 2011).

The general campus climate also significantly enhances or diminishes feelings of isolation. Even though most student veterans in the study by Livingston et al. (2011) reported positive feelings toward the military on their campuses, the negative experiences regarding classroom discussions about warfare or the general frustration with traditional-age students had a greater impact, causing many to feel disconnected and unappreciated. Many described a general lack of acknowledgement of the contributions of student veterans as a part of the campus population, with some campuses devoid of Veterans Day activities or celebrations (Livingston et al., 2011).

The perception of campus attitudes may lead to frustration or a marginalized experience for veterans who may feel rejected, unappreciated, invisible, or forgotten (Livingston et al., 2011). The fact that very few of their nonveteran peers were affected by a war in which the veterans made major sacrifices can exacerbate feelings of isolation (Tavernise, 2011). With only 1% of the population serving in the military, it is not an experience or identity with which many external entities can fully empathize (Tavernise, 2011).

Few veterans live on campus or participate in student organizations, adding to feelings of isolation (Livingston et al., 2011). Furthermore, veterans often find that their

families have difficulty in empathizing or understanding the stress of combat, increasing feelings of isolation or disillusionment (Livingston et al., 2011). This is critical to consider, as family is often the most immediate and intimate social connection for a veteran and, outside the university, may be the only available support system.

The unique nature of each student veteran's experience and identity as a student veteran can be complex and nuanced. Student veterans have various reasons for separating from the military, ranging from self-initiated choices to external forces that thrust the transition upon them. A key note to consider is that many student veterans are not actually separated from the military, as they attend school on active duty or serve as reservists while attending classes.

Each of these perspectives affects the experience and identity of a student veteran, creating an array of feelings or attitudes that a veteran may exhibit as he or she begins the transition (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). It becomes difficult for veterans to adjust on a college campus to the lack of tight camaraderie experienced in the military, and some go so far as to consider returning to the military expressly to regain that intense support network (Livingston et al., 2011).

The feelings of belonging and acceptance are lacking for these students, yet the challenges that seem inherent in the current campus environment and common veteran assessment of campus life inhibit these students from finding methods to become involved. Connecting with veteran peers seems to ameliorate feelings of isolation for some student veterans, if only temporarily (Rumann et al., 2011; Summerlot, Green, & Parker, 2009). Recently, there have been conflicting arguments regarding expectations of

integration to campus life by student veterans, but a majority of the literature recommends that student veterans connect with veteran-friendly staff, creating a support network of student veterans and then engaging and adapting to the university, especially as they prepare to “move out” to their careers (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Challenge of Involvement and Investment

Another issue in the adaptation process is the student veteran’s desire for anonymity coupled with a seemingly contradictory need for connectedness. Anonymity allows student veterans to avoid questions from traditional students about combat and killing (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), as well as either preferential or unfavorable treatment from professors, particularly from those with anti-war viewpoints (DiRamio et al., 2008). Livingston et al. (2011) called this anonymity “invisibility” (p. 433). However, student veterans also reported that this invisibility led to feelings of isolation (Livingston et al., 2011). As veterans learned to navigate campus and reintegrate into roles as civilians and students, they also longed for their former military companions who understood the issues that they faced and their viewpoints (Ellison et al., 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Student organizations, support groups, and mentoring programs were recommended resources to address this issue (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). Conversely, the instilled military value of self-reliance inhibited some student veterans from reaching out for these services or support groups (Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2011).

Often, student veterans seek the company of other student veterans in order to discuss experiences; ultimately, this peer support aids in their transition (Rumann &

Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot et al., 2009). A social connection who shares combat experience, values service, understands the military and its associated jargon, or demonstrates empathy for the transition experience is ideal for student veterans who may feel isolated from the greater campus population (Ellison et al., 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot et al., 2009). Student organizations with a supportive advisor who is knowledgeable about resources for student veterans and may also be a veteran are ideal for these students (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot et al., 2009). Student organizations provide a place for student veterans to voice their opinions about what services are needed on campus (Summerlot et al., 2009). Most important, involvement and campus engagement provide a place to belong, to matter, and to engage in high-impact practices; engagement offers the opportunity to connect and to relate to peers.

Tinto's (1975) model of student attrition postulates that students must integrate both academically and socially in order to persist; however, Vacchi and Berger (2014) argued that Tinto's model does not apply to the unique population of student veterans. Southwell et al. (2018) found that age was a more significant factor than military experience in whether students reported higher rates of interaction with student organizations.

In a study of traditional and nontraditional students, Southwell et al. (2018) found that faculty interactions and social support from student organizations were strongly connected to persistence by students. Even when student veterans were less involved, student organization contact was still positively correlated with persistence (Southwell et al., 2018). However, many barriers deter student veterans from engaging

in campus experiences. Student veterans often do not want to ask for help, and they suppress their emotions (Garcia, Finley, Lorber, & Jakupcak, 2011). Therefore, with little direction in how to navigate the campus environment, little motivation to connect with younger peers, and a perceived lack of support from faculty and staff, student veterans may view the university context as less supportive and report lower rates of involvement on campus than their civilian peers (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010). Institutions should adapt their services to seek to serve student veterans where they are (Cate & Albright, 2015). Despite this institutional responsibility to equip faculty and staff with cultural competence for student veterans, many institutions do not provide such training (Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011).

Frustration With Traditional-Age Students

Student veterans feel strongly that their international travels and combat experience make them more mature than their traditional-age counterparts (DiRamio et al., 2008; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). The age and maturity gap between student veterans and traditional-age college students can create impediments to a smooth transition (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Student veterans may express frustration and impatience about this less-mature population who permeate their every interaction on campus and around whom the campus is oriented (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Not only do student veterans often describe their nonveteran peers as immature and self-centered, but the lack of accountability for these peers in the college environment is quite a challenge to accept (Arminio, Grabosky, & Lang, 2015).

More challenging, though, are the experiences in which the environment is hostile toward veterans, increasing the disconnection and distance from the social environment (DiRamio et al., 2008). Those who must cope with the additional stress of a post-deployment transition not only may have difficulty in focusing in class but may also struggle to connect or relate to those who have not served in such a capacity, both staff and students (Ellison et al., 2012; Sayer et al., 2009). This results in many student veterans struggling through the transition, as involvement in campus experiences does not seem feasible, desirable, or salient. Serving as student community leaders could greatly improve their transitional experience (Tinto, 1993). Student veterans choose not to engage in campus life for many reasons, but a key component is that they do not see value in these relationships and cannot imagine shared interests.

Student veterans share many traits with other nontraditional students, but they diverge in their distinct experience gained during their military career (Cate & Albright, 2015). Although this distinguishing feature may isolate them, they, like other nontraditional students, have great value to bring to the campus environment. Examples of this include the ingrained military skills of personal discipline, goal attainment, and time management that most student veterans exhibit, which can also translate to success in the college environment if they are able to adapt (Cate & Albright, 2015).

It is important to reach out to these students for both what they can offer and what they can gain from it: development in leading diverse people and following others who may be younger than them. These experiences may be valuable to the growth of other students. The value could be even greater for veterans who may need this

experience to make the next transition to the workplace because an inability to cope with civilian peers in college most likely will translate to frustration with civilian colleagues in the workplace. Despite possessing many of the professional qualities that employers seek (Harrell & Berglass, 2012), many veterans have difficulty with civilian employment after military service (Krieshok, Hastings, Ebberwein, Wettersten, & Owen, 1999); almost 50% leave their first place of employment (Maury, Stone, & Roseman, 2014) and more than 60% indicate difficulties in adapting to the civilian workplace (Society of Human Resource Management, 2010). Tinto (1975, 1993) and others have advocated the value of involvement both for career outlook and transition and for the persistence and graduation rates of student veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Distrust of Nonveteran Staff

Vacchi (2012) argued that student veterans cannot be classified and subsumed under the general nontraditional student category because their military culture and experience makes them distinctly different from other nontraditional students. Southwell et al. (2018) supported this claim by providing evidence that the rate of interaction with faculty, campus entities, and advisors was related to military experience rather than to age.

Many student veterans report that nonveteran faculty members may judge them unfairly, and they find it challenging to listen to faculty who contradict their lived experience of war (Elliott et al., 2011). In addition, faculty in general tends to identify as liberal (Hamilton & Hargens, 1993), and this identity could lead to potential clashes of opinion, particularly regarding the military. The faculty identity itself creates a distance

for student veterans who perceive a lack of understanding and anticipate a difference in beliefs based on that identity (Ackerman et al., 2009).

These feelings of isolation and lack of understanding increase the feelings of distance and disconnection to a vital resource that student veterans need in faculty (Kirchner, 2015). Many student veterans have a deep-rooted pride in demonstrating self-reliance, and this often deters them from asking for help in their adaptation to university life (Garcia et al., 2011). Faculty and staff who identify as veterans are preferred for social camaraderie, as they share experiences and an understanding of the challenges faced by these students. At the same time, it is essential for student veterans to trust faculty and staff by allowing them to serve as a resource and support (Rumann et al., 2011).

The significance of a student veteran's interactions with faculty cannot be emphasized enough; the interactions can have a profound influence on their experience and success (Lighthall, 2012; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Southwell et al. (2018) found that interactions with faculty and academic advisors were positively related to better expectations of completion and evaluation of the campus environment. However, nonveteran students reported higher rates of interaction with faculty and academic advisors than did student veterans (Southwell et al., 2018). Especially in light of a student veteran's lack of connection to the nonveteran peer group, faculty and staff might be a student veteran's only connection and social support on a college campus. Although faculty and staff are slightly more supportive than are nonveteran peers (Moon

& Schma, 2011), Gonzalez and Elliott (2016) reported a strong relationship between a faculty member's familiarity with the military and the desire to help student veterans.

Some veterans express distrust in nonveteran staff because the comprehension gap in experiences, cultures, and identities may seem too great to bridge (DiRamio et al., 2008; Pew Research Center, 2011). Arminio et al. (2018) investigated the significant investment in which nonveteran staff members must engage to support student veterans and outlined strategies in which institutional staff members should engage to ameliorate the extreme cultural collision that student veterans experience. Relationships and accommodations are important for the success of student veterans, but Arminio et al. (2018) found that staff must also engage in a process of cultural shedding (changing aspects of one's culture that are not appropriate in light of the new culture), cultural learning (incorporating the new culture), and cultural stress (response to the need to adapt to a new culture) to truly support student veterans in their transition to the academic culture of a college campus (Berry, 2005). Moreover, Arminio et al. (2018) found that a staff member's positional proximity in an organization and physical distance to a "veteran savior," or the central staff advocate, who also identifies as a veteran on campus, determines how much a staff member will engage in this acculturation process that is essential for student veteran support and transition.

Most experts recommend significant training for faculty and staff to change their perceptions and to understand the needs and expectations of student veterans, along with a student orientation specifically designed for student veterans to address particular transitional issues (Bellafiore, 2012; Gonzalez & Elliott, 2016; Moon & Schma, 2011;

Rudd et al., 2011). Studies have also recommended student veteran mentoring programs and ally programs, such as Green Zone or Veteran Ally training, that seek to ease the transition into higher education and provide safe places for student veterans to engage and find support from higher education professionals (DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Nichols-Casebolt, 2012; Osborne, 2014). The benefit of student support services geared at student veterans is highlighted frequently (Daly & Garrity, 2013; Ryan et al., 2011) with suggested strategies including orientation sessions specifically for veterans, training for advisors, staff whose sole purpose is to assist and advocate for veterans, and training for faculty (Kirchner, 2015). However, there is a dearth of information regarding the success of these programs and even more so regarding the lived experiences and narratives of how student veterans overcome the challenge of adapting to campus life.

Moving Forward

In its eagerness to serve and support student veterans, the higher education research field has amassed literature on this student population (Bellafiore, 2012; DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliot et al., 2011; Moon & Schma, 2011; Nichols-Casebolt, 2012); however, very little if any of it has pointed to strengths of student veterans to persist despite the challenges or their capacity to learn to adapt, an intriguing and apparent omission in the literature. Brown and Gross (2011), based on their informal observations of student veterans, described student veterans as

serious, motivated, goal-oriented students . . . [who] tend to focus on achieving career goals . . . success is influenced by their military background: they have

worked within a disciplined job environment, established proven work ethic, and developed tested leadership skills. (p. 48)

This characterization is congruent with anecdotal descriptions, newsreel highlights, and interview exposés found in mainstream media; however, an academically rigorous account supporting this description does not exist.

Nationally, student veterans have reacted by criticizing the misrepresentation of the veteran experience, the lack of veteran voice in the literature, and the omission of the assets upon which veterans draw in university life (Vacchi, 2012). Vacchi (2012) pointed to several avenues of future research, such as considering the success of student veterans and examining how student veterans are motivated to succeed. The present study was designed to move the student veteran body of literature forward by examining the omission of assets, by placing the veteran voice at the center of the study, and by studying the adaptation process from an agentic perspective.

Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory, as proposed by Albert Bandura (1986, 2001), is characterized by human agency or “the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of one’s life” (Bandura, 2001, p. 1). An individual exerts personal agency through intentional behavior that requires foresight, through self-regulated behaviors moderated by self-reactive acts, and through self-reflection about his or her abilities. Social cognitive theory is made up of “three modes of agency: direct personal agency, proxy agency that relies on others to act on one’s behalf to secure desired outcomes, and

collective agency exercised through socially coordinative and interdependent effort” (Bandura, 2001, p. 1). It is this human agency that is missing in current research on student veterans. The agentic perspective and the learning lens of social cognitive theory make it an appropriate theoretical basis to address the research question: *How do student veterans learn to adapt to the higher education environment?*

Based on this theory, I believe that student veterans learn how to adapt to the setting of higher education in three ways: by experiencing how the college environment directly affects them, by observing how other student veterans adapt to the college environment, and by understanding how outside entities affect their behavior (Bandura, 1986). Through an examination of these characteristics, I offer insight into the ways that student veterans learn to mediate their transition into college and model the behavior of others who have successfully negotiated the transition to increase their likelihood of succeeding in college.

Bandura’s (1986) study focused on the social element of learning, the learning that can occur through modeling, and integrated the very internal experience of cognitive processing and personality. I investigated what examples student veterans modeled, how they self-regulated their behavior, and what personality traits played a key factor in their transition. This theory is grounded on three important assumptions: the concept of “triadic reciprocity,” human agency, and the notion that learning can be isolated to simply a cognitive process and not result in behavioral changes (Bandura, 1986, p. 18).

Social cognitive theory “embraces an interactional model of causation in which environmental events, personal factors, and behavior all operate as interacting

determinants of each other” (Bandura, 1986, p. xi), which emphasizes the idea that none of these elements occurs in a vacuum and none can be examined in isolation. For example, when one examines the adaptation process of a student veteran, one might notice how the cognitive processes of the student veteran are being influenced by environment and behavior, while cognitive processes may be acting on those elements simultaneously.

Human nature is complex; the process of learning in the social environment is a “triadic reciprocity” (Bandura, 1986, p. 18). It is not a simple equation; human nature cannot be attributed entirely to one’s internal drive, and it is not simply a product of external events (Bandura, 1986). This concept allows for individuals to exert some level of agency to determine their fate, yet it also recognizes the limited ability of a person to have total direction and control (Bandura, 1986). This understanding provides a healthy framework that balances external forces with internal forces and promotes the perspective that an individual has the power to act, change, and regulate behaviors (Bandura, 1986). The three interactional determinants are further categorized and analyzed in this theory, but the fundamental idea of the interaction of these determinants remains a principle framework to understand the larger context, even as one looks more closely at personal factors, behavior, or a particular aspect of the environment (Bandura, 1986).

Social cognitive theory’s emphasis on the power of observation in learning (Bandura, 1986) also explains why these student veterans’ stories are so important. Many campuses lack funding, staffing, or an office to support veterans’ needs. This

research offers veterans on those campuses a vicarious learning opportunity: the opportunity to learn how to adapt to the college environment not through trial and error but by learning observationally by reading about the adaptation strategies of other veterans who can serve as observational models (Bandura, 1986). Past research experience with this group has taught me that student veterans as a population seem to be quite engaged with the publications produced about the student veteran population, both in their critiques of the literature and in their sharing it with other veterans. This qualitative research study might serve as a lucrative learning mechanism for student veterans as it combines a clear and concise explanation of student veteran adaptation with specific voices of participants.

Bandura's framework for viewing a person's motivation, thoughts, and actions is appropriate for understanding a vast majority of people, particularly their adaptive learning processes. It neither promotes the idea of fatalistic determinism, where the world is against an individual and one's fate is determined regardless of behavior or action taken, nor does it promote the idea that sheer force of will can move any mountain (Bandura, 1986). It is a rational balance that accounts for the events of one's life, one's personality, and one's actions to determine one's path (Bandura, 1986). This theoretical perspective emphasizes the power of the human mind not only to process and interpret one's environment but to respond and adapt to that environment (Bandura, 1986). The perspective emphasizes the importance of reflection, regulation of self, and cognitive processing rather than viewing humans and their capacity to learn and change as frozen and inflexible (Bandura, 1986).

Social cognitive theory is a well-suited framework for this study because it analyzes the world from an individual's construct of reality, which matches with the study's constructivist approach. This theory's focus on learning in social contexts is why it is more desirable than other learning theories to study the social behaviors of student veterans in a college environment. The "triadic reciprocity" (Bandura, 1986, p. 18) of this theory is an exemplary format to analyze veterans—former military personnel who are taught to assess the environment, to utilize their strengths, and to persevere and demonstrate disciplined behavior (Soeters et al., 2006). Veterans could greatly benefit from understanding their new transition to college through the lens of a learning process with which they are already subconsciously familiar.

Approaching the transition issue as a process of learning not only empowers student veterans with the potential to change but also equips very small veterans service centers with a conceptual framework from which to base their services. Taking this approach also allows practitioners to evaluate how they are supporting the learning of student veterans in this new environment. Adaptation is a learning process, and it is important to understand their adaptation process through a lens of learning. This is vital because, if issues are simply resolved but do not help student veterans to learn how to adapt and grow in a self-directed but supportive environment, they may have similar transition issues into their post-college careers. Although this theory is a social learning theory, it incorporates the vital and complex factors of motivation, regulation, and cognitive processing, which are more appropriate for the dynamic nature of the adaptation process, a learning process experienced by student veterans.

Despite many researchers' desire to produce more research on the multiple inherent challenges of being a veteran, that angle does not sit well with the veteran identity (Vacchi, 2012). Utilizing Bandura's framework addresses this criticism of the veteran literature as the empowering language of social cognitive theory suits the population's identity. In addition, the ability to simplify such a complex process of learning meets the preferences of practitioners who need to comprehend and implement programs for student veterans in practical and efficient ways.

The terminology and the agentic approach to this theory resonate with the narrative of most student veterans and address key criticisms of past research efforts (Vacchi, 2012). The asset-based conception of learning to adapt is better suited for veterans who have successfully navigated the transition, and it is these voices that are being ignored (Vacchi, 2012). Although the question of how veterans adapt may have been asked before, researchers tend to focus on why they do *not* adapt or how to help them to cope. The story of the challenge drowns out the stories of the veterans who, through resiliency and determination, find great success. Although it is important to be aware of the hurdles, it is even more important to understand how veterans surmount those hurdles and continue. In and of themselves, the stories of these veterans present opportunities for vicarious learning for other student veterans regarding how to successfully adapt—a tenet that Bandura's theory strongly promotes. Their stories also amplify the student veteran voice from an asset perspective in a manner that the population rightly deserves.

Grit, Growth Mindset, and Resilience

Grit, growth mindset, and resilience represent key cognitive processes and personality traits that one would assume that student veterans who successfully adapt exhibit, according to the social cognitive theory, as they align with elements of agentic learning, purpose, and motivation (Bandura, 1986).

Grit. Grit and its dogged, never-give-up attitude, is often utilized in popular forms of media to describe veterans, but research examining grit or the growth mindset in student veterans is lacking. Grit could be a vital asset that student veterans bring to the table in looking at why some achieve and others do not. Grit's combination of passion and perseverance helps to shed light on two aspects that seem to be key to a student veteran's success.

Duckworth (2016) differentiated the intense emotion that is often connoted with passion by defining the passion that embodies grit as a sustained interest or purposeful direction over a long period of time. Her research demonstrates that the highly successful are often the most determined, hardworking, and resilient people. Several studies have looked at people who are able to endure things such as The Beast at West Point, a weed-out boot camp held prior to the first semester (Duckworth, 2016). In Duckworth's study of the psychology of achievement, she acknowledged talent and external forces but stressed the vital importance of effort (Duckworth, 2016). Those who exhibit grit are consistent in their goals; they are not distracted from their goals or deterred by setbacks (Duckworth, 2016). They are diligent, focused, and hard working, moving forward without their interest waning (Duckworth, 2016).

The perseverance aspect would seem to be a consistent aspect of veterans who have successfully endured the rigors of military training and service, but what might explain the difference of why some veterans succeed and others do not is the secondary aspect of grit: passion. Some veterans have direction and a sustained interest that would motivate them to endure as students; others lack direction, purpose, and passion, which may explain why some achieve, some survive, and others drop out—they do not have the stamina of grit. They lack the compass of passionate purpose and their goals are inconsistent or ill defined. Not only is grit appropriate for use with student veterans, but it also fits well with Bandura’s social cognitive theory, as key elements of the theory include motivation (passion), agency (perseverance), and a defined purpose or goal (direction).

Growth mindset. The *mindset* of a student veteran is an important concept in adaptation. A mindset represents the assumptions about the ability to change or develop one’s personal characteristics (Dweck, 1999). It influences the manner by which one interprets a given challenge and one’s ability to overcome it (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). One’s mindset directs the goals that one sets, how one behaves, and one’s motivation because it is the basis from which one interprets circumstances and evaluates personal resources to succeed (Dweck et al., 1995).

A fixed mindset perceives one’s attributes as unchanging and concrete, but a person with a growth mindset believes in the ability to grow, to develop more intelligence, discipline, emotional control, and other personal qualities (Dweck, 1999). Thus, one’s mindset plays a role in one’s reaction to adverse circumstances (Dweck &

Leggett, 1988). Those with a fixed mindset see their personal resources as fixed, with little potential for growth; they feel hopeless and are more inclined to give up when facing difficulties (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Individuals with a growth mindset recognize that they may not have the skills or attributes in their current state, but they believe that they have the potential to work hard to attain those qualities; thus, they are able to adapt to circumstances (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), particularly academic transitions (Yeager et al., 2014).

Studies have not been conducted to determine whether student veterans as a population demonstrate one mindset more than another, but in order to adapt and thrive in the new environment of a college campus, a growth mindset is valuable. It would seem that a growth mindset might be instilled in members of the military because an underlying philosophy in the training and development of military personnel seems to mirror a growth mindset. For example, military training instills the belief that obstacles are an integral component of one's success, strengthening and improving an individual, and it reinforces at every level the power of persistence, of continually exerting effort until one has accomplished a given goal. Growth mindset is exemplary of the sort of agentic learning that Bandura's (1986) theory presents.

Resilience. Both grit and growth mindset have much more overtly positive language, a stronger thriving focus, or achievement orientation, whereas *resilience* is more focused on surviving, coping, and adapting in challenging times. Numerous studies have connected the concept of resilience to student veterans. Some have purported that resilience, like adaptation, is a skill that can be studied and developed in others,

including student veterans (Luthar et al., 2000). Resiliency is an essential skill for student veterans to develop in order to adapt and succeed; it is an area of student veteran research that has seen growth in attention (Henderson-White, 2017; Iverson et al., 2016; Young, 2012). Student veterans face great adversity in their transition, so the study of resilience or their ability to cope or adapt in the face of such challenges is a logical progression of research. Some have examined whether student veterans possess the trait or skill of resiliency (Eakman, Schelly, & Henry, 2016) and its effects (Blackburn & Owens, 2016; Young, 2012) in a quantitative research approach; others have argued that resiliency is a dynamic process that must be understood and explained qualitatively and theoretically (Reyes, Kearney, Isla, & Bryant, 2018).

An interesting grounded theory regarding the development of resiliency in student veterans suggests that the construction of resilience is the process of “integrating,” which has two aspects: “transition from military to civilian life” and “harmonization of personal and academic life” (Reyes et al., 2018, p. 41). The theory also notes two expressions of self during this process, which closely patterns the adaptation process: the “dissonant self” and the “integrated self” (Reyes et al., 2018, p. 42).

Most intriguing about this theory is the introduction of how a student veteran enacts this process of “integrating” by three processes: “recognizing,” “resonating,” and “reactivating” (Reyes et al., 2018). This grounded theory portrays that the process of developing resiliency for student veterans is a dynamic process, not a stable, progressive trajectory of development, and it shows the interaction of the three enactment processes.

Two of the processes are internal, as the person identifies present challenges (recognizing) and connects to goals (resonating); the third is external as the person applies past skills and learning into action (reactivating; Reyes et al., 2018). These processes align somewhat to Bandura's elements of environment (recognizing), cognitive processes and personality (resonating), and behavior (reactivating), but Bandura's theory (1986) and elements are more encompassing.

Chapter Summary

The review of the literature demonstrates a prevalence of deficit-based perspective and a narrow focus on challenges, whether environmental (frustration with traditional-age students), cognitive (identity dissonance), or behavioral (proclivity for drinking or suicidal ideation). This study was designed to move the student veteran body of literature forward by broadening the dialogue to include a more asset-based perspective, by placing the veteran voice at the center of the study, and by studying the adaptation process from an agentic perspective. The use of Bandura's social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework provided the opportunity to examine holistically how student veterans learn to adapt to the college environment, explaining both the challenges and the process of learning that allowed them to adapt.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study with a constructivist paradigm—a worldview that sees learning as an active, constructive process by which people create their own subjective representations of reality—was utilized to achieve the goals of this study. This chapter presents a description of the methodology employed to address the research question, including the following: (a) purpose and research questions, (b) research paradigm; (c) research design of the study; (d) researcher perspective; (e) location of the study; (f) sample selection; (g) processes for interviews, observations, and transcription; (h) data analysis; (i) triangulation; and (j) trustworthiness.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to better understand the adaptation process for undergraduate student veterans at a large research-intensive public university in the southwestern United States. The study of this adaptation process, of how veterans adapt to being college students, was driven by four key problems: (a) The rapidly increasing student veteran population differs from both traditional and nontraditional student populations, (b) student veterans face numerous challenges in their adaptation to university life, (c) staff and faculty should seek to understand this process because they are key in student veteran success, and (d) the current literature misrepresents the student veteran voice and lacks insight into student veterans' agency in their adaptation. Utilizing Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), I looked at student veterans' processes of adaptation to university life. I examined the strategies, behaviors,

and outlooks that were implemented to support their adaptation; the environmental factors, behaviors of others, and social interactions that helped them to learn to adapt; and the key resources or support that were most valuable in their adaptation.

The study addressed the following as the central research question: *How do student veterans learn to adapt to the higher education environment?*

Three subquestions were also explored:

1. How does behavior play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?
2. How do cognitive processes and other personality characteristics play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?
3. How do environmental factors play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm of a study is the foundation of the other research design elements that follow; it is from these philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) that a study's trajectory should originate (Merriam, 2009). One's thoughts determine one's actions; therefore, it is vital to elaborate on one's research paradigm as it not only explains subsequent research decisions but also sheds light on the findings and conclusions and makes inherent assumptions transparent.

From an ontological and epistemological perspective, I believe that reality is a subjective truth that each individual constructs; therefore, this research originated from a social constructivism worldview (Patton, 2002). I see my world as an environment with

contextual truths and realities rather than the absolute, objective, and measurable reality of those from a positivist orientation; therefore, the interpretative or constructivist approach of a qualitative research design stemming from a naturalistic inquiry was an organic inclination (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009).

Social constructivists posit that one's reality is constructed by social, political, and psychological realities, and the questions of social constructivist researchers are oriented to understand how these realities are constructed (Patton, 2002). Utilizing a constructivist paradigm of naturalistic inquiry, I collected data about the process by which student veterans learn to adapt to their new environment. As a constructivist, I not only sought to understand how my participants constructed their reality and knowledge, but in my interactions with the data, I, as the instrument, played a significant role in constructing the knowledge, rather than simply reporting it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Design of the Study

The research design of this study was qualitative in nature to provide context and voice to the heavily internal phenomenon of successful adaptation by a student veteran (Bandura, 1986; Merriam, 2009). A qualitative approach allowed me to immerse myself in the world of student veterans to “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret the phenomena [adapting to college as a veteran] in terms of the meanings people [student veterans] bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). The qualitative approach provided participants the voice, or the rich, descriptive, and self-constructed representation of their reality, which I felt was lacking in the current research literature. Qualitative research seeks to interpret “the meaning people have

constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). Qualitative research is uniquely designed to “free the authentic voice” (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 1) of participants. As a qualitative researcher, I demonstrate a commitment to voice by allowing the constructed realities, experiences, and perspectives of these individuals to be heard and represented in the literature. This methodology places participants’ voice as central in the research and allows them to determine how they are represented and to evaluate the truth of that representation.

The qualitative design of this study included interviewing 16 student veterans and observing two veteran-specific orientations. Both the interviews and observations took place at a large research-intensive public university in the southwestern United States, which is herein called SVSU for the purpose of this study. The interviews allowed me to give voice to student veterans’ experiences of adaptation and the observations of veteran-specific orientations allowed me to understand this experience from a different perspective as a participant observer.

The design of this study not only addressed the research question, but the design was “a comfortable match with [my] worldview, personality, and skills,” an important factor according to Merriam (2009, p. 1). For example, qualitative interviews best suit my style of investigative inquiry and the aspect of problems that tend to pique my interest as a researcher. I seek to understand and am drawn to the meaning-making process of human nature and “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their world, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5).

Thus, the purpose of this study was to better understand the adaptation process for undergraduate student veterans at a large research-intensive public university in the southwestern United States.

My natural orientation toward inquiry stimulated questions rooted in the how, focused on the process, and answered from an experiential and narrative perspective (Merriam, 2009). My motivation in research is to understand and to share that interpretation with others, which is why the qualitative approach of research was appropriate for this study. I agree with Merriam (2009) that “the overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 14).

Qualitative studies place the researcher as the key instrument due to a constructivist orientation (Patton, 2002). The researcher as an instrument has many assets compared to other instruments, but this approach can have perceived detriments, depending on the research paradigm (Merriam, 2009). As an instrument, the researcher can be much more adaptive and can capture the nuances of human interaction that other instruments of the positivistic orientation cannot (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research is much more interactional and can pursue emergent questions or themes in real time (Merriam, 2009). However, placing a human as an instrument of research investigation inherently introduces bias into the research; however, bias is always present in research, no matter the instrument (Merriam, 2009). In qualitative research, because bias is assumed and anticipated, the researcher can acknowledge her own assumptions and

flaws at the onset and reflexively examine the influence of those factors throughout the process (Patton, 2002).

The analysis of data in qualitative research is inductive in nature as it engages with a various pieces of information to build themes and later conclusions, rather than starting with a hypothesis and testing that hypothesis, as seen in the positivist research approach (Patton, 2002). This style of research first examines the data, finding patterns and themes in the data that can lead to key themes or insights (Patton, 2002). While theoretical frameworks and literature informed me as a researcher, the data collected through interviews and observations determined the findings (Patton, 2002).

Location of the Study

The location of the study was intentional, as SVSU is considered a top choice university for student veterans. SVSU meets the criteria outlined in the Operation College Promise (OCP) *Field Guide for the Framework for Veteran Success* (OCP, 2012) by offering resources such as a veteran-specific office, student veteran organizations, in-state tuition policy, veteran-specific orientations, a veteran-specific website, veteran acknowledgement ceremonies, and peer mentoring, among others (OCP, 2012). Factors such as these that support veteran success were important as the study examined successful adaptation. According to social cognitive theory, environmental elements matter. The environmental setting included a highly conservative state and a very military-friendly university, both of which are considered easier environments for student veterans to adapt from the military (Gonzalez & Elliott, 2016). SVSU has been commended as a top university for veterans to attend by *Military*

Times (Sightline Media Group, 2018) and by *Best Value Schools: Top for Veterans* (Best Value Schools, 2018). The experience of adapting to student life at SVSU is influenced by the predominately military-friendly culture and conservative student population. In addition, SVSU boasts a large student veteran population from which research participants could be recruited.

This university invests in the student veteran adaptation process significantly, and analyzing whether these efforts play a role in the adaptation process for student veterans provided an interesting consideration. For example, SVSU opened a resource center for veterans that supplemented their financial aid. There are numerous military admissions counselors, advisors, and counselors who are trained and designated for student veterans. New student veterans can attend a supplemental orientation designed specifically for veterans. In addition, awareness of student veteran issues is raised through professional development sessions for the student affairs and academic affairs staff, in addition to numerous programs offered to the campuswide population. More than 40 student organizations have military-friendly missions, and the university boasts a strong and active Student Veterans Association.

However, as much as SVSU is veteran friendly, it is also a large public 4-year university that is a Tier 1 research institution with highly competitive academic programs. Its central mission is research. Efforts to serve students are geared toward 18- to 24-year-old students, and it is academically rigorous, which means that it is not an easy campus for adjustment compared to a community college (Rumann et al., 2011). Community colleges may not have the streamlined and expansive services of a 4-year

university (Persky & Oliver, 2010), but many researchers argue that community colleges are better suited for nontraditional students such as student veterans because there are more nontraditional students with whom to connect (Britt & Hirt, 1999), faculty appear to be more helpful (Bauer & Bauer, 1994), and class sizes are smaller. Also, it is difficult to transfer to and make strong relationships at large institutions (Britt & Hirt, 1999).

Thus, despite its veteran-friendly status, SVSU's campus culture for student veterans presents numerous challenges. This condition allowed me to examine the difficulty of adapting and understand which resources were utilized and perceived as most valuable. SVSU provided the opportunity to study challenges as well as strong support in the environment. Student veterans may struggle at this university but they have ample available resources to succeed. This allowed me to study to a wider extent the stories of successful adaptation rather than the exceptional student, which other institutions may have presented. Social cognitive theory, which served as the theoretical framework of the study, looks at the interactional dynamic of personal factors, behaviors, and environment (Bandura, 1986), and SVSU provided rich examples of the interaction of all three.

Sample Selection

Participants were initially selected based on purposive sampling, in which inclusion in the study was based on the likelihood of providing useful data or information-rich cases (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990). This type of nonprobability sampling required that I establish inclusion criteria (Merriam, 2009): undergraduate students at SVSU who had served in the military after September 11, 2001, who were no

longer considered to be on active or reserve duty, and who self-described as having adapted to life as a university student. Participants had to have begun their undergraduate studies no more than 5 years after separation from the military.

The primary path for recruitment was SVSU's student veterans' Facebook page and email listserv via a key gatekeeper, Colonel William Maples (pseudonym), the director of the Veterans Center at SVSU. Colonel Maples posted a message and sent an email that I had composed that explained the purpose and criteria of the research and directed interested participants to contact me via email to schedule an interview time and location (Appendix A). When participants emailed me, I provided them with a consent form (Appendix B) to review in advance of the interview and asked for convenient dates and times to conduct the interview. I narrowed the pool to those who fit the criteria and whose perspective and narrative were expected to provide valuable information for addressing the research questions. I met with those students first. From these initial 13 interviews, snowball sampling, a type of purposive sampling, was employed as participants referred me to other student veterans who matched the study criteria (Merriam, 2009) but might present a different perspective.

I sought to select student veterans who also fulfilled a broad spectrum of key demographics (race, gender, marital status, children, age, first-generation status, military branch, recent deployment in a combat zone, and institutional type for initial enrollment) to represent the larger student veteran population (Table 2). I gathered this information via a demographic information sheet (Appendix C) that was never connected with any individual consent form or any identifying information.

Table 2

Diversity of Study Participants

Demographic	Diversity of study participants
Race	9 White, 5 Hispanic, 1 Asian American, 1 African American
Gender	13 males, 3 females
Age	8 ages 24 to 29 years, 8 ages 30+
Marital status	5 married, 5 divorced, 5 single, 1 engaged
Children	5 with children
First-generation status	8 first-generation college students
Branch of service	9 Marines, 4 Navy, 2 Army, 1 Air Force

The sample was deemed to be representative of the student veteran population at SVSU and included diverse perspectives and experiences. The sample included nine White student veterans, five Hispanic student veterans, one Asian-American student veteran, and one African-American student veteran. There were 13 males and 3 females, with half of the sample identifying in the 24- to 29-year-old age range and the other half in the 30+ age range. Of the 16 participants, eight were first-generation students, five were married, five were divorced, five were single, one was engaged, and five had children. There were nine affiliated with the Marine Corps, four with the Navy, two with the Army, and one with the Air Force.

The sample was representative of the wider student veteran population in other ways than these general demographics. For example, despite describing themselves as

having successfully adapted to campus life, many of the veterans cited challenges that were described in the literature, such as suicide ideation, excessive drinking, depression, frustration, resistance to involvement and investment, combat experience, learning disabilities, and nonlinear pathways to the university. These veterans were not exceptions to the rule; they had experienced the commonly cited challenges and adversities of being a student veteran, and their narratives reflected that experience. This is significant to note because, although the study focuses on their successful adaptation, this was not a “mowed-down” pathway to success. These veterans represent the general veteran population both in demographics and challenges; they serve as representative examples for other veterans to follow as they navigate the transition to campus life.

The informant pool was broad to provide a wide lens by which to view this phenomenon, but the participant population was delimited to undergraduate students at SVSU who had served in the military after September 11, 2001. The range of demographic representatives was important (Appendix D) but the delimitation to undergraduate students was a means of studying the most intense adaptation process: student veteran interactions with the very traditional college culture and experience. Specifications regarding military status were included to isolate and examine recent adaptations to civilian and campus life.

The sample included 16 participants, which satisfied the popular recommendation in the qualitative methodology literature of at least 12 to 15 informants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Kvale, 1996). However, the sample size determination for this study focused more on attainment of saturation and inclusion of diverse

participants in order to achieve transferability (Merriam, 2009). General recommendations from the qualitative methodology literature provided various projections of ideal sample size and included the following guidelines for basic qualitative studies: 5 to 25 participants (Kvale, 1996) and a minimum of 6 to 12 interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Therefore, the sample met size recommendations for this methodology, included diverse participants, and led to saturation.

Processes for Interviews, Observations, and Transcription

Interviews were essential for the purpose of this research because one “cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88), and a direct and purposeful dialogue with another person is the optimal way to access personal data. In addition, interviews “yield in-depth responses about people’s experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge,” so they are a rich source of data for researchers (Patton, 2002, p. 4). Due to the depth to which interviews reveal human emotion and perspective, they can prompt and motivate action from readers (Patton, 2002). Each interview was approximately 1 hour in length and semistructured in nature, with a combination of structured and unstructured interview questions, which prioritized flexibility (Merriam, 2009). The open-ended nature of the interview questions allowed participants to present their world as they saw it (Patton, 2002).

The interviews were conducted in person in a private office environment on campus. I developed the structured interview protocol (Appendix E) that focused on behaviors, cognitive processes and personality, and environmental factors that played a

role in adaptation, but I was flexible in pursuing emerging topics that were relevant to the study questions (Merriam, 2009).

The interview structure was chosen in part to provide flexibility and direction. Efforts were made to assess questions for bias and quality, and rewording was used to improve access to data in alignment with planned data analysis. These efforts included having veterans external to the study and a dissertation committee review the interview questions (Merriam, 2009). Each interview was audio recorded, and interviewees chose a pseudonym or asked me to choose one for them. At the end of each interview, I conducted a member check, wherein I summarized key insights that I had gathered from the interview and solicited open, honest feedback and elaboration from the participant.

Lynn Riedesel of LR Transcripts, a professional transcriptionist who signed a nondisclosure agreement, transcribed all interview data verbatim from the tape-recorded files. The raw data of the interviews (direct quotations) were a rich source of information for addressing the research questions as they reflected each participant's "depth of emotion, the ways they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions" (Patton, 2002, p. 21) about adapting to the university environment as a veteran. I reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy and sent them to corresponding participants for additional verification. This process was an additional form of member check; I asked the participants to review the transcript for accuracy and allowed a space for the participant to offer feedback, clarifications, amendments, or additional responses.

I engaged in two observation experiences by attending two iterations of a university-run student veteran orientation as a participant observer. The documentation of these observations provided a different perspective on student veteran adaptation and supported the validity of the research by “testing one source of information against another to strip away alternative explanations” (Fetterman, 1998, p. 93). The observations led me to understand the complexity of the adaptation experience and to broaden perspectives gleaned from the interviews, or, as Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) stated, “The interaction of the two sources of data not only enriches them both, but also provides a basis for analysis that would be impossible with only one source” (p. 99). Colonel William Maples of SVSU’s Veteran Center arranged access to these orientations (one in August and one in January), which allowed me to see the adaptation process both from a traditional entry timeline and a midyear transition point. I attended the orientations as a participant, sat at the tables with student veteran attendees, and engaged in the resource table fairs as a participant. I was provided access to the discussions of breakout groups composed of spouses, significant others, and parents of the student veterans. Due to the intimate and vulnerable conversations in these sessions, I revealed my identity as a researcher. I requested and received their permission to sit in and engage in their conversations. I took copious field notes in a journal during and after the orientations, including detailed descriptions of behaviors, conversations, activities, and the environmental setting, and I transferred those notes to an observation protocol (Appendix F) directly following the experiences.

Data Analysis

The data consisted of transcribed interviews and field notes stored on a word processor. Once the transcripts had been finalized and approved, I unitized the interview data with the observation data. I printed each unit on a quarter sheet of color-coded paper to identify the pseudonym or observation experience. For the interview units, notations regarding race, marital status, age, and first-generation status were documented on the cards (Appendix G).

Throughout the data analysis phase, I implemented the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009); that is, I continually analyzed and compared data. I tested and repeatedly modified categories in order to move forward with the most representative perspective of the data. I categorized the data, identified multiple topical themes, and further refined the themes and subthemes in an effort to capture what I saw in the data (Patton, 2002). I systematically and concurrently engaged in the data collection and data analysis process, each of which informed the other (Merriam, 2009). The process of simultaneously collecting, coding, and refining themes informed what else was needed, who needed to be interviewed, what needed further observation, and when the point of saturation had been reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Specifically, I read through each card individually to determine in which pile of cards it fit best. I tentatively labeled that set of cards with an emerging theme—a phrase that represented that set of cards at that particular point in analysis. As the piles grew, I read through each pile and amended the phrasing of the category, merged piles, and removed cards to more appropriate piles that had emerged in the process. As I worked

through this process, I documented my thoughts reflexively in a journal. I also documented themes and subthemes to see the data from a holistic view. I labored over the phrasing of each theme and argued internally about where each card fit best. Categories emerged and were deleted as more data were analyzed. Throughout the process, the purpose was to identify unifying characteristics of the adaptation process, as well as cases that were exceptions or presented different viewpoints. This process was implemented in tandem with the data collection process, informing additional questions to participants. I strived to present the wide array of perspectives that participants presented and to identify themes or categories that emerged across the participant pool. This in-depth analysis resulted in the findings presented in Chapter IV.

Triangulation

In efforts to triangulate data (Erlandson et al., 1993), I engaged in a separate data collection process by observing student veterans during university-sanctioned orientations in August 2017 and in January 2018. This strengthened conclusions drawn from the data sources and added to the credibility of the findings by providing a rich and robust spectrum of data for triangulation (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Trustworthiness

Reflexive journaling was a component of the interviewing and data analysis processes, employed to establish trustworthiness (Erlandson et al., 1993). The journal not only served as part of the audit trail but was an outlet for formal summarization of ideas and developing themes (Erlandson et al., 1993). In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument through which all data are interpreted and analyzed

(Merriam, 2009). As the instrument, I sought to recognize the assumptions, influences, and worldview that were inherent in my approach and process (Merriam, 2009).

These often-overlooked qualities affect every step of the research process from the question to the interview protocol, even the manner in which the researcher processes, responds, and adapts to collected data. Even in instances when the instrument was not created by the researcher, no instrument is without flaws or bias; moreover, an advantage to being both the researcher and the instrument is the intimate understanding and ability to raise one's awareness of issues that may hinder or aid discovery, misdirect or cloud analysis, and influence purpose and rationale of decisions.

A good space in which to analyze these issues is the reflexive journal and consultation with a peer reviewer (Erlandson et al., 1993). The use of a reflexive journal was integral, especially as a way to reflect on emerging themes throughout the entire process. Peer reviewers were professors and colleagues who work with student veterans, are veterans, or are spouses of veterans. These peer reviewers were helpful in providing credibility to the analysis and conclusions, particularly in the data analysis stage. They were instrumental in debriefing the study's findings as interactions with them produced feedback regarding topics such as biases, clarity of findings, vague descriptions, and methodology.

I worked to establish trustworthiness of the research through the tenets of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I invested a significant amount of time in validating the data in the manner suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Member checks to verify the data from interviews were a

regular aspect of the process. Allowing participants to review their transcripts, provide feedback, or elaborate supported credibility (Erlandson et al., 1993). According to Merriam (2009), reality is multidimensional and ever changing, which was an important concept with such a diverse group of student veterans; their varied life experiences innately resulted in varied frames of reality. Their perceptions of the same experience varied significantly, and I attempted to reflect that diversity in the analysis and findings.

Researcher Perspective

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument of data collection. Thus, it was essential that I clarify and present my shortcomings, intentions, and biases in order to be transparent and demonstrate awareness and intention to monitor biases and address shortcomings. Such acknowledgment allows the audience to understand how the data were collected and analyzed through a constructivist lens—to understand my reality and truth as I interacted with the data and participants.

My intent was to capture a part of the veteran story that is sorely lacking in the literature. I saw these strong, motivated, resilient veterans demonstrating grit and perseverance to succeed and adapt on college campuses, but this story was not being told. I saw veterans actually reading the literature and being frustrated that their voice was not expressed, that they were not being represented. The literature focuses on challenges, barriers, and limitations. The focus is on the deficits, not the assets that veterans bring to the table. Thus, my motivation as a researcher was to understand how student veterans adapt and to represent the student veteran voice. My intention was not to devise yet another program in a very resource-limited environment. Instead, I chose to

look at student veterans' internal process of learning to adapt that might be utilized on various campuses.

As a classroom teacher with a master's degree in curriculum and instruction and a student affairs practitioner, I have a total of 12 years of experience in the field of education. I have seen students lose hope because they see learning as impossible. As an educator and an advocate for those who seek an education, I am passionate about helping students find success. I strongly believe that the perceived secrets of learning should be broadcast widely and shared with others to support their success.

The concepts of grit and resiliency took root from an early stage, prior to beginning this project, because as I researched, interviewed, observed, and worked with student veterans over the years, I wondered, "Why are some student veterans adapting and succeeding and others are not?" Intelligence, ability, and experience surely helped; however, in talking to veterans, their stories pointed to and gave life to the theoretical concepts of grit, resilience, and growth. As an educator, it was difficult to accept that some students would succeed and others would not, so I set out to discover how student veterans had learned to adapt in the hope that one day it could be taught to other veterans who were endeavoring to complete the same journey.

My interest in student veterans is rooted in both my family's involvement in the military and my own return to higher education after a professional hiatus. I sympathize with the experiences of many of the veterans whom I interviewed because they reflect the experiences of many members of my family and my own journey as an adult

graduate student adjusting to life on a college campus. I am passionate about student veterans because I see a need for further research and advocacy.

As a working mother and wife, I especially empathized with the participants who were balancing school, work, and family. I believe in the power of narrative and of advocating for marginalized voices. This was a major part of my motivation as a researcher. I felt compelled to share these voices and stories because I believe, perhaps with nascent idealism, that this work has the power to serve as a change agent. These narratives of resilience, perseverance, and strength should be shared broadly; not only can they inspire other student veterans, they can inspire people of various walks of life in facing challenging circumstances.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this research and its questions were restated in this chapter to demonstrate the suitability of the methodological choices made in this study. This chapter presented explanations of important research decisions, such as how the location and participants were selected. The process of data collection and analysis and the strategies for building trustworthiness were reviewed. The findings of the data analysis are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The goal of this study was to better understand the adaptation process for undergraduate student veterans at a large research-intensive public university in the southwestern United States. The study addressed the following as the central research question: *How do student veterans learn to adapt to the higher education environment?*

Three subquestions were also explored:

1. How does behavior play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?
2. How do cognitive processes and other personality characteristics play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?
3. How do environmental factors play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?

This chapter presents an in-depth description of the findings that addressed the research questions posed, as well as other findings that emerged. The chapter is divided into the following sections: (a) role of environmental factors in adaptation process, (b) role of cognitive processes and personality in adaptation process, (c) role of behavior in adaptation process, and (d) impediments to successful adaptation.

Role of Environmental Factors in Adaptation Process

Environment influenced both the challenges that the participants faced and the support that they received. The challenges reported by the veterans were those that are found in most literature. This section examines the environmental factors that supported a successful adaptation process for student veterans. Categories that emerged as

important environmental components included the following: (a) observation of both models and anti-models for learning; (b) a strong veteran community; (c) surrounding oneself with positive, motivated peers; (d) support from spouses, family, friends, and older adults; (e) connection to exemplary staff in veterans offices; (f) faculty and staff who offer resources, excellent education, support and mattering, mentorship, and respect; and (g) connecting with and appreciating traditional-age students. Figure 1 depicts the role of environment in the adaptation process of student veterans on college campuses.

Observation

Participants engaged in the environment by observing the setting, interactions, and the key players in the environment for cues and examples, both positive and negative, on how to adjust their behavior. For example, Raoul discussed how careful observation of the details in one's environment was an important source of information in guiding his adaptation: "Observation and situational awareness, being able to take in all the things that are around me. You know, if you miss out on the nuance of the little things, you don't have that information to go off of." Allen's broad-stroke observations of the student population informed his decision to become involved as he interpreted a cue that involvement was a valued behavior in the SVSU community: "Once I took that step back and looked at the environment because everybody is involved in something here So I feel that getting that connection and really inserting yourself into that is important."

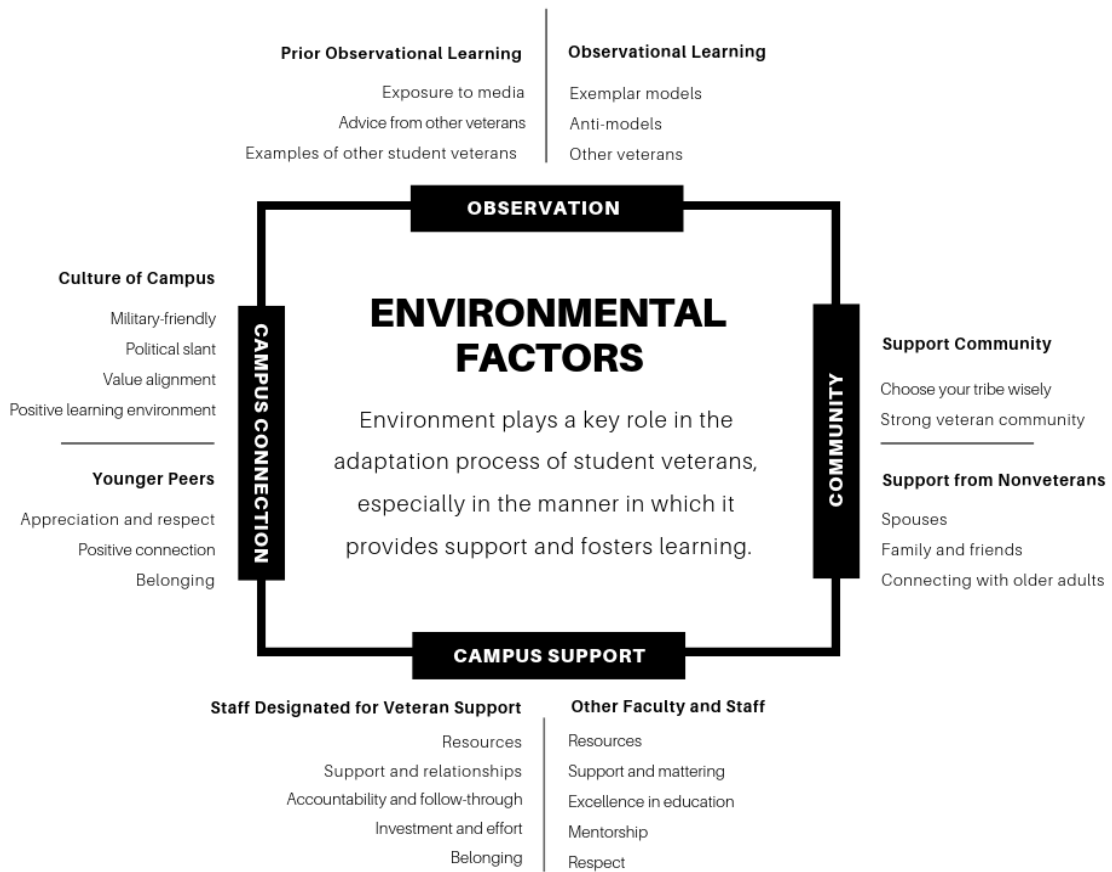


Figure 1. Environmental factors in the student veteran adaptation process.

Observation of exemplar models. Using observation of the general environment helped student veterans to adapt to the campus setting, but many veterans discussed specific observation of key models or anti-models that enhanced their adaptation process:

So I was very close to the president of that organization, so when I came into the organization, I shadowed every step he took. Not with the intent to take his position but to know everything he knew and to see every mistake he made, so

that I could adjust off of that in the future. . . . So there's a girl who is a student veteran who's in my major who is exactly one semester ahead of me She always hands me the notes from the previous semester. And so I've observed her, and to learn study habits. . . . I can use them as a resource. . . . What should I do? What should I not do? (Tom)

Travis used observation of others such as his military family, veteran roommates, and peers to inform his approach to adaptation, as well as a strategy learned from a noncommissioned officer in the Marine Corps under whom he served:

He said, "Look at your leaders. Look at the people around you. You should be able to pick out the things that people do that you like, and try and incorporate that in your own lifestyle, you know, how they're successful, and then look at their shortcomings." . . . You can see what they've done to be successful and what they're doing that is just detrimental. And I've kinda taken that approach.

Observation of anti-models. Mac's observation of anti-models motivated him to find success and informed him of destructive behaviors to avoid:

Talking to some of my friends that were veterans that got out and see what fell apart with them. . . . It always seemed to be that they lost interest or they got into the wrong degree plan . . . no commitment to their classes or school. . . . They looked at going to school as "I'm gonna graduate, and this \$80,000 career is gonna hit me. And the whole time have all this GI money and just party, party, party." It's disheartening. I wanna make sure I'm not one of those guys.

Greg's observation of anti-models led him to take a critical look at his own attitudes and behaviors to promote healthier adaptation:

The ones who failed to adapt, seeing their pitfalls helped me along the way

You see kind of like a mirror of yourself. You're like, "Well, if that's what I'm doing, it's not what I wanna be doing." You'll talk to vets, and they're just

"Screw all civilians" or whatever, and "They don't understand," and they wanna hang on to certain stuff. And just seeing that, you know, helped me realize,

"Okay, I need to be conscious. I need to be aware that I'm not being that guy."

Eric pointed to an example of success—a friend whom he considered had successfully adapted because "he left the military behind him, and . . . he's just kinda successful." He shared that more prevalent was his observation of anti-models that showed him "what [he] didn't wanna do, where [he] didn't wanna be at, what [he] didn't want to find [himself] doing a couple years from now."

Observation of media. Observations from the media created expectations for the college environment and set a low standard for veterans. Mac recognized how the media skewed his perception and created a knowledge gap between civilians and veterans:

I was thinking it was gonna be high school plus some . . . like Monster's

University Some general population may say what they know about the

military from the movies. It's kinda the same for veterans knowing what they do about college, because we have no idea until we get there.

Travis explained how his observations of how the media portrays veterans versus military members affected his and other veterans' adaptation and identity:

The problem is, honestly, I see a lot of times, is military members are idolized in Hollywood movies, television, film, the news, everything, they are held up to such a high standard. But then think about when you watch a TV show that has a veteran in it, how are they portrayed? Alcoholics, PTSD [post traumatic syndrome disorder], you know, snapping, gun fanatics, racists, hate Muslim people. And it's not inspiring . . . it kinda pisses me off when I watch that stuff, like that's not me. That's the perception a lot of veterans have when they get out. They kinda watch that, and it's like, "Well, if this is what they're thinking all veterans are like" . . . you kind of absorb that mentality. . . . You have to realize and you have to separate yourself from the fictions that are put out there, or the personas, and prove people wrong.

Other Veterans

Connecting with other veterans is a key system of support in the transition from a military environment to a university environment for most student veterans. The students in this study found the veteran support system, whether within the SVSU community or from their military buddies across the world, to be an important environmental resource in their adaptation.

Veteran community. The presence of a strong veteran community was a valuable source of support in their adjustment. Travis shared the importance of the veteran community when he separated from the military and when he started at SVSU, not only for becoming connected but also for processing and finding peace with other veterans about one's service:

Finding similarities between deployments, you know, maybe trying to one-up your buddy. . . . So it's one of the things that doing that really helped come to terms with everything you'd just done . . . and then when I came here, the first thing I did was I got tapped in with the veteran network out here.

For Ryan, the veteran community helped to smooth the bumps of transition as it provided an informal orientation of key aspects of the environment: "If I have issues with my VA, with my disability payment, or with my educational payments, my BAH, all that, I know where to go on campus because . . . somebody literally took me, walked me over there." Logan expressed a similar appreciation for the veterans who "took [him] under their wing at first and showed [him] around the town and stuff . . . the best grocery store, you know, this and that, and just getting to meet people." Tia's veteran community was her "small circle of military buddies" with whom she stayed in touch regularly. This community was her support system because they "push[ed] each other to keep going." Greg also utilized military buddies as his key support system for processing and finding ways to succeed in the role of civilian, even outside of the immediate campus setting:

For my friend that I served with, we just talk back and forth and exchange opinions like, "Hey, here's something that happened to me today." Or he tells me the same, and he's like, "Hey, what should I have done?" And I'll give my opinion, and I'll do the same with him.

Advice from other veterans. Other veterans were key sources not only of support but also of wisdom, advice, or insight into the adaptation process. Logan identified an array of people who offered support or advice, such as "people who have

already done this transition, with officers in the military who were enlisted first. . . . Anybody [he] could reach to, other veterans [he] knew” and he created a “kind of network and got some feelers out before [he] actually went.” However, Logan cautioned that he had to find a way to integrate and synthesize that advice while seeking what worked for him as an individual: “I kinda have to do my own thing and realize that there’s just little pieces of everybody’s techniques that I can use.” Ryan pointed to an older veteran with whom he had worked who was key in helping him to find ways to cope in his adjustment to the civilian setting:

He always had to pull me in, anytime he saw me getting upset and frustrated. He kinda pulled me to the side and reminded me that, you know, calmly in a language that I can understand. . . . He kinda was the words of wisdom, if you will . . . he kept me in check. He’s the one that kind of helped me because he had already gone through a lot of the adjustment process himself.

Like Logan, other participants shared advice that ranged from sage to simplifying to practical that they had received from other veterans and had found beneficial in their transition. For example, they advised, “You have to treat your student life as though it were a full-time job” (Raoul), “I just paid attention, man. Nothing, no crazy formula for this” (Mac), and “the importance of office hours and talking to your professors and making sure they know you” (Tia).

Not connecting with other veterans. Despite describing the veteran community at SVSU as clearly positive, strong, and supportive, several of the veterans shared that they did not connect or spend much time with other veterans at SVSU. Some, such as

Mac and Logan, were married with children; others had a significant other or spouse and were very driven academically, such as Tia and Chris. Still others did not interact much due to their major not having many veterans like Bob, and Carolina did not feel comfortable or welcomed in the veteran community as a female veteran. Mac did not express any negative feelings about not connecting to the veteran community. He seemed to know that the positive community was available but he did not seem to need it:

I don't really take too much advice from fellow veterans. Not that they're bad people or anything, but everyone's got their own situation. And when I'm here in school, every minute counts. I'm always on the clock. I gotta get out of class, go back to work, and sometimes come back to class, go back to work, and stuff like that . . . As for the other veterans, they're nice guys, but I never clicked with them.

Tia shared that her support network was outside of the SVSU veteran community, mainly as a result of busy schedules and various responsibilities: "But for my support network, I really don't have it here. I mean, yes, there's veterans, but you know, they have their own lives and families and situations, and they're in school, too."

Choose Your Tribe

The veterans in this study articulated an understanding of how their environment had influenced them, but they also acted on their environment by making choices of those with whom they surrounded themselves who would support their goals and success. Raoul, Tia, Chris, Tom, Travis, Rudy, and Logan emphasized the importance of

their choice of friends because those friends influenced their success. Raoul, Tia, Chris, and Tom were driven achievers who sought an elite group who pushed them, were aligned with their goal-oriented paths, and understood the powerful influence of peers:

If you hang out with five millionaires, you're gonna be the sixth. If you hang out with five runners, you're gonna be the sixth. But if you hang out with five negative people or five idiots, you're gonna be the sixth. So with that, I had to cut some people off . . . I had to remove myself from social settings of people who don't wanna thrive. Like it's contagious. (Tia)

Chris knew that he needed to select his peers wisely. He pointed to intentionality in his social setting as key to his adaptation and perseverance:

I was used to being around a bunch of A-type personalities, you know, people who wanted to be successful. And just because you're going to college doesn't mean you necessarily have that drive. . . . So I needed to take myself out of an environment and surround myself with people of like minds. That actually includes some of the veterans as well That kind of negative atmosphere I didn't need to be around, as well as students who didn't really want to learn. . . . Everyone I interact with, generally speaking, they have a goal for the future, and ambitions they are striving for. And that has helped me, because again, you're generally the average of the five people you spend the most of your time around.

Raoul was very strategic in creating his social circle, as well as recognizing that he was motivated by being a part of elite groups whose members pushed each other to greater heights of achievement:

I think being very purposeful about the connections that I sought out initially, and kinda surrounding myself with those people who had the same drive and interest that I did, helped a lot If you surround yourself with professionals, you are going to do better at whatever your endeavor. . . . And so to try and surround myself with that same kinda situation here academically, yeah, that has made the difference It pushes you higher.

These veterans recognized the power of their social setting to harm or help, and, like Tia and Chris, they did not hesitate to make necessary changes to ensure their successful adaptation, even when that was not an easy decision:

And so with some of my veterans groups, I'm starting to get away from them because they don't want to change the behavior that's gonna change the perception that's gonna change the reality, and don't understand that It is a true story about association. If you consistently associate yourself with the negative crowd, regardless of the fact that they're veterans, then your mind frame is gonna be there. And I've found myself doing that at times, and I had to stop and like yank myself out of that I'll try to help them, but if I'm constantly helping them and they're constantly pulling me in this direction, then I have to cut them loose. . . . I'm not going to hold your hand. I'm not going to carry your backpack. Same thing as we did in the military, you know, nobody carries each other's pack. (Rudy)

Travis echoed this sentiment and emphasized that environment is not a given, set entity that one must accept; people have the power to choose and power to change:

But everybody has the ability to change their environment and change the people that they are hanging out with It's about who you hang out with because, if you're just hanging out with people that are just whining and complaining and just everything is a problem to them, you're not going to succeed, you're not going to go far because you're gonna get sucked into that.

Support From Nonveterans

Many of the participants identified that key sources of support in the college environment were support systems that were already in place before the transition: spouses, family, and friends. However, some shared that they had connected with older nonveteran adults in the community as important connections and relationships, as well.

Spouses. Many of the participants noted that their significant others were very supportive of them, making sacrifices and dealing with hardships that came with being the partner of a student veteran. Several of the spouses had been students or were taking classes at the same time, so those spouses were noted as providing a source of understanding of the experience. However, the spouses also knew when to prod the student veterans: "So fortunately, my husband is in school too, so he understands He's like, 'Babe, don't you think you should study?'" (Tia). Mac's wife was not only a valuable motivator; due to her college degree and experience as a resident advisor, she provided a wealth of knowledge about the college experience that Mac needed but did not have:

She's super helpful, she's got her degree too, so she knows kinda how it is. . . . I really depended on my wife, she's gonna be there for every semester. . . . She

was even a resident advisor for a while, too, when she was in school. She can explain to me kind of maybe why the other students act this way or what's going on. . . . So, she's probably the one I leaned on the most in all of this.

Rudy felt supported by his wife and stated that they were an effective team because she managed the many responsibilities of family and home, allowing him to focus on providing financially and on school:

I think that's what helps with us being married is, I delegate, and that's something we learned in the military, but you know, I take responsibility for everything. . . . And my wife understands basically our division of labor, who's responsible for what, and then, "This is your area of responsibility," military terms. . . . So probably the biggest asset to my adjustment is my wife. . . . I supply the logistics with the fuel, and she takes care of it and that operation, and I take care of the frontline stuff of school, because that is the mission right now. And we're together on that mission. Our mission here is for me to graduate.

Family and friends. Many of the participants reported that family and friends were important sources of support. They described how family and friends provided both emotional and financial resources through the transition. Susan had moved back initially to be near her family as she "worked on some things" and Raoul moved in with his mother initially, which provided "one less thing I had to worry about." For Carolina and for others, family was not only a support but motivation:

My mother and my children, they showed an interest in what I was doing, and they asked me questions. And sometimes they would they would ask to just sit

while I studied. My kids still do that. Even though I can't spend time with them, they sit on my back as I study, and sometimes they'll ask me questions, and they make me engage in the material more.

Travis's father not only provided an understanding of his military experience, but together, his parents were his steady and unconditional love, motivation, and support:

So still staying in that sort of military family, you know, I hadn't really lost those bonds. . . . He was my biggest fan, biggest cheerleader They've been the most supportive parents in the world. I mean, they do everything . . . you know, whether it's before I joined the military, during the military, and after, all three of those phases, my parents have been invaluable.

Bob's unconditional support came from high school friends in his hometown:

They kept in touch with me through the Navy. Even during my time at [community college], we hung out a lot, and I still hang out with them now. . . . So that's something that's definitely been helpful . . . just that understanding that, even if it all falls through, at least I have somewhere to go—acceptance there.

Connecting with older adults. The ability to interact with “more mature people” and “have real conversations” was a valuable source of support that participants found in older adults (Travis). Mac found that interaction with professors and advisors was important, but he also found that his part-time job was a place of mature relationships, which were vital for his sanity and thriving:

I always kept my job . . . that was my solace place, that was my friends, my adult conversation I would have. . . . And a lot of the guys that work there were

veterans or just older guys, and that was my spot to go and complain, I guess you could say, to talk and have my I'm not trying to say anything negative to undergrads, but my adult conversation . . . was actually pretty important. Like my boss, [name of boss], he's not a veteran, which isn't bad, but he probably understands more probably about what I'm doing than a lot of guys.

Chris echoed Mac in the value of conversation with older adults for his sanity, which he found both in his job on campus and in friendships with staff members and their spouses:

So having a nice adult conversation with adults has been . . . it's a little thing, but I think it plays a big role in just my sanity and mitigating my stress levels and stuff, just having that human relationship. I also work here on campus at the clinic, and the physicians and all the nursing staff are great people. So working with them and just taking a break from school . . . they are essentially in the same area where I'm at in life, and so having those relationships has been great.

Support From Veterans Office Staff

The participants expressed great respect and trust for the staff who worked in the veterans support office and the veterans services office. There were frequent stories about how the staff in those offices went above and beyond to help student veterans to be admitted, find the right major, keep on track, or connect with opportunities.

Veterans resource office and Colonel Maples. Mac credited the staff of the veterans support office for being at SVSU:

This experience was better than it could've been because the [veterans resource office] here was kind of there to help me out, like the colonel and [Kristie

Cuellar], they actually were in touch with me before I even got here. . . . I keep saying [Kristie Cuellar] and Colonel [Maples] because of those guys. Man, I don't even know if I'd be here. . . . But it was definitely those two guys.

Travis shared that he appreciated the follow-through by the office staff: "It's the follow-through . . . they're not afraid to call you up like 'Hey, did you do this yet? Did you call this person? Hey, what are you doing? Did you sign up for your classes?' They'll follow up with you." Susan shared many stories of when the staff of the veterans resource office had intervened with a student who was struggling: "The Colonel will pull them in here and go, 'What the F? What's going on? You gotta get your act together.'" She had witnessed the deep investment in the success of each student that the staff had for student veterans:

Oh, it's balloons and fireworks going off, that's huge . . . for the Colonel to be able to see us graduate and have that job already planned, or already in tow . . . that's huge. . . . That's the stuff he fights to get the money to make this go better.

Susan explained that the office was vital in the transition for veterans because "there is no training," so the office and its wide array of resources and guidance, such as their veteran-specific orientation, mentor program, and connection to other resources such as Warrior Scholar Project, scholarships, and more, were essential to adapting successfully.

Tia found the office to be a wealth of information and opportunities:

The [veterans resource office] was the most helpful to me. . . . They were all accepting with me in just giving me the information of what to do, how to do, if I need anything, call. Colonel [Maples] helped me to get my [college ring].

Chris also saw value in the way that the veterans resource office was led: “[Colonel Maples] has been really helpful, too. He’s obviously looking out for all the veterans all the time. He’s always trying to make things work for people.” Allen described the office as “hands down one of the most useful resources” and was in awe of the way the office staff “go above and beyond” and “take that extra step” for him, “a random knucklehead student.”

Kristie Cuellar and Kristie Linney. While many staff and faculty members were influential resources of support in the campus community, two names were shared frequently as the most instrumental and vital systems of support on campus—Kristie Cuellar and Kristie Linney. The participants described their advising styles as a bit of sugar (Kristie Linney) and spice (Kristie Cuellar), but the admiration and deep love for these staff members was undeniable:

Things I found successful was obviously the [Kristies]. . . . Yeah, [Kristie Cuellar]’s not afraid to get on your ass if you’re being stupid. She is just an amazing woman. And then [Kristie Linney] is kinda like, you know, sugar and spice, where [Kristie Linney] is just so loving, she’s very motherly, very “Here, let me help you.” And then [Kristie Cuellar] is, like “What the hell are you doing?” (Travis)

These two women were described with great reverence and appreciation for their help in the admission process and beyond, whether it was making the admissions process much more smooth as they did with Raoul, setting up a meeting with a dean, as they did with Susan, or being the one positive source of support on campus as they were for David:

The [Kristies]. Mine was [Kristie Linney]. She's been kind like one of my best friends. She acts like my mom. She's always real nice to me They just have that comforting feel where you can just . . . sometimes, I just go to say hi, just talk to her. She's a good old lady. Oh man, she went completely . . . I failed out of college my first time, and I came back, and she was the first lady I talked to.

And she was just so completely blunt with me, and I really appreciated that.

Logan described Kristie Linney as “a fairy godmother” who “sealed the deal” in his choice of school because of the supportive environment that she provided. Chris described both Kristies as the veterans’ “other mothers,” with whom he visited frequently to “catch them up on what’s going on in [his] life” and served as “a monumental factor of [him] getting into [SVSU].” Allen praised Kristie Linney’s tireless effort to serve and support student veterans:

Anytime I need anything, she’s there, she helps, and she’s the most useful person I’ve seen at this college basically. And I know she works day and night trying to get veterans to get into the college and also just help them as they’re here.

Veterans finance office and Shelby Langford. Support in areas of stress and confusion like financial circumstances was important, especially from competent and kind staff who made the complicated easy and the hopeless possible. The participants appreciated the support that they received from the veterans finance office, an office that not only served as a resource of information but also helped with complex financial processes and dire financial straits: “They were great. They managed to find grants and stuff that I wasn’t previously aware existed” (Bob).

While the office was described as a valuable and helpful entity on campus, it was the repeated and specific name of Shelby Langford that rose to prominence as their go-to staff member: “Miss [Shelby] is super awesome, I mean, just talk to them and they’ll take care of the stuff. Even if I had the dumbest questions, they would still help me” (Mac). The participants also emphasized peace of mind from knowing that their financial questions and processes were being handled by someone like Shelby Langford: “Obviously, [Shelby] helping me with all my benefits and stuff, that was beneficial. Not having to worry about that, trusting her that she’s gonna get all that stuff. And she performs above and beyond all the time” (Chris).

Support From Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff served as important resources and support outside of the veterans offices, which was important for their continued adaptation. Seeking the valuable resources that faculty and staff could provide in office hours, reaping the benefits of excellent educators who helped them to learn the material, experiencing support and mattering in areas across campus, and engaging in mentoring relationships with faculty and staff were aspects of their environment that aided in their adaptation.

Resourceful faculty and staff. Mac, Carolina, and Greg shared that faculty and staff served as important resources in their adaptation. Office hours were emphasized as helpful and important in adaptation because of available resources. Carolina and Greg both appreciated advice from professors. Carolina specifically valued those who had an “enthusiasm to meet and talk about anything and everything” and those with whom she could discuss her challenges and “they would parallel [her] to other veterans they knew”

sharing “how they dealt with the situation.” Greg articulated particular gratitude for professors who were veterans or who had taught veterans because they had helpful advice and demonstrated an attitude that “understood you were in a different place necessarily than your normal college students.” Mac valued faculty and staff who took the time to answer his questions. He expressed a special recognition for the role of his academic advisors in adaptation:

To ask questions, that was the hardest thing for a veteran to do. . . . I would send emails at weird times, and [his academic advisor] would always answer them, at night, weekends I don’t know if it’s forgotten but I think for veterans how important the advisors are. Because we always think of like the [veterans resource office] as like our first to go to. But within our schools, we have these great advisors, too, that help veterans and regular undergrad students that are super immense.

Excellent educators. The participants appreciated the professors who made an effort in their instruction. However, their articulation of this appreciation made it appear that these professors were the exception rather the rule for many:

A few really awesome professors who, even though their primary thing for most of them is research and grant proposals and that sort of thing, there’s still a few that know that where 70% of their paycheck is coming from, they know that, but they still value that last 30% and understand that the students do value the instruction and things like office hours. (Bob)

Mac stayed after class and found that teaching assistants would “give you tips of how to learn the stuff . . . or even maybe why we’re even doing this,” which stimulated his motivation because they were able to connect it to his future. Allen listed several professors who had made a difference in his life and adaptation to SVSU because they took “that extra step.” Allen echoed the rarity of these kind of professors: “Because every other class I’ve had outside of those people I’ve named, it’s just they read their slides, and they’re done.”

Support and mattering. Logan expressed a need for support, mattering, and feeling known in the academic environment, and he valued professors who provided that environment:

I like to feel like people care about each other and want people to succeed

Teachers do make an attempt to know you, especially if you sit in the front. And

I think most of the teachers generally do care if you succeed or not The

biggest thing is just support . . . someone who takes pride in your success and encourages you through failure.

Susan found support in the classroom as she had “established some fantastic relationships with some of my professors” with whom she felt comfortable enough to “go to them with issues, no matter what it is.” Mac’s academic advisor cared about his success and made him feel comfortable enough that Mac could have vulnerable and difficult dialogue about his direction and challenges:

I sent him an email saying I dropped classes, and he was smart enough or been doing it long enough to kinda ask like, “Can I ask you why, like why do you wanna do this?” And I was like blah, blah, opened up to him and he set me down. This conversation and relationship allowed Mac to find a more aligned and purposeful direction for his life. The value of good support staff was emphasized by the participants: “Whenever you have a good support staff, it’s kinda like you have a home base that you can go to when shit starts hitting the fan” (Travis).

Mentorship. For some of the participants, professors played a more critical and personal role in their adaptation as mentors. Carolina’s mentors shared their connections, discussed shared passions, shared stories that instilled pride and belonging to the institution, and set her up to engage with research at the university. Tom said that his professors pushed him and provided direction for his career path:

Professors really started pushing me. . . . And I can tell you, had it not been for their push and their words, I would probably still kinda be in that drifting phase. Had I never interacted with them, I don’t think I would have the drive. I don’t think I would’ve adapted to really know what I wanna do right now.

Allen’s mentors connected him with important networks and resources, supported him through a divorce, and grounded him through his adaptation: “I was in [professor’s] class when my divorce started, and he’s who I reached out to. I was like, ‘I don’t know what’s going on.’” And from there, he helped me out, helped me get inserted into the culture.”

Respect. Besides being supportive and offering resources, academic assistance, and mentoring, another helpful yet fundamental quality that veterans acknowledged was a need for respect. Some of the respect that participants particularly noted was being seen for who they were as individuals, both in seeing them as veterans who were not 18 years old but who had life experiences, and sometimes seeing beyond the stereotypes of veteran identity and not expecting them to have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Susan expressed her appreciation for respect and understanding for her unique and individual needs in her transition:

I would tell my professors, not as an excuse, but “I’m doing this brand new,” and they all knew, they could tell I was much older. And it was like I’m coming from a whole other world. “I’m gonna need some extra guidance, some extra help,” and they would sit down with me, and I could ask them questions. And they’d give me the extra one-on-one if I needed it. And they respected the experience and the age, I think, too, for the most part. But it was a two-way street. I still had to respect them as my teacher, even though I was older than some of them.

Travis valued people who treated him as a unique individual rather than inaccurately grouping him:

They didn’t treat you like you’re on edge, like you’re about to explode. . . . All they hear on the news is that all veterans have PTSD. And as soon as they hear I was deployed, they think, “You have like PTSD and are about to friggin snap.” Having that good support network, some people that know how to handle veterans.

Traditional-Age Students

Although adjusting to the younger peer population remains a key hurdle to surmount in the transition process, the participants articulated that, in some ways, the student population at SVSU actually helped their adaptation process. They were able to create positive connections with them and join student organizations that created a sense of belonging. The culture of the campus population in its politically conservative slant and military-friendly demeanor also served as important assets in the environmental experience for adapting student veterans.

Appreciation of younger peers. When the participants were further along in their adaptation process, some began to engage with traditional-age peers. As they engaged with the students at SVSU, many earned their respect in myriad ways. Travis said that “the student body here just, it really did help” because he began to see that “there’s a lot of good kids . . . and they all have a background and a story about how they got to this university.” Allen shared a story of a traditional-age peer whom he respected for his courage. He explained that “there are people that have qualities that are worth knowing about. It’s just you gotta find the right community that has those people.” Some of the respect and improved relationships were fostered when the veterans suspended their expectations and engaged with peers as individuals: “Some of them are super mature for their age, too. I’ve been super impressed by that. I didn’t expect it when I got here.”

Travis and Eric were impressed with the higher caliber of students at SVSU compared to their community or junior college experience. The motivated students

created an environmental quality that supported successful adaptation. They found that their peers “wanna be here . . . actually want an education . . . they want to succeed, they wanna get their degree” (Travis). Eric felt “happier [at SVSU] because you have more dedicated students here . . . it’s uncommon to find a student that doesn’t really care . . . students are like smarter than you.” Rudy intentionally sought interactions with younger peers to learn more about them because “one of the reasons I came to college was for the very uncomfortable thing of working with young people. Because regardless, once we leave here, we’re gonna go work together, and I want to be in charge of these guys.” Travis and Mac both valued the resources that their younger peers provided, whether it was that “they know something that I don’t know, or they’re able to . . . see the world from a completely different lens” (Travis) or how they could provide “information . . . different leads of different opportunities for employment . . . internships” (Mac).

However, those resources were available only when the veterans reached out and connected to peers; otherwise, they would have “no idea [the resources] existed, had I not talked to this guy next to me” (Mac). Greg articulated an appreciation of his younger peers because his adaptation took a positive turn when he engaged and integrated with the people in his environment who showed him how to thrive: “Integrating with those millennials or integrating with the people in my environment, that’s what . . . they essentially taught me how to succeed again, whether they realized it or not, they taught me how to.”

Connecting with younger peers. Many of the participants shared stories of their connection to peers, whether that connection was in shared networks through the

military service of family and friends (Travis) or making friends through various classes, jobs, research labs, and internships (Bob). Those who made those connections found them to be “a good pal . . . an awesome guy . . . a good ally” (Bob) and “mature . . . a good support” (Tia). Susan shared that she found that, although she spent much time serving the veterans on campus, her support network were civilian, traditional-age peers in her major:

The nonmilitary group in [major] . . . they’re not as partying as a lot of the 18- to 21-year-olds, and I think that’s helped. And they’re very focused. . . . So I’ve got a hodgepodge of group there that I know that I can go to for different things, which is helpful. And then I just took them under my wings and kicked their butts anyway!

Mac was surprised by the connections he had made with younger peers:

But the rest of the student body, the one I thought was like gonna be against me . . . they’re the ones that actually I talk to the most, they’re the ones that are the most open-minded . . . they’re the guys that are more here to learn . . . and I would say that would be a change in me. Because I thought the complete opposite was going to happen.

Mac’s connections were forged when he began to see admirable qualities in his peers and related to them:

I met a lot of undergrads that were just a kid from a small town just like me 10 years back that I really connected to, the ones I had for lab, the ones I had for

lecture . . . they were honest, genuine people. And I never thought that was gonna happen. . . . But that definitely changed for me.

Joining an organization gave many of the participants a sense of belonging or purpose on campus and helped them to adjust to campus life. Travis connected with his peers to establish a sense of camaraderie: “Joining a fraternity was the best thing I could’ve done because you had that brotherhood, that closeness.” Susan said that joining an organization helped in her adaptation: “Getting involved in things helps some. . . . I have found a little posse of other students. Mentor some, lead some, but follow some, too, because there are some things that those guys know that I have no clue on.”

Culture of campus. The culture of the SVSU campus was a major factor in making the adaptation process easier for the participants. An environmental component that supported their adaptation was a population that was accepting and sensitive to the veteran experience, who did not ask questions such as, “Were you ever deployed? Did you kill anybody?” (Travis). The campus was veteran friendly in its orientation and its abundant resources: “more of a military-friendly state . . . you get more help and more support, and there’s more resources and guidance . . . the job opportunities, like I just got a [large dollar amount] scholarship because I’m a veteran” (Tia). The culture of the campus included “a lot of tradition and overlap with military tradition” that made the experience “super veteran friendly” (Logan) and the university’s “ideals are very closely related to the Marine Corps ideals” (Rudy). The alignment of values eased the transition greatly:

The community here, which is one the biggest reasons I came to this school, is you have the core values at [SVSU], and really that aligns very closely with how the military runs and how they treat everybody. So I feel like adjusting here was much easier than the community college. (Allen)

The political slant and military tradition of the student body and community also made the transition easier:

I mean, this is a very conservative school. . . . And we have a military mindset here in many ways, and I think that helps because I can see that pride in the flag, I can see that pride in the marching, you know. I see what those guys and ladies want to do in the future, some of them. (Susan)

The familiarity of being around military culture was comforting in their transition:

When I came back to [SVSU], and I joined the [ROTC program], and I got around all the other veterans again, it felt like a huge weight off my shoulders, because I could go back to what I knew best, you know what I mean? I can go back to training soldiers, or in this case [ROTC members]. I could go back to speaking with a language that I know. And the [ROTC program] is not the military . . . but it's a familiar environment, you know what I mean? (Ryan)

Other environmental factors that the participants found favorable in their adaptation process were how friendly the campus and community was: "The people are friendly in [current state], as stupid as it sounds, people are friendly. In [previous state], everybody is standoffish" (Allen). Logan valued a few environmental aspects of SVSU, such as smaller class sizes and a more deemphasized party culture than he had expected.

He especially valued the way “there’s like way more of like a family atmosphere.” Eric and Ryan both articulated the benefit of accountability in the campus culture for their peers and for themselves. The accountability of his peers was a positive change from the community college from which Eric had transferred:

It makes things less frustrating. At [community college], you’d come across some motherfuckers that were just like we had one kid straight up cheating on a physics test. I’m like, “Dude! This test is friggin’ easy, and you’re cheating on it?” That’s frustrating. . . . That’s one of the reasons why I love [SVSU] with the [college]. It’s like there’s hardly any leniency. There’s just like, you either get it right or you get it wrong. And if you’re gonna talk, you better know what you’re talking about.

However, Ryan appreciated the accountability that he found in the community for himself:

It was that sense of accountability . . . that’s when the light bulb went off, like I need to stop drinking so much, I need to start working out again. And ever since I did that, my life has been so much better. Like hey, I’m an adult. I really need to focus on college. . . . I know that I can’t skip class because I’m accountable to the other guys in my [ROTC group]. I can’t skimp on PT because I’m accountable. But not only that, with everything I have on my uniform and the tattoos on my arm and all that stuff, people know what unit and what background I come from, and I don’t wanna set a bad example. It’s a sense of accountability. That familiar

environment really did set me up for success. It's an environment that I work good in, it's an environment that I know.

Significance of Environment

Environment played a key role in adaptation by the participants, especially in the manner in which it provided support and fostered learning. Significant environmental components included the following: observation of models and anti-models for learning; a strong veteran community; a positive, motivated social group; support from spouses, family, friends, and older adults; exemplary staff in the veterans offices; faculty and staff that offered resources; excellent education; support and mattering; mentorship; respect; and connection to and appreciation of traditional-age students. Environment is the factor by which student veterans can demonstrate the greatest discretion by considering which campus environment will best prepare them for success. Institutions who serve student veterans should consider these factors when determining how to invest funds in programs to support student veteran success. These factors were the context in which student veterans could be stimulated to engage in cognitive processes or behaviors that would lead to their successful adaptation. Discussion of the findings of the role of the environmental factors occurs at greater length in Chapter V.

Role of Cognitive Processes and Personality in Adaptation Process

Student veterans' cognitive processes and personality traits, which an outsider cannot always distinguish in cursory review, are the primary differentiators of successful adaptation. Student veterans can enter the same environment with the same challenges and resources, but it is the cognitive processes that occur and one's personality factors,

together with environmental factors, that spur a change in behavior and eventual adaptation. The following four categories emerged as important *cognitive processes* for adapting successfully: (a) motivation, (b) self-discovery, (c) reflection, and (d) acceptance. The following four categories emerged as significant *personality factors* in the adaptation process: (a) confidence, (b) openness, (c) view of work, and (b) desire to succeed. Figure 2 shows the role of cognitive processes and personality in student veterans' adaptation to college campuses.

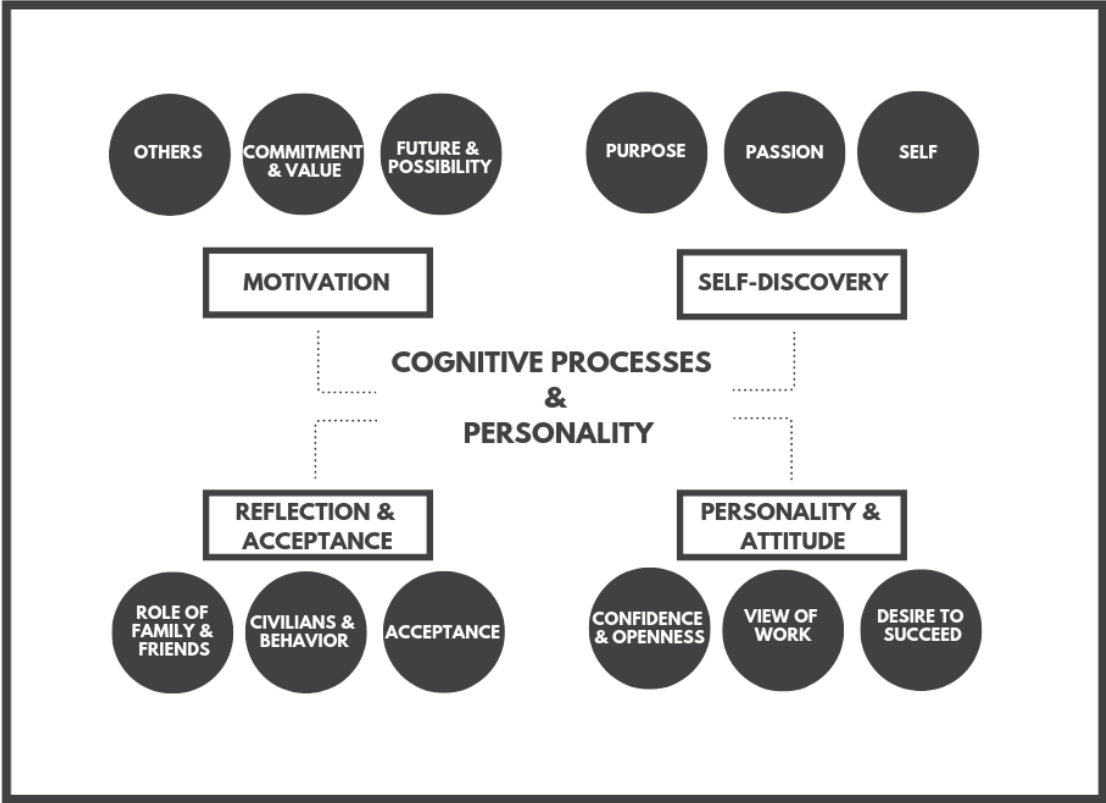


Figure 2. Cognitive processes and personality factors in student veteran adaptation.

Defining Success

Many of the veterans defined successful adaptation in terms of cognitive processes and personality. The participants described successful adaptation and the distinguishing factors for successful adaptation as possessing an agentic perspective, self-knowledge, motivation, and a positive content attitude. A healthy attitude of agency was cited by many veterans as key to success:

Success is honestly someone who's at peace with themselves and able to enjoy life and knows what they want in life, accepts their shortcomings, but still finds a way to make things work. . . . So I think success is just a person who's able to live a fulfilled life and isn't afraid of who they are or what has happened to them in the past and doesn't blame that as to their failures. (Travis)

Their discipline and perseverance led them to have a confident, agentic attitude: "I think it is the transformation of discipline into perseverance. I think when you stand tall and walk through campus, and knowing that you can take on the next challenge. I think that means that they got it" (Bob). Logan demonstrated this agentic confidence:

As far as hindrances, I try not to focus on anything like that. If it's not helping, either I try to change it, or I guess deny. So I can't really think of anything that I feel like really held me back.

For Eric, it was a combination of motivation, capitalizing on a valuable opportunity, and hard work that set him up for success:

Combine that with the fact that I had the GI Bill, it's like, okay, you have an opportunity to go to school right now. And you have damn good motivation, like

you have a reason to go. And then the hard work, those three put together kind of led me to I guess what you would consider success.

Ryan pointed to using “a lot of positive attitude” to get through, and Bob gave specific examples of how he harnessed the power of a positive outlook to adapt to the demands or frustrations of the classroom. Bob had others who encouraged him to keep a positive attitude when he experienced academic setbacks: “Definitely, there was a lot of tutor labs where they were like, “Don’t let it get you down. You got this.” And I was like, “Heck, yeah!”

Being content and seeking happiness helped to alter adaptive behaviors in positive ways. Travis adapted by being content and accepting his circumstances as he sought to “make the most of it.” Bob also demonstrated an attitude of peaceful contentment with his circumstances:

I’m at the great crossroads of life right now. I’m happy with wherever it goes. If I get a job in the industry, I’ll take it. If I get accepted to grad school for research, I’ll gladly do it. And I’m happy with both.

Cognitive Processes

Motivation, self-discovery, reflection, and acceptance were important cognitive processes that allowed the participants to enact adaptive behaviors to succeed. The most significant aspect of the following categories was that these were internal and unseen processes that allowed for change, for learning, and for adaptation. Motivation allowed for perseverance and resilience. Self-discovery allowed them to both find a purpose or direction and to embrace an identity beyond their veteran construct. Reflection allowed

for learning and change to occur. Acceptance allowed them to move past the frustration or emotional response to move toward reflective thinking and change. Each of these cognitive processes had significant impact on the adaptation and success of the participants.

Motivation. The motivation of the participants was often an intrinsic drive that gave them the will power to persevere or make the difficult adjustments necessary to thrive. This was a distinctly internal cognitive process that resulted in behavior, but it could be found only within the individual:

Finding that motivation is the . . . finding a way to turn that motivation on.

There's only one way that it can be done, and that's within that person. . . . We

used to say this a lot too, "I can show you how to do it, I can teach you how to do it, but I can't do it for you," right? So you have to do it. (Rudy)

Rudy argued that intrinsic motivation was vital not just in the success of student veterans but in the success of others as well:

If you don't have it in your heart and mindset while you're here, you're more likely to fail no matter who you are, veteran or not. . . . I never played college sports, but I've heard stories of the intensity, and it's a lot like the military . . . you know focus, discipline, all a similar skillset. And I'm like," Well, then why do they have a hard time applying it in the classroom?" Motivation.

Bob was an example of this as he explained why his adaptation felt easier than others: "Because I was ready. I was like, 'This is what I wanna do.' So that's what I did." The source of the motivation varied: being motivated by others, their future, and their own

success story; the shared component was that motivation was prevalent and essential to their adaptation.

Others as motivation. For a majority of the participants, their primary motivator was others: family members, fallen friends, and others who had inspired them. Mac, Carolina, David, and Rudy cited family or children as motivators. David's son was his motivation to survive: "Oh, just that little boy, man. If it was up to me, if he wasn't alive, man, I would have blown my brains out of my skull a long time ago." As a single mother, Carolina explained, "The better I do in school, the better opportunities I have." She was motivated to provide for her children and the dreams of a house that her career could provide. Travis pointed to his parents and his girlfriend as the source of his motivation:

I don't necessarily feel like I'm just failing myself, I feel like I'm failing my dad and my mom, and all the effort and just love and dedication and time they put into me to get me to this point. I feel like I'm letting them down . . . They're the reason why I'm here, they're the reason why I'm successful. . . . Plus, also the fact, I have a girlfriend now, and I have a future.

Susan was motivated by her nephew who "keeps [her] motivated to get through this because [she] want[s] him to do the best he can." For Eric, his buddies who died in service motivated him:

I kinda try and live for them, you know, and move forward for them. . . . I gotta do something. I can't choose the easy route out. I can't take this 9 mil. I can't do that. That will do nothing, but I don't know, I guess bring more pain to them . . .

make them feel that their son wasted their life, you know, trying to keep me alive. So I said, “No, these guys gave up everything, literally everything, their lives.” I can’t just say I quit, so it’s like, “No, I gotta drive forward.”

Looking to the future for motivation. Goals and a vision of the future were sources of motivation for the participants: “Kinda my goals like for the life I wanna build with my wife . . . the things I really want out of life” (Greg). Tia’s passion for fitness, nutrition, and health and her vision of “starting a step aerobics class, like an outdoor mobile unit . . . then eventually . . . opening my own gym” were strong sources of motivation for her to work hard and persevere. Bob had a similar passion and a specific vision of how he saw his future, but he also pointed, as others did, to the basic need for employment and provision as a source of motivation when things were difficult:

At the end of the day, I do need a job . . . but still being part of the tech realm keeps me going. I wanna be in there. . . . Yeah, the picture of myself working at a [technology company] office, being part of the team to make sure that Moore’s Law keeps going. Yeah, that’s a big motivator.

Success, achievement, and competence as motivation. For many of the participants, a vision of their success or achieving a lifelong goal motivated them. Being a success story was a major motivator for Tia; in fact, when asked what motivates her, she identified herself. “Myself. Failure is not an option for me. I want to do great; therefore, I will.” Tia’s motivation for success was rooted in both fear of failure and a means of proving people wrong:

I grew up in foster care. And most people who grow up in foster care usually tend to be on drugs, or if they have backgrounds as I did, they usually tend to become a statistic. So me, personally, I was determined not to become a statistic, so that is what keeps me going It's so that people who doubted me, I can prove them wrong.

Others were driven to succeed to serve as a positive example to others: "What keeps me motivated is I wanna show my friends and my fellow veterans and my family that you can go through hell and still come out strong on the other side" (Ryan). Rudy's motivation stemmed from the legacy that he wants to leave and the precedent that he wants to set for his children:

I said in my mind, "What do I want on my tombstone?" Because in the end, you're just gonna die, so what is gonna live on past that as your legacy, what precedence you set for your kids and everybody else . . . being a good example.

Experiencing success is a powerful motivator to seek further success, as it breeds confidence and competence:

I think I got like a 3.46 my first semester, and I was pretty excited about that. And then getting a 4.0 for the first time in my life is kinda like a realization that, "Yes, I can do this!" . . . see the small victories. . . . But don't be content, you know, be thirsty still. And I don't think it's a finish line. I think it's just realizing that you are doing it is a success of the adaptation. (Logan)

Rudy explained the importance of recognizing and celebrating one's progress and achievement as it breeds motivation to achieve more: "Being able to go back and look

and say, ‘Look how far I’ve come.’ Accomplishment is accomplishment, and just like failure can be contagious, accomplishment can be contagious.” Travis elaborated on how this energizing force of small wins can add up to big wins by motivating and stimulating confidence and competence:

Take anything, and you attack it enough, you’re gonna be successful. And I think the more you start succeeding, it could be little successes. You get a promotion, you get a job. . . . You make a new friend that’s not a friend from high school, and it’s not a veteran. Yeah, it is because you start and you can learn, and you can start growing. And it’s just you start taking these little successes, and it’s great for your motivation.

Feeling competence in their adaptation and seeing their progress motivated them and bolstered their confidence in this new setting.

Commitment. Rudy explained his motivation both as stemming from his total commitment and as a source of his total commitment. He described his motivation as a survival instinct resulting from his approach of committing himself so fully that success in college was the only option:

Like the same thing for being a Marine, as far as putting yourself all the way in, like invested, that’s what I’ve done here. Nothing motivates you like that sense of survival. So I believe that I’ve pretty much put all my chips in the bank, and this is the commitment that I’ve made That’s why I didn’t want to work full time and go to [SVSU] because I knew that I would marginalize it too much and just, “I don’t really need to try.” But when this is all I have in a sense, you know, I

can't pay my bill without the GI Bill, so I can't exist without it right now. And I don't have a full-time job, my job is dependent on me going to school, so therefore, I'm fully committed. This is my life. It's not quasi halfway.

Valuing opportunity. Participants were motivated by an appreciation for the opportunity that they had been provided. They recognized their college education as a valuable opportunity that they should seize: "You also didn't want to fail because this is like your shot, you know, they got me into [SVSU]" (Mac). Chris had been waiting since he graduated from high school to have the financial resources to pursue his education and his dreams, so his motivation to maximize this opportunity was high: "So now that I finally got a chance to go, I didn't want to waste it." Even David, who noted a lack of motivation and purpose, said the only thing that kept him coming every day and got him to the point of his final semester and imminent graduation was the appreciation of the opportunity: "I keep showing up here every day, you know, and I appreciate the degree—no, I don't, but I appreciate the fact that I'm getting to go to college."

Possibility. Many participants were motivated by the possibilities, potential, and options that a GI Bill-funded college education unlocked, and this stimulated a sense of excitement and hopeful motivation. Eric saw this as a chance to change his life trajectory, and he was motivated to utilize the opportunity to seek a different type of career:

I'm done doing manual labor work. . . . I was like, "I'm sick of this, I'm gonna work towards something else, more academic." . . . I kinda started seeing all the workhorses I knew in my entire life, the people that I knew that have worked

their entire lives, just work paycheck to paycheck, and they're kinda falling apart.

I was like, "I don't wanna be like that." (Eric)

Rather than being fearful or bitter about the blank slate of civilian life and being a student veteran, Rudy was excited and motivated by possibilities: "You gotta remember, you're starting over. But that's not a bad thing. That just means that you get a new story to write, a new legacy, a new achievement." Carolina's perspective changed in the manner that Rudy explained, and it allowed her to have the motivation to take advantage of the opportunities that were afforded to her through this experience: "I just opened myself up to the possibilities that college offered, whereas before I thought the little clubs and organizations were worthless, were pointless, and now I actually see value in them."

Self-discovery. Understanding their purpose and motivation and discovering their passion and identity as a civilian were important cognitive processes that represented the self-discovery category. This self-discovery was essential to the adaptation process.

Discovery of purpose. Mac and others considered knowing one's purpose as a key descriptor of those who had adapted to the university setting: "When they've adjusted, they know why they're doing this, because it is going to pay dividends later." Bob reflected that his equation for success was quite similar to the definition of grit (passion plus perseverance), and emphasized that veterans need more than just determination; a passion or purpose is essential:

I have had frustrating nights where I'm sitting up at 2:00 in the morning on a Friday night still working on my code going, "Why am I doing this?" but then I sit back for 5 minutes, and I'm like, "Oh, yeah, that's why." . . . I think the combination of the perseverance and the determination to be a part of something that you love is, when both of those combine, that's what makes success happen. Rudy equated the need to identify one's purpose or motivation to persevere in college to the same need to have a purpose or motivation to persevere in boot camp:

You go all the way back to your boot camp stories, and it's the same story because, when you're laying face down in a sandpit on a hot July day, like I was, you wonder why are you here, and you know you could be back home with your buddies, and all the rest of your friends are doing what they do, and you wonder why you're where you're at. But then something has to come from within and say, "You're here for a reason." You have to look into yourself for that reason.

The importance of this self-discovery and identification of purpose was a key differentiator for Tom as it allowed him to run headlong in a direction with total commitment and purposeful motivation:

I basically made the decision that this is my purpose, that's my purpose. And so to attain that goal, I have to have this priority, so it just all falls in line. Now I didn't make that decision . . . until probably about midway through my first semester. It's like right when I got comfortable with the transition, I was like, "This is it, this is what I wanna do." . . . I didn't have a full sense of direction. I was just kinda like drifting in a direction, but now, no. . . . Why am I motivated?

Because I feel like I found my purpose, and I'm doing what I have to do to fulfill that purpose.

Discovering of passion. Although this was an internal cognitive process of self-discovery and reflection, many of the participants identified specific others (veterans office staff, advisors, friends, spouses) who asked critical questions to prompt the reflection and discovery of their passion. In fact, Travis discussed how he had witnessed that happen for countless other veterans as well:

The ladies that work down at the [veterans office], they've had a few "Come to Jesus" talks with other veterans, saying, "Listen, engineering just isn't your thing. What do you enjoy? What classes did you take when you were taking your basics that you liked the most?" . . . So he became a history major, and now he's going to be a teacher because he found a passion.

Bob discovered his passion while on deployment, where he had a great deal of time for reflection and had friends who pointed out his obvious passion:

I actually figured it out on that last deployment because it was one of those situations where I was on long watches. As long as nothing was happening, I had plenty of time to think. So I was speaking with some other guys that were out there with me, and I was talking to them about what kind of technology I was into. And they said, "What are you doing out here? You should've been a [career]." I said, "Oh, okay." So, that's what I'm doing.

Self-discovery is not an overnight process and seeking without finding passion and purpose can produce anxiety; however, with time, finding one's passion can provide purpose and motivation. As Tom described, that passion can make all the difference:

I was kinda drifting. I never knew what I wanted to be when I grew up, ever. I woke up one day, and I went to high school, and everybody in the room knew what they wanted to be when they grew up but me. . . . I joined the military to buy time. Well, when that time was up, it's like, "Okay, what do you wanna do?" and I'm like, "I don't know." I still don't know. And so I was, with my job in the military, I was like, "Okay, so I'm good at medicine, I can do that." And the more I thought about it, I found that I was good at it, but I wasn't passionate about it. I finally realized that to be able to wake up and never have to work a day in my life, it was what would make me happy. Like nobody becomes a [Tom's career path] to become rich. And it took 29 years.

Figuring out one's passion was not an easy process, especially when it required shifting from what one had thought was the right path. Deep reflection about his passion and strengths helped Mac to find his calling:

I was talking to my wife and my advisor. They kinda said, "Are you even happy doing these classes?" Like not really. I just wouldn't mind being a [career]. It's like, "Do you even wanna be a [career]?" I thought about it a little more. So reflection, I sat there and looked in my [major] class, like "I don't even like the students here." This was gonna be my crew if I kept moving on. So I guess that'd be a nitty-gritty moment that I changed. And we talked to my advisor . . . "What

else are you interested in?” So we talked about the classes I enjoyed and the ones that I excelled at. . . . It was kinda hard. . . . It’s reflection on what you’re good at. . . . What made me okay with it is, I think, my wife laid it out the most. She’s like, “Get a piece of paper, write down what you’re doing now, then get another sheet of paper, what do you really like to do?” . . . I like to go drive around and think stuff over, so I drove my car around and thought about it and was like, “Yeah, this is really right.” . . . It was kinda like leaving the military, some big questions you always have, like “Did I make the right choice?” And I think that one was mainly my advisor really asking me what I really wanted to do. And obviously, if it’s what you love doing, it’s gonna work out.

Discovery of self. The transition to civilian life and university life is challenging because it creates identity dissonance for many student veterans. Some student veterans expend more cognitive energy coming to terms with this new identity than others, depending on how central their military identity was for them; however, their discovery of self in this new setting is vital in order to move forward and adapt successfully. Chris pointed to understanding one’s identity and developing it beyond the veteran identity as a key first step for successful adaptation: “[Being a veteran] doesn’t define them. . . . Having a strong sense of identity is a good first step, knowing that military life was only just a small portion of a hopefully long life.” Travis also emphasized the importance of finding one’s identity after the military as essential to adaptation and success:

I think just accepting the fact that I have to truly find myself, because in the Marine Corps, you’re told how you have to feel, how you have to think

sometimes. . . . People just need to find themselves. And if you can do that, if you can find who you are, and be realistic with yourself, there's nothing that you can't do.

However, in order to engage in the process of self-discovery in the civilian world, many had to go through a process of letting go of their veteran identity. Raoul identified this letting go of one's veteran identity as a descriptor of a successfully adapted veteran: "I think when they're no longer student veterans . . . like never having to bring it up because then really the only difference is that you're older than the other students I'm just another, you know, member of this group." Tom expressed a similar approach to his adaptation, and he shared that his identity was not synonymous with "veteran":

I don't need it. You could remove it completely and nothing will change.

Whenever I'm out and about on campus or at the bar or meeting new people, you'll never hear me talk about the military, the Army, wars, all that jazz, anything affiliated with it. The only way it's gonna come up is if you bring it up, if you ask me.

Part of discovering oneself is developing who one is beyond the veteran identity.

Developing that identity beyond veteran status was linked to competence in that these veterans felt confidence in their mastery of skills outside of the military or their ability to transfer those skills and succeed in the civilian world. They were willing to grow, learn, and master new skills in a new setting and that feeling of competence allowed them to find an anchor in the civilian world. It was not shedding the value of the identity

completely; it was finding a balance and a peace about one's identity and new position in life:

Being a veteran is part of who you are, but it's not who you are. . . . I don't know if the people who failed to adjust, it's because like that's all they make it about, or because they have nothing else going on, then they make it about that because they want something to hold on to. But most of the vets I know and talk to, even myself, like the ones I know that are doing great in school or doing great in life in general are, you know, they take kinda what they learned, but applying it to a new context So, I'd say like the ones that have been successful, yeah, that's probably the biggest marker for me, is that ability to use it as a strength, but not as an identity. (Greg)

Reflection. While motivation and self-discovery were the most fundamental of the cognitive processes necessary for adaptation, reflection was the cognitive process that allowed the greatest learning and change to occur. Reflection stimulated new perspectives, understanding, and adjustments to behavior. It allowed study participants to improve their relationships, identify more effective behavioral approaches, accept circumstances, and move forward.

Role of family and friends in reflection. Family and friends were key stimulators of reflection for participants because, for many, they were already trusted confidants who could challenge them, ask them critical questions, and point out elements that they had not considered. Carolina's mother was an example of this as she served as a trusted

supporter who could ask the tough questions that others might not ask. The reflection that resulted from those questions was the turning point for Carolina:

My mom was tired of seeing me miserable and hating my new life. And she finally asked me why do I think that I'm better than the rest of them? And I told her, and she said, "Do you honestly think that just because you were in the military, that makes you automatically better?" And I said, "Well, of course." And she said, "Well, they're gonna start earning money, a lot more money, a lot quicker than you. So if you think about it, in the civilian world, they're a lot better than you." And so when she said that, that really got me thinking.

Travis pointed to both "decompression with [his veteran] friends . . . sitting around cracking a beer and just talking" and "long nights sitting out there talking to [his] father, you know, comparing his transition, what he did" as important time for him to reflect and move forward in his adaptation. Travis explained that reflection was a long and slow process, but it was what he needed to come to terms with his service and move forward with his civilian identity.

Reflection on civilian relationships. One of the most prevalent sources of reflection was also one of the greatest sources of frustration for student veterans—interacting with civilians, particularly younger peers and professors.

Younger peers. Reflection regarding younger peers centered on recognition that civilians were humans with value to offer, that not being military did not make civilians lesser, that the ignorance of their peers was not their fault, that focusing on the frustration with their younger peers was not helping them to succeed, and that the

situation was different. Travis shared that he “got to talk heart to heart with some of these kids and learn their backgrounds and their upbringings.” Putting himself out there forced a deep reflective process for Travis:

I realized that maybe not all kids are bad, not all these younger kids are going to trip my trigger and set me off, you know It took me a little while, but I sorta started to come around to the fact that not everybody was meant for the military, so why should I suddenly put them as, you know, a tier lower than myself.

As time went on, Travis not only gave them a chance but he began to see the value in connecting with his younger peers: “Because maybe I don’t understand this subject as much, but this guy over here is acing the course, like it’s easy for him, so then he can teach you.”

Ryan discussed that the reflection process was a long-term process that was not easy, but eventually his reflection and introspection regarding the perspective of his peers allowed him to view his younger peers differently, which led to better adaptation:

It’s hard to let go. It’s not their fault, this 18-22 demographic, and it took me a long time to look back and realize it’s not their fault. It’s the first time in their lives that they’ve been away from mommy and daddy. . . . I had to sit back and look at perspective, and I had to put myself in their shoes. That’s something that adaptation helped with. I had to utilize reflective thinking. . . . I had to sit back. And the more time passed, I saw that these people are actually contributing to society. It’s just a different perspective that I wasn’t used to.

Eric's reflective process allowed him to come to the realization that the ignorance and entitlement of younger peers was not their fault, particularly when regarding issues of war and the state of global affairs:

It's not their fault, that kinda sparked . . . this realization that I came to. . . . And that took me a while to realize that I should be happy and grateful that they don't ever have to experience anything like that. That's why I went over there.

David's reflection had not progressed to a state as positive as that of the others, but it allowed him to accept and not react to ignorant statements by his peers:

That's what I've come to accept, is just the masses, they don't know what they haven't seen or experienced or been a part of. So their opinions are not gonna be opinions based on anything more than what others have told them, or a book, or a professor. And so now I just sit there.

Rudy's reflection on a statement by a civilian after he had expressed frustration about interacting with civilians allowed him to see and accept his new circumstances:

She's like "You're an eagle, and you are used to flying with eagles, and you were around eagles, and you were doing all this eagle stuff. And now you're around a bunch of turkeys. So you gotta remember that's what you're dealing with. You're out of place in this." And I was like that's so profound on the ride home, and I still think about that.

Professors. Reflection on professors varied, but it generally focused on understanding the person of authority who usually was not as vindictive or scary as he or she might seem. Travis recognized that "professors aren't out there to destroy you. Most

times, they do actually want you to succeed.” Logan, on the other hand, was able to recognize when his professors were simply using scare tactics to motivate:

Because, of course, every teacher says, “Oh, you know, this class is gonna be impossible unless you read every margin and every picture and all the stuff” because they want to scare you. That’s something that I was used to in the military, and kinda saw through that, but you know, sometimes it’s true.

Reflection on behaviors. Reflecting on one’s approach or behaviors was a key learning process for participants because it allowed them to adapt more successfully. The change could be stimulated by a situation that forced the reflection—a setback or a negative interaction—or simply a recognition that their current strategy was not working and that something had to change. Travis identified the ability to do this as an indicator of successful adaptation: “The people that are able to realize, ‘This just isn’t gonna work for me’ are the people that become successful because then they find what does.” For some of them, the realization was a trial-and-error and evaluative process: “If you find yourself making the wrong decision, you gotta figure out how to change that” (Raoul). Others had to have reflection forced on them: “You have to get to a point where you realize that” (Ryan). Susan explained that she saw variety in how receptive some veterans were to reflecting on the changes that they might need to enact:

Some people can just do it, I think. They go, they realize right off the bat, boom, I gotta pull back! Some of them get a boot up their ass before they get to that point. They hit that wall or somebody says, “Screw you, you idiot,” and they go, “Oh!” And then there’s the ones that don’t get the clue at all.

The key, according to Susan, was reflection on what was helping and what was hurting and then making adjustments accordingly: “So you gotta figure out, coming to this university and transitioning. You gotta figure out this is gonna help me, this isn’t. I need this. I don’t need this.” Tia and Logan described a reflective process in determining how to study. Tia shared that she had to “reevaluate [her] thought process . . . stop getting comfortable, and change up the way [she] was doing things.” Logan realized that there was not a single best way to study and succeed, and he learned that he had to reflect on the best method for him:

Maybe reading isn’t the best way for you to learn. Maybe it’s getting a tutor, maybe it’s spending that same time you would doing a different thing to learn it. If anything, that was probably the biggest thing I had to change was realizing that there’s different ways. And the teachers don’t care how you do it, they just want you to perform.

Acceptance. Acceptance was an oft-repeated concept among the participants. They discussed acceptance of past and present circumstances, acceptance of their lack of control, acceptance of their fallibility and shortcomings, acceptance of changes in plans, and dealing with failure. Acceptance was an important initial step, cognitively, because it allowed student veterans to stop fighting and resisting the change. It allowed them to have a better view of themselves and the situation that they faced. Most important, it allowed them to move forward.

Acceptance of circumstances. These student veterans had to come to terms with the transition and their circumstances in order to move forward and adapt, which is why

acceptance was so often cited. For some, it was not just accepting their new situation; it was also accepting some of the painful and traumatizing experiences that had occurred during their time in the service: “I have to just accept what happened. I have to live with what I did. . . . I’ve accepted it all now. I’m at peace” (Eric). For others, it was accepting that their service was over, especially for those who had had their separation thrust upon them rather than having willingly chosen to separate from the military:

I did not wanna be there. I didn’t understand the point of everything. It was also in the same area where the base was, so I was feeling a lot of like homesickness, and I was really struggling to adjust. . . . I definitely didn’t feel like I was ready to leave. (Carolina)

Ryan had to accept the world that he was reentering, the loss of time, and the circumstances, which allowed him to readjust his expectations and adapt; however, this occurred only because he was not fighting the change:

He just helped me change my standards around, essentially what it was. . . . And you have to have that drive and that will to not give up, and to not . . . realizing that you’re going to fail, realizing that the world is not the same as when you left it. It’s not just a pool you can jump back into. There’s a chunk of your life that’s missing. You have to be fluid, you have to be adaptable, and you have to want to change.

Acceptance allowed Ryan to want to change and adapt. Unfortunately, acceptance was not an easy cognitive place to reach; some could accept frustrations in the university setting because it was a temporary situation: “But having people there to tell you, ‘It’s

not forever, and remember, as long as you keep doing it, you'll get it done, and then you won't ever have to come back here again'" (Rudy).

Accepting one's lack of control, fallibility, and shortcomings. Acceptance also took the form of accepting the fact that some circumstances were out of their control:

Accepting the fact that I'm not, I can't control everything, and these are the people that I'm going to have to deal with for the rest of my life . . . just sorta being real with myself and accepting the fact that I'm not gonna be able to control everything. (Travis)

This healthier sense of perspective and locus of control was complemented by an acceptance of one's fallibility:

If you're just too static, or you're too "I'm gonna do it my way," you're not gonna succeed in college. So you have to be flexible, you have to be able to accept that you're wrong. That's one thing the military taught me pretty good is that I'm wrong all the time . . . good initiative, bad judgment. So by accepting that, like I'm wrong or I just can't do it. (Travis)

Despite being trained to execute with perfection and demonstrate an infallible attack approach in the military, the transition made these veterans accept their fallibility on a regular basis. As Rudy phrased it, "You're not as indestructible as you thought you were."

Accepting their shortcomings was another cognitive realization that allowed for adaptation:

There's a class that I took where it was actually a lot about reflective thinking . . . and it helped identify, or I would say for me, it helped articulate things to where I could do better say, "Oh, okay, this is really something. I need to be more open or more social and better socially with my peers in class" and stuff like that, so it really helped identify a lot of areas . . . kinda seeing it quantified for me was like oh, okay. (Greg)

Greg not only accepted his need for growth in his interpersonal interactions, but his acceptance of his lack of omniscience allowed him to become more open to peers:

Just because you're older doesn't mean you know everything. You may have something you know more, but learning to accept that, hey, someone else, just because they are younger, they may know more about a subject than you. And being open to that and being willing to learn from other people, I think that's very helpful.

Carolina expressed a similar acceptance process where she realized that "some of the kids there were understanding the work better than [she] was because [she] was refusing to pay attention in class," which led to her acceptance of what she lacked and prompted a change in her behavior.

Acceptance of change in plans. Another challenging area of acceptance as a cognitive process was when plans or goals had to be altered, but this acceptance allowed them to adapt to a new path. This type of acceptance was understandably difficult, as it included the loss of a dream, a threat to one's sense of competence, and a fear of failure.

However, Travis encouraged fellow veterans to accept the change and realize their multiple options:

Nobody wants to be told that they can't do something, and that's just not veterans, that's across the board, just human beings in general There's more than one job out there. You don't have to be an engineer . . . you can do so many things . . . and if you face those hurdles, whatever, along the way, reach out and don't be afraid to shift your goal Just because you can't do one thing doesn't mean you can't do another. A lot of people start thinking that, they get tunnel vision, and they think just because they can't do this, they can't do anything.

Mac was an example of someone who, by changing majors, gave up on his dream of returning to the military and serving with a medical degree. He explained that, through his process of acceptance, he recognized that his decision was right for him and for his family. He shared that, before he changed majors, "everything was tanking" and that after the change, "everything was going up, GPA, quality of life, morale was going up, all the good stuff was happening." Rudy also experienced a change in majors where his plan was derailed, but he reflected on other experiences in the military when his goals and expectations had to shift in order to accept the change and move forward:

That's why a lot of veterans freak out, is because they're like me with the intensity of focus and discipline and determination, and I'm a bulldog, right? But then the door gets shut, or they fall down; well, now they're just kinda crushed, now they feel the walls falling in on them, and it's like crush of defeat. But if you have a plan, it's just like fighting a war—you can adjust.

Dealing with failure. Accepting and moving through failure and mistakes were important tools that the veterans had developed in their adaptation. Travis accepted and expected failure without it defeating his self-worth; in fact, he valued failure for the lessons that it offered: “It’s okay to fail at things, as long as you’ve done everything that you could; it’s okay to fail because you don’t learn anything from successes.” As Tia dealt with health issues that affected academics, she learned that her grades, although important, did not define her: “So I’m learning one, your GPA does matter, but it’s not gonna make or break me.” Logan accepted mistakes as part of the process, and he did not let those detract him from his mission or focus: “Take the small successes and brush off the things you mess up . . . and focusing on your current thing is a big one.”

Personality and Attitude

The personality and attitude of student veterans were the inherent resources that each brought to the new environment. However, environmental factors both supported and inhibited these attitudes and personality traits. Confidence, openness, view of work, and desire to succeed were important personality traits and attitudes that played a role in successful adaptation.

Confidence. The participants had confidence in themselves that stemmed from past successes in military life. That confidence served as a foundation or wellspring for continued perseverance, which allowed them to adapt and succeed in the face of challenges or frustrations. Their confidence often forced doubt out in order to eliminate hesitation:

It's the sort of mentality you approach it . . . being in the infantry, you have to have the mentality that you are bulletproof, and you're going to go out there, and you're going to win 100% of the time. Because if you don't, you're going to be, you know, have cement feet. (Travis)

Allen demonstrated this when he was told that his goal of getting into a specific college was impossible:

I don't know if it was daunting. I just never had a doubt in my mind. And [Kristie] will tell you that I came in, and I was like, "No, this is how it's gonna go." There was never a doubt in my mind.

Chris' self-confidence, refined in the military, helped him to adapt and stay motivated:

When I was going through the military, going through like certain training things that were hard, I would always tell myself whenever I struggled, "X amount of people have done this already, there's no reason why I can't do it." I kinda kept that attitude for the academics thing, too.

Greg's confidence in his own efficacy was developed by his past perseverance:

I'd say the biggest takeaway for me was the self-confidence, and I guess the belief that, if I apply myself and if I work hard, I can accomplish whatever I'm setting out to do. Because when you're in the military, they throw all this at you, but I mean you're forced to, but at the end of it, you see, yeah, these things I didn't think I can do, I know I can do as long as I keep pushing forward.

Tom's similar reflection gave him an optimistic confidence and a lack of fear of failure in the university setting: "There's nothing here that can defeat me, nothing. There's

nothing here that's worse than what I've seen and done and faced and lived and experienced. So I wasn't intimidated because of that background."

Their confidence allowed them to be people who were "always pushing forward" (Eric), "fighting the good fight or . . . slaying dragons" (Rudy), and "sticking with it . . . and understanding it's like not a choice" (Logan). Tia had confidence because she had learned the depths of her determination and perseverance:

I've learned that, when I feel like I've had enough, that I really haven't, you know? Like when I feel like, "Okay, this is too much, there's still a little bit more that I can take on," if that makes sense. So basically, I've kinda learned a lot more about me and my capabilities and my . . . what's the word I'm looking for? Like when you're so determined not to fail, and you just keep trying, no matter how hard it gets . . . maybe grit?

Ryan's strategy to adapt and succeed was perseverance:

There is no recipe for success. It literally just takes time. You have to keep failing, but survive, if that makes sense. You don't have to win the fight, you just gotta last all 15 rounds, and eventually you will learn how to be a civilian again. You'll learn how to do things on your own again. You'll learn how to find those support groups . . . just time and perseverance.

Openness. One's view of work, desire to succeed, and confidence are all attributes that are fostered in military culture; however, another personality trait or attitude that was prevalent in these participants was openness. This was a differentiating personality trait and attitude that was either an aspect of individual personality or an

attitude that was fostered by the environment or through one's own cognitive processes. It was a critical element, as openness allowed for adaptation and change.

The veterans expressed a value for growth opportunities and an attitude that was open minded, with no expectations. Travis valued growth and progress, and it was this value that allowed him to adapt:

If you're always living in the past, can you really call that successful? Can you really call that moving on and growing as a person? Because I think when you stop growing as a person is when you just stop living life. . . . The ones that I've learned from the most are the ones that continue to grow.

Part of Logan's open-minded personality was that he was not hindered by expectations, which hurt other veterans in their transition: "I was pretty open-minded coming here, and I try to keep an open mind starting stuff. And that keeps you from getting disappointed or caught off guard or whatever . . . I wasn't really coming in with expectations." Logan also demonstrated an open-minded attitude with his degree and career:

I try to be open minded. And ultimately, I was like, "Oh, I wanna do this for my career." But one of the things I realized is, you have no idea what it's really like, and really you don't even know what the career field is like.

Chris's open mindedness allowed him to connect with people in a more positive manner: "When I walk into a new environment, new place, and generally keep an open mind. I try not to judge people."

Openness resulted from a humble personality that understood that there were other, better methods and approaches available. The participants strongly emphasized the importance of humility and attributed their success to a personality that was humble. Eric described a successfully adapted veteran as someone who has “been humbled.” He explained, “They’ve seen some fucked-up shit, and they just keep their head low, you know. They’d rather not have attention be brought to them.” For Mac, his humility allowed him to learn quickly from anyone who would aid in his adaptation and success:

I’m actually a pretty humble guy, so when someone tells me, “Maybe you should be doing it a different way” or if I get a terrible grade on an exam, and they say, “Maybe you should focus more time on this” or “You’re studying the wrong things,” I tend to listen.

View of work. Participants had an attitude that work should be challenging and a personality that exhibited a strong work ethic, focus, goal orientation, and extremely high standards. Eric best explained the orientation of veterans to seek the path of greatest challenge as a matter of pride, of growth, and of the wisest course of action:

Engineering is one of the hardest degrees you can get. So I was like, “Alright, that’s what I wanna do.” . . . That was kind of why I also chose the Marine Corps, because I wanted the greater challenge. That just got kind of amplified while in the Corps, where you don’t go the easy route. The saying in Afghanistan specifically was, “Muddy boots are better than bloody boots.” In other words, you go through the treacherous terrain, the horrible terrain, and you maintain the higher ground at all times, so that way you’re always engaging your enemy from

an uphill at a more advantageous position. I guess that kinda rolled over into the civilian world a little bit, so like you always wanna go for the harder route.

Allen articulated a similar philosophy of choosing the tough route as a motivation for his successful adaptation, a route where he challenged himself to get out of his comfort zone in order to accomplish his goals:

If I look 10 years down the road, there's two overarching realities that are there. There's one where I go move into the middle of nowhere and live by myself and do nothing, or there's one where I do what I wanna do, which is [field of study], even though the situation stresses me out, and I don't let anxiety and PTSD dictate what I do. . . . So really looking down the road and seeing which way I wanted my life to lead and where I wanted to end up is kinda what drove me into forcing myself to do that. Being comfortable is easy.

Rudy and others recognized that their work ethic allowed them to excel, and they knew that they could work hard in this setting because they had proven it in the service:

When I was a Marine, I had to have duty every month, and you would have to be up all day, or some days it was Sunday, and then you gotta go to work Monday. So, I just look at it like, "I've done this before, and it's just a different setting."

The participants exhibited a focus, a goal-oriented attitude, and a personality that allowed them to do the monotonous and the difficult:

Whenever I'm struggling, like say class, I try to rethink of it as, "Okay, how can this be applied, like what's the end goal?" Like it may be this particular subject

may not be something I enjoy, but what I'm getting or whatever or I'm having difficulty with, "How can this be used?" (Greg)

Rudy's attitude of extreme focus on his goals allowed him to prioritize his goals and eliminate distractions:

But again I came back to, "What did I set out to do?" . . . When I approach a problem, I stay focused and dedicated until that problem is solved. . . . I don't let anything stand in my way, regardless of who it is. . . . I'm a student, and I'm here to succeed in my classes, that is my number one mission, like there's no other thing that should be more important than that right now. And every time something comes up, I should look at it and go, "Does that help me get closer to my goal? What is my goal?" It's that simple. If you make it any more complicated than that, you're gonna talk yourself out of it.

Many of the participants held themselves to impossibly high standards, and working to meet those standards motivated them to work harder than others and to make the changes that were necessary to succeed. Their view of work was that they were going to work harder than others because it was what they had been trained to do, and anything less would not represent the military community well:

It's go there to do 110% or don't go there at all . . . you remind yourself to set the example. You know, you're a veteran, you're a retired Marine. Don't act like the freshmen kid. He can act that way, or they're allowed a mistake like that, but you should take your training and put it towards your process. (Rudy)

Bob did not recognize his high standard of work as abnormal, although others did so:

They're like, "See, this guy he doesn't procrastinate. He doesn't stay up late. He gets up early and does it then." So someone told me that I got that reputation somewhere along the line of hard working, gets up early, and does it, which I didn't even realize. I thought I was just doing what it took.

Desire to succeed. Participants expressed an intense desire to succeed that permeated their cognitive processes, behaviors, and even their manipulation of their environment. They indicated a desire to succeed in myriad expressions that demonstrated an attitude of success, achievement, and excellence, no matter the obstacle. Their desire to achieve success, in whatever way they defined it, permeated their personalities and attitudes:

I just wanna succeed. I don't wanna be a millionaire. . . . I wanna be comfortable in life, I wanna be successful. . . . I'm not unrealistic, but I know if I can study my ass off and I get a good degree, I can live a comfortable life and I can provide for my family, and I can pass on these skills and this mindset, to my kids, hopefully. (Travis)

Their drive, confidence, and motivation to succeed often were personality characteristics that had been forged in the military—what Travis called a “war fighter” mentality:

You join the military, where you're told you are a friggin' war fighter. You're gonna go out there, and you're gonna win your battle because you're somewhat conditioned, like I said, to believe that, because you have to go out there with that aggressive fighting mentality. And it doesn't matter what your job was in the military, you're taught to attack every single thing. (Travis)

Their motivation was so strong that quitting was not an option: “Like I’ve never . . . not that it’s never been difficult. Because I mean I don’t wanna sound like it’s all just you know, roses. But I don’t know, I’ve never considered not doing it” (Raoul). Many expressed a similar attitude in which achieving or doing things without complaint was as natural as breathing. Tia described her approach in simple, straightforward terms:

I’ve learned that I’m still determined, like I’m very determined. Failure is really not an option for me. . . . I just did. Like the same way you do when you enlist in the military. It’s not gonna be what you expected. It’s not gonna be roses all the time. You just do what you have to do.

Rudy explained that he had learned a long time ago that sometimes he needed to be able to “shut up and color” when it came to work, and Raoul said, “It’s what I have to do, so I do it. I guess there’s not a part of me that would see a task before me and not complete it.”

They exhibited an attitude of excellence that had been instilled in them from the military or other life experiences. For Travis, that attitude had been a part of his personality from his father since Travis was a child:

When I was doing baseball, we would go out and do pitching sessions, and then he’d record me he’d break it down frame by frame, everything I was doing. So he instilled in me a sense of, if you’re going to do something, do it right, and then do everything you can.

Logan viewed his success and his school work as a valuable asset, not a trivial pursuit, and he demonstrated a mature perspective that his work was a job that he had to do well:

I think just the maturity you gain through the military. . . . If they're trying to figure out actually how to succeed in the class and they can't quite separate the fun from work. "This is your job. This is what you should be doing." It's not playtime in the classroom.

Significance of Cognitive Processes and Personality

The role of cognitive processes and personality was an ignition for these student veterans to make a change and adapt, which led them to behave differently and engage differently with their environment. Their view of work, desire to succeed, confidence, and openness were important personality traits and attitudes that played a role in their successful adaptation. The mental energy that they expended in generating motivation, discovering their civilian identity, reflecting, and accepting difficult issues was vital to their ability to adapt to the university environment. Discussion of the findings of the role of cognitive processes and personality is presented in more detail in Chapter V.

Role of Behavior in the Adaptation Process

Behavior is a critical component in how a student veteran learns to adapt. It is the tipping point of the interactional model of social cognitive theory. The environment, along with the cognitive processes and personal factors, provides the ingredients for successful adaptation. It is in the behaviors of student veterans where one sees adaptation happen, where learning and change occur. Five categories emerged to address how behavior plays a role in the adaptation process for student veterans: (a) utilizing positive behaviors learned from the military, (b) preparation, (c) locus of control and agentic behavior, (d) implementing strategies for academic success, and (e) changes in

behavior for healthier adaptation. Figure 3 displays these six areas of behavior that indicate successful adaptation by student veterans.

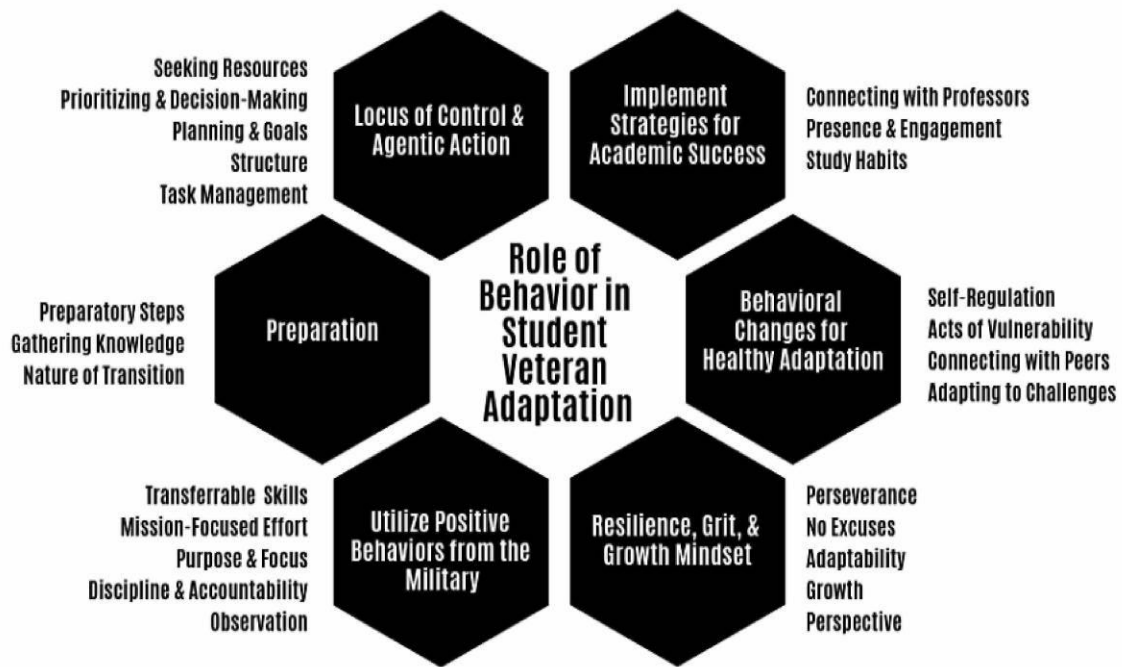


Figure 3. The role of behavior in student veteran adaptation.

Utilizing Positive Behaviors Learned From the Military

Participants in this study stated that they already knew and had at their disposal many behaviors that had been gained through military service that, when utilized, positively affected how they learned to adapt and subsequently led to their successful adaptation. Recognizing that they had valuable skills such as mission-focused effort, resilient discipline, grit, a growth mindset, and a big-picture perspective to build on and

apply in this new setting was a key aspect in creating confidence and a sense of competency.

Transferrable skills and strengths. An initial step to this realization was how they viewed their new circumstances. Without diminishing the very real challenge of adaptation and the intense change of culture, participants built a bridge from one life stage to the next by describing it as “a different deployment” (Rudy), recognizing that “the things that made me successful in the military continue to make me successful in my academic pursuit and my professional pursuits” (Raoul). Despite the change in setting, culture, and purpose, they could still “use the same tools, use the same thought processes, use what works” (Raoul). The operating systems and processes that they had integrated into their life in the military to guide their actions were the same; their challenge was to take those skills, systems, and processes and determine how to implement them in a university setting.

An important clarification is that these student veterans cited these skills as a starting point from which to build: “It’s the foundation of what I’m doing now as a student” (Raoul). The need to adapt and add to their toolbox was essential, but their confidence and competence were enhanced when they recognized that they were already prepared for this challenge with many behaviors that set them up for success. They emphasized that the transition was not a blank slate for starting from scratch. Grounding themselves in this transition to who they were, what they had done, and how they had succeeded in the past was important in finding their confidence to persevere, adapt, and grow. Travis shared that a key factor in those veterans who adapt successfully is to

“transfer from that military mindset and apply his ability, everything he’s learned. They don’t discount it, don’t just toss it aside. . . . They take what they’ve learned and build upon it.”

Whether the behavior related to studying, schedules, working with teams, or facing obstacles, the participants related that they were able to translate military skillsets to their new university setting. Being able to apply these skills and lessons from the military not only set them up for success but brought comfort, routine, confidence, and direction. Rudy encouraged veterans who might have been feeling lost or struggling with issues of identity:

Don’t forget all that stuff that they taught you, just because you’re not wearing a uniform, and people aren’t calling you staff sergeant Remember, you can still lead without the uniform, you can still lead without a title, just by setting an example and trying to do the best you can.

For Carolina, applying her military knowledge and training helped her to understand her new environment and expectations: “I always just try to parallel, just paralleling everything. The same way that assignments are due no matter what, back then stuff was due no matter what.” It also provided Carolina with a strategy and set of skills that she had confidence in implementing: “It was after the second semester of being miserable, I realized I had to do something. . . . Finally, I just thought, ‘I already know what works for me, maybe I can incorporate that into this new life.’”

Mission-focused effort. A behavior that was described as mission-focused effort was the exertion of intense focus and energy such as one might demonstrate on a

military mission. This behavior allowed student veterans who had a goal, large or small, to focus and expend effort beyond what their peers might have the discipline to exhibit. Bob described this behavior from a military lens: “It’s always the mission, like every assignment, every lab report, it’s the mission, so get it done. So that really helped there, and that’s the discipline I needed to get through that.” They saw this total commitment of effort as a means to an end. They saw the smaller tasks as a way to accomplish their much larger goal, and they were willing to put in the extra effort and demonstrate excellence in everything they did on a consistent basis. Rudy, a father of two, viewed a degree at SVSU as his mission, and he utilized that mission focus to summon the motivation to work late and with excellence:

I go to school, and I kick ass and I take names; in my mind, that’s what I’m thinking, “I’m gonna write the best paper I can” . . . because if I don’t put myself up like that, it’s just this big depressing thing.

Breaking down the larger goal and demonstrating mission accomplishment in the smaller tasks was a key behavior that these participants pointed to as a strategy that they utilized from their service experience to help them to adapt. It was also helpful in giving them the confidence to defy the normal standards of their peers. Allen achieved the impossible and “broke every rule” in his acceptance to one of SVSU’s most competitive programs. He was able to break down what advisors deemed impossible into smaller missions and achieve his larger goal due his mission accomplishment mindset.

Purpose. However, there were a couple of caveats to this behavior. One must have a goal, purpose, or direction, and a mission-focused effort is not a one-size-fits-all

solution. Many students pointed to a lack of mission, purpose, or direction as a key factor in veterans who struggled or failed to adapt to the college environment. Either they lacked a mission or they lacked a *worthy* mission, especially in light of former missions:

They don't really have any goals for the future. And so with no goals, no direction, they're lost. That's how you end up with the individuals that are just broadcasting how great they were, and not really thinking about the future.

(Chris)

The veterans not only noted this *lack* of a worthy purpose or goal as a key inhibitor, but they consistently identified the *presence* of a valuable goal or mission as a key indicator of a successful veteran: "It's the guy who, first of all, knows what he wants to do. It's going out there and doing what's important to him" (Travis). Those who used this skill as their only resource for success realized that, particularly in a college setting, tireless effort does not necessarily equal success; one must demonstrate adaptability with an array of instruments to solve a problem, not just a sledge hammer of effort.

Focus and discipline. Tangible practices of the mission-focused effort included focus, discipline, hard work, high standards, and accountability for self. This focus was demonstrated regardless of outside responsibilities. Chris, who was engaged to be married, expressed that, even in a major known for high-achieving students with extreme focus, he "had an advantage over them because I was a little bit more focused, I wasn't really getting tied up in having to do things at school just because X amount of people are doing it." Rudy, who was married with two children, shared, "You have to be able to

focus, you know, like for yourself’ and explained that focus sometimes means telling extended family and friends “no” in order to get the mission done. Tom explained that his single status allowed him to have an even greater focus and a guilt-free ability to accomplish the mission:

I don’t have children, and I don’t have a significant other. . . . So, I have myself to focus on, I have my self to drive on. If I did have those other things, then maybe I would wanna focus on them, but I don’t. And since I don’t, I’m focusing on my purpose.

Discipline to get the job done and on time was a recurrent behavior that student veterans attributed to their military service. Bob stated that his discipline from the Navy was instrumental in his adaptation: “Definitely the discipline required to just sit down, shut up, and do it. I certainly didn’t have that in high school, so that Navy training is what got me there.” The ability to work hard until the job is done was another part in accomplishing the mission: “You don’t say ‘Oh, it’s 5:00, time to go home.’ No, you stay until it’s done” (Ryan).

Accountability. Mission accomplishment also entailed high standards and a strong sense of duty and accountability to complete the mission. These veterans cited the vast array of resources and programs that student veterans can utilize to take responsibility for themselves and accomplish their goals. They did not mince words about accountability for self: “But you know, you’ve gotta remember that, you’re a big boy. Carry your own load. Your responsibilities are these. You need to do those things” (Rudy). It is important to note that they described accountability for self in conjunction

with utilizing resources and programs; it was not an exhortation to go it alone but to be responsible for one's goal to seek important resources and enroll in the programs that one needs to succeed. They viewed the concept of accountability for self as more a "no excuses" perspective, with an abundance of resources, rather than an isolating expectation of going it alone.

Resilience, grit, and growth mindset. Many of the participants described behaviors that had been developed in the military that psychologists would categorize as resilient behaviors or grit. They had resilience, or the ability to thrive in the face of adversity, as they made situations work despite setbacks.

Perseverance. Discipline was articulated as a requisite to perseverance:

I'd say carry your discipline forward because that's what's gonna get you through, because it gets tough. There's nights where it's just you questioning why you're doing it, and the military discipline will be the thing that gets you through, I think, just making up a word: stick-to-it-iveness. (Bob)

Veterans who adapted successfully demonstrated a healthy sense of agency and did not let external factors impede them from pursuing their goals: "They didn't let any setback, they didn't let any psychological or physical impairments keep them from doing what they wanted to do" (Travis). Having one's support systems in place was vital for resilient and agentic behavior: "You get punched in the mouth, you get knocked down, and you gotta have the will power. You gotta have those social and support networks set up to keep you coming back up, and eventually you will" (Ryan). A positive, goal-oriented attitude was also important in exhibiting resilient behavior as a means to cope with

stress: “Not get bogged down in, ‘Okay, I have this and this and this.’ Instead, it’s, ‘Where does my focus need to be, and that’s where my focus is at.’ So, prioritization and stuff like that” (Greg).

No excuses. Many of the veterans emphasized that a differentiating factor for their adaptation and success was a focus on solutions rather than excuses. Their agentic perspective allowed them to move past complaining to fruitful action:

I can sit around and complain how Mrs. Smith likes her APA or whatever it is and complain and go home and be mad about it. I probably will! But I’m gonna get over it, and I’m gonna go in there, and I’m gonna go beat myself with APA. I’m gonna go to the writing center and see what they can help with. And then at the end of the day, I’m gonna have to just work and try to get better at this.

(Rudy)

For others, this grit to persevere despite circumstances was expressed as an intrinsic and natural instinct:

I was trying to explain this process to someone the other day. I mean, when you whittle it all down, the bottom line is you just do it . . . you figure out what you need to do. You figure out how you need to do it, and then you do it. (Raoul)

Adaptability. These veterans emphasized the importance of adaptation in resilient behavior, finding a way to make the goal work, particularly with regard to choosing a major, even if the pathway was not what had been originally planned:

If you realize that, “You know what, this just isn’t working out,” it’s OK to turn the wheel and shift focus to something that is going to ultimately make your life

a little bit better, make you a happier person, and give you more fulfillment.

(Travis)

Many student veterans discussed the importance of backup plans and knowing one's resources when things did not go according to plan:

No plan survives combat. The same thing applies to the semester. I'm gonna get 8 hours of sleep every night, I'm gonna do this, that, yeah. I wish! But it's one of the things that you can always have a backup plan or know what your resources are. You know, instead of me saying, "I can call in arty [artillery] if shit hits the fan, I can talk to the TA [teaching assistant] or go to office hours, you know.

That's my artillery, that's my backup. That's my close air support. (Travis)

The student veterans also said that the military had equipped them with "the ability to work in diverse and adverse situations, the ability to work in a team with people who don't think or agree or look like you" (Tia). They articulated an ability to adapt to different faculty or people: "So some of [the teachers] are different, right? Just like your different leaders in the military . . . and your job is to adapt to it" (Rudy).

Growth. The student veterans talked about the valuable growth that had occurred in the military due to being forced out of their comfort zone, and they expressed an appreciation for the experiences in the university setting that challenged them. They intentionally sought those challenging experiences, even situations that made them anxious, to stimulate growth because they knew that it ultimately led to success: "What it takes for me to be comfortable doesn't get me there. It's not in the roadmap to get to where I wanna be" (Allen).

Perspective and observation. Another coping behavior that had been learned in the military was expanding one's perspective or worldview. The student veterans cited the importance of seeing the big picture regarding class assignments, curriculum, university policies, tuition, the veterans support office, and student organizations. Some needed to remind themselves to take a step back and consider different perspectives or a wider scope; for others, it was an automatic behavioral response: "The military programmed me to see more big picture, how I fit into the puzzle, but then how everything around me fits into the puzzle, so a matter of programming" (Ryan). One veteran noted that this ability to grasp the big picture set her apart from her younger peers in numerous settings:

I'm not in the weeds. I can see outside the weeds. I can see the whole forest versus the weeds. Some of these young people, all they see is that next assignment, that next quiz, that next test, and they don't see that role that all of this puts into. (Susan)

They utilized their observational skills to process and analyze information and their environment in a way that supported successful adaptation: "But the best way to adapt to that is sit back for a while, observe, and then adjust accordingly" (Bob). This observation helped them to identify what tasks existed, their position, their resources, and any possible shortcomings. The analysis of that observation then drove how they prioritized their action, which led to more observation. This entire process, called the OODA loop (a military term: observe, orient, decide, act), was quite natural for many veterans, and they referenced this process as a strategy that had been taught to them in

the military: “I didn’t think that up; the OODA loop is a military thing” (Raoul). Many veterans saw this environment as a new environment to adapt to, and they applied processes that they had used in the past for successful adaptation to different cultures or situations:

I did the same thing that I did in the military. So as an interrogator, I needed to understand the Muslims. I needed to understand Afghans, Iraqis. And what did we do when we didn’t understand? A lot of guys would go and judge; but as an intel guy, I would try to understand them. So I integrated fully with them [students]. I started using their language; once I started doing that, just like with the Iraqis and the Afghans, I built a sense of rapport, and I was able to learn from them, and, by integration, I was able to adapt and understand them a little bit better. (Ryan)

Preparation

Many student veterans noted that it was essential to prepare for the transition to college or that they wished they would have prepared for it. Taking preparatory steps in anticipation of the transition, gathering valuable knowledge, and determining the nature of the transition that best suited their needs were key to their success.

Preparatory steps. Student veterans discussed the importance of setting up one’s housing and applying to colleges in order “to hit the ground running” (Bob). Logan emphasized the necessity of planning: “Try to make plans and set yourself up for success. Just like if you’re gonna go out on a patrol, you need to make sure you have all your gear ready. Well, make your life ready.” The plan was even more essential in the

context of the limited funding of the GI Bill as students strongly advised not wasting that financial resource by lacking direction:

Don't waste the GI Bill. . . . Make sure you have a clear path and a clear plan before you really start putting down your GI Bill. . . . Don't just mill around in community college thinking you're gonna figure it out and still have the GI Bill.

(Allen)

Another way in which they supported their positive adaptation was saving money and budgeting responsibly, long before separation from the military, in order to prepare for moving, hardships, unknown surprises, gaps in pay periods, and summer and winter break differences in GI Bill dispersion:

Don't get me wrong, the GI Bill is wonderful, but you're not like a normal college student that lives on Ramen normally. You have cars to pay for. You don't have your parents to fall back on. So making sure stuff was saved. And then learning to budget responsibly, so like the money factor, making sure that was well under control. (Greg)

Gathering knowledge. Key behaviors included seeking and acquiring the knowledge that allowed them to feel informed and have reasonable expectations. They called in advance to talk to personnel in admissions and the veterans office. Raoul explained,

I was very purposeful about going out and trying to find as much information about the transition as I could, heading into it. And as much information as I feel like I had, there was even more that had to be accomplished.

Mac emphasized knowing and understanding one's degree plan both "so you don't take all your easier core classes and then just get demolished by all these science courses later on" and "so that they're a full-time student the whole time." Allen advised veterans to "keep every single piece of paper they give you" and have a method of storing and organizing that information.

Nature of the transition. Participants had varied preferences for how they made the transition regarding institutional type and time between separation and enrollment at a university. For those students who might feel that they were not prepared academically or had experienced a significant gap in time since their last classroom experience, many veterans advocated refreshing oneself on the basics: "When you don't know the basics, even the basics are tough. So they built me up to that" (Bob). Mathematics and science skills were noted particularly as areas needing remediation or a refresher course; however, even though most veterans chose to utilize community colleges, a few discussed preparatory programs specifically for veterans or online learning resources such as Khan Academy (Allen) or Linda.com (Rudy). Eric warned that simply taking basics at a community college was not a sufficient preparation for him: "If you wanted to really be prepared for [SVSU], I had to do a lot more. That's why I specifically chose like the hardest instructors . . . would do extra problems, do extra homework."

Community colleges and junior colleges were preferred by those who wanted more time to prepare and ease into the university context:

I started off at a little bit slower pace, so that's why I went to [community college]. But she asked me, "Why don't you go to university?" I said, "Well no,

because for the same reason you won't get up and run a marathon right now because you're not conditioned for that yet." (Eric)

The community college setting was more relaxed, and they "could kind of try things out, maybe stumble a little bit, and really quickly make a course correction and do better at whatever it was" (Raoul).

Some of the participants had taken a break between separation and enrollment and others made the transitioned directly from the military to the university. This difference in the timing of the transition reflected the path that they had chosen at the time. None of the participants who chose to take a break articulated regret for this decision, whereas a couple of participants who did not take time for the transition to being a civilian noted that a gap of time might have been beneficial. Those who took the break expressed a need for finding direction and exploring a professional environment first. This time allowed them to be more purposeful and motivated when they did enroll: "I wanted to make sure that I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and I wasn't just trying to jump the gun after the military and just be like, 'Use that GI Bill, get out there'" (Greg). It also allowed time to adjust to interactions with civilians:

I took a little time off, even though I knew my eventual goal was to return to [SVSU]. Whenever I got out, associating with people who weren't in the military or had any experience, some of the things that you know you experience was. . . . I just needed a little more time. (Greg)

Those who chose to enroll at a university immediately demonstrated a long-burning desire for a college degree and a focused goal. As such, the time to explore, harness their

passion, and specify their direction was less essential to their adaptation. Logan shared that his motivating factor to enroll immediately stemmed from a fear of some of the negative veteran stigmas that circulated:

I did my best to get my college situation set up before I actually got out. I wanted to ensure that I had somewhere to go. I heard that people have a hard time if they get out, and they have a lull, and they don't really know what to do.

Locus of Control and Agentic Behavior

In an experience that felt wildly out of control, surreal, and overwhelming, behaviors such as seeking resources and planning helped student veterans to take control of their situation or environment. This agentic behavior in a critical period of seeming helplessness was instrumental in their positive adaptation because it grounded their locus of control (their belief in the amount of power they have in their life) in a much healthier context.

Seeking resources. The transition from military to the university is especially evident in terms of the philosophy and structure of support provided for student veterans. The stark contrast between military culture and college campuses in terms of flow of support resources and expectations for seeking resources could be jarring and disorienting for student veterans:

I know [Colonel Maples] says this all the time: We were raised in that push environment where our information and resources were pushed to us and everything, but now we have to learn how to pull, and we have to go seek out those resources. (Chris)

When student veterans recognized that “it’s something you have to go out and grab, and that you have to get, and you have to bring resources to yourself” (Ryan), they not only demonstrated a greater awareness of the environment, but they also responded in an agentic manner. Many identified this as a differentiating factor in a successful adaptation process and a student veteran who fails to thrive in the university setting. Many participants expressed frustration and a lack of sympathy towards veterans who expected resources to be pushed at them or who complained without acting to find resources: “If you don’t have all the tools, it’s because you didn’t go to the . . . you weren’t seeking them out” (Raoul).

Logan and others pointed to the wide array of resources but explained that pride and fear inhibited many veterans from capitalizing on those resources:

It’s really taking advantage of opportunities and benefits provided to you through your veteran status, and there are a lot there. I feel like people are afraid or too prideful to ask, and it’s like they’re there for a reason.

Susan echoed the necessity of these resources for all veterans as a part of healthy adaptation: “When the [veterans office staff] sends out information or we have events like [veteran specific orientation], you need to get your ass there, you need to participate in these things.” Raoul also dispelled arguments that might point to the talent or intelligence of an individual for success by identifying what he felt was the key differentiator:

There's nothing special about me that made that available to me and not to anybody else. . . . It's all out there, all you have to do is go get it . . . like I went out and applied for applications that most people don't apply for.

The veterans cited myriad resources of which they took advantage to set them up for success. Such resources included veteran-designated study rooms, marital counseling, links to resources from a staff email, peer mentors, admission counselors, socials, academic preparation workshops, scholarships, career fairs, veterans organizations, and more. With such a deluge of resources at their disposal, knowing how to capitalize on the resources in a balanced and effective manner was important and differing methods for doing so were shared. For example, Rudy advocated considering carefully what one is committed to and not compromising one's mission simply for opportunity, whereas Allen advocated a "never say no" philosophy. Raoul offered a slightly different perspective in asserting that a more important consideration was the effectiveness, dynamic, and interconnection of the resources: "It wasn't about having an additional tool, an additional resource. It was how to use them all effectively. . . . You have to be pulling a little bit on all the handles at the same time."

Planning. Behaviors such as prioritizing, decision making, goal setting, planning, imposing structure, and task management were important precursors of agentic behavior that established a healthy locus of control for the adaptation process. Rather than feeling defeated by the environmental and personal challenges or relying solely on support structures, the participants activated their own agentic energy to have more of a role in self-determining their success.

Prioritizing and decision making. Strong prioritization supported quality decision making for student veterans. Each participant expressed different priorities, with various values in individualized rank order, but most of them mentioned that they had to prioritize and make sacrifices in order to be successful in the university environment. They were faced with many competing demands and no predetermined decision-making processes when there was a conflict of priorities. Some used military training to assess what they should be prioritizing or doing in the moment: “Orienting yourself, basically prioritizing, figuring out what is the more important at that moment, and that in of itself is complex because there may be something that’s important and not immediate” (Raoul). Others discussed needing to explore and understand their own values and purpose to determine their priorities, which then allowed them to make decisions regarding how they invested their time and energy: “Really nailing down what my motivations were in life . . . it’s just really knowing my motivation, and like what motivates me helped my decision-making process” (Greg). Prioritization also contributed to confidence in declining or avoiding experiences that were not aligned with priorities: “If you have values set correct, then you don’t feel bad telling people no” (Rudy). Prioritization directed determination of decisions, even when others disagreed or when other things seemed more appealing. It empowered them to make difficult choices or sacrifices that aligned with what they deemed most important. Raoul noted that the practice of prioritizing alone does not equal success: “Prioritizing and making a schedule is great, but if you’re prioritizing the wrong things and executing it in a wrong way, you’re not helping yourself . . . you have to prioritize and break it down. It’s just not

possible to do everything.” The quality of one’s assessment of needs and circumstances, along with the more dynamic and responsive nature of prioritizing, was important, especially as some veterans noted that their priorities had to be readjusted:

My second semester was much better after I kinda just reflected and, you know, prioritized things differently. . . . Obviously, doing well in school was a priority, but at the same time, if I don’t take care of things at home first, I won’t be able to focus at school. (Chris)

Planning and goals. The study participants identified planning and goal setting as particularly important because they provided structure and direction during the adaptation process. A key difference in the university setting was the self-directed nature of the environment; there was no directive, accountability, or micromanagement of time. Two planning strategies that participants shared as methods that they had implemented to help them adapt to the unstructured environment of college were reverse planning and a military acronym for planning, BAMCIS. According to Travis, BAMCIS consisted of “begin planning, range recon, make recon, complete recon or complete your planning, issue the order, supervise.” He employed the strategy to gather information, make a plan, and then execute the plan. Ryan explained his use of reverse planning to manage his time and meet deadlines:

If I know I have to get something done, I can literally work through it in my head, and I use what we call reverse planning. So if I know it needs to be in at 1500, I need to have my draft done 24 hours prior. I need to have it checked. I need to review the syllabus, review the checklist.

Carolina (and others) also expressed the value of reverse planning:

Same thing like what we would do in the Marines. We knew we had by a certain date, we had something to do, so we'd mark it down and then count it back, estimate how many, how long it would take. And I still do that now; it's boring, and it takes a few hours, but I do that for every single class, every single event.

Rudy and Travis both utilized the syllabus as a guide for planning their semester and evaluating their progress. Student veterans are entering an environment where each course has its own intricate set of deadlines that compete rather than coordinate with other course deadlines, whereas in the military their entire schedule is coordinated and routine. In college, they have outside responsibilities and many deadlines that require intensive planning, such as finances. Rudy explained that he had made a plan based on the syllabi and allowed that plan to refocus and guide his action:

It's a busy course load, and so there's these distracting factors. But aiming back in, bring it, you know, having my planning straightened out, having everything plotted. I plot everything from the beginning of the semester. That's what I would tell [incoming student veterans], like take that syllabus and take a calendar, and plot everything on there, when it's due. And then for every week, you need to know what needs to be done when, and you have to review it every day, and it'll just keep you focused.

Commitment to planning allowed them to protect their time according to their values, to be more productive, and not be deterred by the unanticipated because they knew their schedule and their availability: "Planning what you can beforehand. . . . I

know exactly really how much time I have, and then how much time I don't have, so that way I can better utilize every hour" (Greg). Even as they advocated careful, detailed planning, they also emphasized the need to be flexible and adaptable when the plan goes awry:

You plan for that year, all the way out. And the thing people have gotta understand about plans is, they can change, and that's okay. You're not gonna die if it changes. It's just you might die if you don't plan. (Rudy)

A recurring concept that student veterans pointed to as a requisite aspect of successful veteran adaptation was identification of one's purpose, direction, and goals. As such, a component of this planning was not just planning in response to deadlines but planning that allowed them to discern their goals and the steps that were necessary to reach those goals. The behavior that they exhibited in their adaptation was setting short and long-term goals, which not only guided their direction and action but often served as a motivating force. Allen related that a step in his progressive adaptation was reflection on his purpose and long-term vision: "I really took a step back, and, I'm not so concerned where I end up afterwards, but I know what my general direction is, and I want to figure out how I can get there."

As some participants began to prepare for the transition to the next stage of life and conduct their career search, they articulated how they applied the same set of planning skills based on priorities and goals. Mac noted his ability to plan for his long-range goals: "I've actually learned from college to plan farther ahead." Mac knew what his passion and purpose were as he set his sights on a specific role, but he "did [his] due

diligence and asked questions about what it is, quality of life, kinda the job scope, that kind of stuff, moving for family, salary, all the stuff . . . because there's more than just me now." Mac and others demonstrated planning that encompassed purpose, passion, priorities, long-term goals, and short-term goals.

Structure. Mac (and others) pointed to creation of structure and time management as an aspect of their definition of a successfully adapted veteran: "When they do adapt, probably I would say they have a pretty laid out schedule . . . know what they're doing today, they know how the pieces fit together." The lack of structure in the university environment was one of the most disorienting challenges for these student veterans, and the need to impose structure and manage time became even more critical at the university level in comparison to the community college. Some had discovered their need for this in their previous institutions: "I already had like a system in place for everything by the time I got here" (Raoul). Others found a need for a higher level of structure and time management upon transfer to the university: "I didn't pick up on it until I got here at the university. You get slapped in the face, and it's like, 'Oh, shit, I gotta manage my time a shit-ton better'" (Eric).

Many articulated their specific system for organizing self and commitments and managing their time and lauded the use of technological systems or planners. However, this structure was more than a one-time organization; it was a consistent and integrated system that oriented everyday behavior: "Getting that stuff squared away and finding a system that works for you, and then being deliberate about it every day" (Rudy). Finding a system and structure that worked was a fundamental step in the adaptation process as it

allowed them to make sense of their environment and tangibly assert their locus of control from within rather than from without.

Raoul mentioned not forgetting the basic need to organize oneself and one's resources by setting up housing, supplies, and study space. Susan discussed the need to structure tasks in group work. However, the resource that was most discussed was the need to manage and structure time. Finding ways to structure time to be congruent with priorities or needs was important, whether time was allotted for attending class, working, spending time with family, studying, working out, or watching football. In fact, Tia explained that she chose outside employment to create more structure to her day, and others committed to a regular workout routine to create consistency. Still others, such as Greg, chose to view school as a job that he worked at during weekdays but then gave himself time to replenish his energy on the weekends.

Imposing structure also eases the stress of transition in that it creates parallels to the environment and culture from which they had come: "In the military, it's very structured . . . and when you're like, 'Okay, we're gonna impose the same structure in the university,' it helps. You're used to that. You're comfortable with that mindset" (Tom). Finding a routine ameliorated the tumultuous nature of the transition and allowed for a feeling of greater productivity: "Maintaining a regimented schedule because it's wonderful in the service, you know that. Zero to six to whatever time every day, you don't even have to think, and you can just do" (David). For these participants, committing to structure and consistent routine was intrinsically linked to their success: "Developing that plan for myself and that structure of like, 'I'm up by this time every

day, and this is what I have to do' . . . imposing structure definitely helped me a lot” (Greg).

Task management. Breaking down tasks into component steps, creating to-do lists, and demonstrating a proactive approach helped participants to manage what they needed to accomplish. Raoul equated his method of task management to when he was assigned a personal trainer in Special Operations. The trainer would do the complex plan to figure out what exactly and how much of everything he needed to do, and he could “focus on the activity at hand” (Raoul), increasing his efficiency and the effectiveness of his action. He applied the same concept by becoming his own trainer and inputting his plan into his calendar or to-do list: “All my RAM is focused on whatever I’m doing at that moment, and then I’ve completed that or I know my allotted time is up, and I’m gonna move on to the next thing” (Raoul). Task management included a process of constantly assessing what has been accomplished, what is needed, and what is the priority but it required action and accountability to produce results. A proactive rather than reactive approach to tasks was emphasized repeatedly: “That’s like one of the biggest things that I learned is to be proactive and accountable for my own stuff, and to really seek out help” (Logan).

Implementing Strategies for Academic Success

As students felt more empowered or agentic in their environment, they implemented behaviors that worked toward academic success with greater consistency and intentionality. Behaviors that participants emphasized included talking to professors,

arriving early to class, sitting in the front of the room, speaking up in class, and integrating good study habits.

Talking to professors. Connecting with their professors in office hours was emphasized as a helpful behavior because professors explained areas of confusion, provided various methods or analogies to illuminate a difficult concept, and served as valuable resources for future career and academic success. Not only did some participants enjoy the social connection to an older individual in their youth-dominated environment; they were able to discuss connections between the content and life experience in depth, which helped to scaffold the learning for them. Although asking for help in other areas might have been challenging, finding a way to break down those barriers for faculty interaction and assistance was beneficial for academic success:

Going to my professors and stuff, I just figured that's their job here, you know. I led people when I was in the military . . . if they had problems, I expected them to come to me. And so I just figured it'd be the same thing for professors. If I was having problems, I would go up to them and just ask them, and that helped a lot. (Chris)

For student veterans who avoided faculty as a whole due to negative perceptions of faculty treatment of veterans, Mac suggested observing and discerning whether one's instructor was open to questions and further discussion as a way to take advantage of those opportunities and avoid negative faculty interactions: "Observing the environment, also the professor, too. . . . Some of them are more accommodating to questions than others."

Presence and engagement. Presence and engagement in class were positive academic behaviors that these veterans demonstrated. The military mentality of sick days not existing and holding oneself accountable translated to academic success: “Really just sticking it out and actually going when you don’t want to and doing that, you know. You see all these empty seats all the time, and you realize that like that’s not the way to success” (Logan).

Active participation in class, whether note taking, active listening, asking questions, or sharing ideas, was important for academic success:

I’m very bold, so the boldness definitely helped the transition to life as a university student because the professors like when you speak up, especially when no one else wants to say anything. And you speak up, they take notice. (Carolina)

An interesting departure from the literature was that many veterans discussed the importance of sitting in the front of the classroom. Tia even noted that it caused her anxiety not to be seated in the front. Most veteran literature discusses the anxiety that lecture halls produce and accommodations for seating in the back where they can see the entire classroom. The participants did not explain why that was different for them, but they emphasized the value of sitting in the front. They noted seeing the board, listening to the professor’s lecture, and diminishing chatter from those sitting in back. Mac even shared how sitting in the front was such a priority for him to the point that he would race to class to claim his front seat position. This seating also held them accountable in that they had to arrive early to secure it, and because of their proximity to the professor, they

took better notes, stayed awake, and refrained from checking cell phones. Other benefits reaped from sitting in front were that they had more eye contact with professors, which made the lecture seem more personal and forced them to pay more attention. The proximity to the professor also increased the connection to the professor. They saw themselves as known and recognized due to their seating and participation.

Some learned positive classroom behaviors because they saw other veterans who were successful exhibit this behavior and imitated it to their benefit, whereas others had someone who provided the insight early in their academic career:

I had a really good teacher that I liked a lot who's a veteran, and he said, "You wanna be in the top 10%, come to class. You wanna get in the top 5, come to class ready to learn. And you wanna be in the top 2, come prepared and on time." And so that's kind of a big thing. And that's one thing I told myself, too, at the minimum, if I just show up, there's gotta be information that I can gain, even if I'm not getting it all. Just being there, you know. (Logan)

Academic success is not only how universities evaluate successful adaptation by student veterans, but those academic behaviors were part of the equation of what defines a successful student veteran for the student veterans themselves, as well:

They show up to class, do well. They're not stressed out. . . . I've met a few that have already adjusted, and they seem to be, other than being older, just another student in class. They go there, ask pertinent questions of the professor, do well on tests. And I don't see them again because they passed that course. (Mac)

Study habits. Participants shared a range of study habits that were instrumental to their academic adaptation. Study space, style of studying, academic resources, and strategies for studying were all key habits for their academic success. Logan preferred a quiet study space, and Bob and Mac advised that one's study space should not be at home, due to distractions. The style of studying was another consideration, as Bob and Greg expressed a strong preference for study groups because they provided the benefit of a different perspective. Tia and Eric mentioned utilizing resources, such as Rate my Professor, and an academic success center, to enhance academic success.

Also of interest were the strategies that participants adopted for adaptation. Logan made a connection between his military training and his study habits to recognize when he was not absorbing information: "The military teaches you, while you hike, you do a certain proportion of effort to a certain proportion of, you know, rest." He would take a break, do something more active, and then come back to that concept. However, he warned that, while "mixing it up" was beneficial, he tried not to skip around too much because he wanted his brain to gain momentum on a task or to warm up to that type of thinking. Eric came to a similar conclusion after consulting with an academic skills coach who advised him to

spend like an hour or two on each subject, and kind of take a little bit of a break, and kinda let [his] mind soak it in, and then take a break, do something else, anything else, and then come back to it, and then something will kinda spark.

This strategy prioritizes productive study time over quantity.

Another strategic consideration for studying was the amount of time invested in each course. Eric realized that he needed to be careful to balance the time allotted to each course and not let his most difficult courses consume him, forcing him to neglect other coursework. He became more strategic about investing productive studying time in each course. Logan's approach was to invest his time wisely in order to gain more significant margins on grades, rather than striving for perfection in any one course. He also knew in which classes he could expend less energy and which required more. He adjusted to the needs of his particular courses. This adjustment of time, approach, or level of studying to the particular course was also something that Tia learned as she advanced in her degree plan and noticed that higher-level courses required a different study approach. Eric recognized that a similar adjustment was needed based on the rigor of the institution as he transferred from a community college to a major university.

Changes in Behavior for Healthier Adaptation

The most indicative behaviors of adaptation were those that led to a healthier relationship and connection to the campus environment. Student veterans found footholds in their adaptation process by implementing the following: self-regulating behaviors, acts of vulnerability, connecting with their peers, and adapting to challenges. These behaviors were transformational for their experience and further developed their adaptation to campus life. The changes in behavior for healthier adaptation also revealed the greatest change in student veterans and portrayed the learning in which student veterans had engaged in order to adapt.

Self-regulation. Participants explained that, in order to thrive, they had to adjust their language use, exhibit self-control about what they said and how they said it, find healthier methods of addressing conflict, humble themselves, and find ways to be calm and slow down. Carolina had to practice stringent and focused self-regulation in this new and different setting, both for herself and for the way in which her actions reflected on the veteran population as a whole:

I have to remind myself that I cannot just say everything that I feel, especially when other students say . . . like sometimes they say things, and I have to remind myself that this is a completely different environment. There are two different playing grounds, and so I have to check myself with that because I definitely do not wanna cause a stir at school . . . and especially because as veterans, we should know better. We should have that self-control. People expect us to have that discipline. If we lack that discipline, it makes everyone look bad. (Carolina)

The new environment and culture of a college campus required focused and intentional regulation of self in a manner that was completely antithetical to how they had been trained and socialized in the military. Ryan elaborated,

You can't even talk to people the same way you talk to your subordinates or your peers. You know what I mean? You have to think a lot more before you say things. You have to change the words that you use so as to try not to offend somebody. Cursing isn't a form of language, you know? You can't speak in acronyms anymore. . . . I mean just the way you act. Your body language has to be different. Your everything has to be different. And that's why I think so many

people are intimidated by veterans because we are programmed with these certain traits, and it could come off as aggressive, and we wouldn't even know it.

Adjusting language use. One of the most commonly cited areas of self-regulation was adjusting language used with civilians. Eric shared that self-regulation in this area changed how he expressed himself in order to maintain positive relationships:

I don't really say exactly what I'm feeling anymore because you might kinda burn some bridges. That's kinda one of the main reasons why I kinda watch my language, and I try to watch what I say and be more considerate.

Participants explained that it was both the culture of the military that promoted a “weird vulgar primitive-like primal mentality” (Eric) and the intrinsic and integrated nature of swear words in military life, where “every acronym in the military, every other one has a swear word in there” (Bob). This caused issues when they entered the civilian world, where this was not the norm. Particularly in group projects, participants had to regulate their language heavily, both in jokes that might be considered offensive or disrespectful and recognizing that curse words can be more sensational in academic and professional settings than in the military. They had to learn to be intentional and adjust their language in the context of classroom or group projects. Ryan explained,

Okay, so if I'm working in a group setting, and previous when I was younger and wearing a uniform, I might use profanity as a point of emphasis, right? So like if I told you in the military, if I said, “Hey, go get these fucking trucks washed.” Right? I'm not cursing as a . . . it's a point of emphasis, like “Hey, we need to get this done right now.” I can't use that language in a group here.

View of conflict. Participants had to choose their battles in addition to changing their approach to interacting with others to allow for more positive social connections. This typically required a bit of reflection to recognize this as a need:

I had to back off, and that took some time, because of needing to see those situations where I needed to . . . gonna piss people off, and you're gonna offend people, and you're gonna lose those possible connections and friends. (Susan)

In an environment with more freedom and structure, the lack of accountability often aggravated participants. Self-regulation in that context meant recognizing that they could not control or hold peers accountable: "So I had to back off a lot. I had to downgrade authority-type attitude. I had to come back with, 'I'm not in charge anymore'" (Susan). Many participants echoed that an aspect of successful adaptation is humility. It was frequently explained as a personality characteristic but it was also cited as an active behavior that allowed participants to regulate themselves: "That's probably the biggest thing, humbling yourself a little bit every once in a while" (Greg). They had to see that their approach was hurting themselves and was not suited for the environment.

They had to learn to "bite their tongue" and not let ignorant or annoying behavior of others affect their response: "Every once in a while, you get somebody saying something stupid, and there was that, and I realized at that point that I can't get into that situation" (Allen). Developing patience for others and regulating their response to others were important social skills that they developed in the university context:

First of all, I take a breath, and then I just remember that. . . . I always think, "Is this conversation gonna matter in a few years?" And the answer is almost always

no. And then I ask, “Will this conversation matter in a few days?” The answer is almost always no. . . . I ask, “Is this conversation gonna matter in a few hours,” and if the answer is no, then I just take another break, and then I let it go.

(Carolina)

Encountering conflict in the civilian situation did not mean always avoiding it. Many developed a competence for addressing conflict in a positive manner:

Because I think people are afraid of the word *confrontation* a lot, and I think that that’s actually hurt us because we have to have confrontation to resolve problems. If I never confront you with a problem, we can never solve it, and I’m always gonna harbor it. (Rudy)

Regulation of pace and energy. Many veterans discussed the challenge of going from the high-pace, high-intensity environment of the military to the much slower pace and lower stakes of a campus setting. Logan explained that he had to learn to relax and calm down. He had to take a much more measured approach and learn how to “just read stuff and do little kinetic things.” David had to work to regulate his pace actively:

Just slowing down, like it’s hard because I’m a very high-strung person, you know. I just had to slow down. I just had to stop. . . . Still, every day, every single day, I wake up, I just try to tell myself to stop, just slow down.

Regulation and adaptation. Regulation addressed the challenges that were ingrained as part of their nature and thus required an investment of intentional energy and maintenance over time. Ryan explained this self-regulation as an active behavior of reprogramming oneself from military personnel to civilian:

Just like you learned how to be a soldier, eventually you'll learn how to do it again because you were programmed for so long. But as hard as it was for them to tear that out of you and reprogram you, you have to learn how to reprogram yourself, and it takes time.

Acts of vulnerability. Participants spoke in depth about the need to act in a vulnerable manner in order to adapt successfully. Many identified asking for help as the first step to being successful and the deciding factor for success:

I think the first sign of someone on the right steps to being successful is someone who is willing to ask for help. Because I don't know how many veterans, they could be getting F's on every single exam, and they refuse still to talk to anybody. (Travis)

Acts of vulnerability included asking teaching assistants, faculty, advisors, staff, and family members for help. Some related it to calling in "close air support" (Travis). There were valuable benefits and resources at their disposal but they had to overcome their fear or inhibition to reach out and ask for help. Motivating factors for doing so were the benefits derived from reaching out to others or observing the success of those who had sought assistance. They gained important information or resources that could be accessed only by asking for help, and many pointed to dramatic increases in their academic performance, comprehension of material, and grade point average as a result of doing so.

Mac explained that he had to change the way he viewed the environment, especially in contrast to the military:

College is different, it's more . . . it's not so much a start-end process either, it's a learning in between obviously. So you're supposed to ask questions. It's a conversation back and forth to professors, conversations with the people next to you in class, or even myself when I talk to my wife.

Logan also explained why the military approach of not seeking help was ill suited for success in the university context:

I think that's like another big thing, is making sure that you're actually seeking out the help from people because they're not gonna come to you like they would in the military to ensure that your performance is up to par.

Their success was in their hands and was a self-directed action. They had to seek help and find resources that led to success. This was humbling, vulnerable, and hard work.

Ryan shared some tough advice that he considered to be key to adapting:

That's my advice, is be able to change, be able to immerse yourself, and realize that, "Thank you for your service, you did great things" but no one cares, now you need to take care of yourself. You need to build that foundation of support. But you have to do it yourself, and it sucks. Now you can use the resources that they give you, the university, the VA [Veterans Administration], use those resources as building blocks. They're not gonna do it for you like the military did. You have to literally build it brick by brick, using the resources they give you. Sometimes you gotta go find the resources, but once you build that solid foundations, it's going downhill.

This pointed not only to the humbling aspect of asking for help but also to the active nature of asking for help and building a system for oneself that supports success. Ryan described active energy rather than passive helplessness (agency), but he also recognized the inability to be self-sufficient and the need to activate one's resources and social support, as well.

Rudy and Tom highlighted a dimension of asking for help that provided insight into how one should request assistance. Rudy explained that the question itself was important: "I think veterans fail to ask the right questions, and they get frustrated with the initial responses because they take them at face value and they don't try to put themselves in that perspective." Tom noted the power of questions:

Questions about resources. You don't know until you ask. I mean whether it's, you know, tutoring, counseling, studying, people who have been there and done it, people who have advice. So what would I ask? Where is it? Is it worth my time? Because time is a resource that I have to personally work very hard to manage. Did it help you, so I can gauge if it's a benefit to me.

The participants explained how they had to come to terms with their shortcomings. They had to humble themselves, reminding themselves that they were not perfect and did not know everything. In fact, Susan pointed out that there was a great deal that they did not know, providing a specific example of how she asked for help, especially for internship interviews. The student veterans shared that they had to address ingrained military concepts of self-sufficiency and accept weaknesses:

It took a little bit to get rid of it because that was the chip on the shoulder. That was the suit I wore for the last 7 years, and that was expected. For the leadership to show—asking too much questions, not being sure, or “let me go find out” was a sign of weakness as a leader. You wanted to have the answer right now. “I need it now. I need it done now.” (Mac)

Recognizing why that behavior was a part of the military culture but acknowledging that it could impede success in the university was important. Many of the participants saw self-sufficiency as a part of their identity, so adapting to a new environment required self-exploration of this concept and breaking down conceptions of self-sufficiency, of manliness, and of what is healthy. Travis described this reflection and acceptance: “So accepting that I’m not a rock. I’m not impervious, and just being more willing to reach out. Like that’s something that’s been invaluable for me to understand and succeed in my classes.”

Connecting with peers. A powerful change that indicated that the student veterans had adapted was connecting with peers in a positive manner. They suspended judgments about peers, figured out how to connect with civilians, integrated by joining an organization, and found their niche by helping others.

Suspending judgment. The first step to connecting with peers was suspending judgment, going outside their comfort zone socially, and giving their traditional-age peers a chance. Participants described how they challenged their assumptions and preconceived notions regarding their peers to form more positive relationships. Travis saw the value of a diverse community:

If I'm only surrounding myself with other veterans here at [SVSU], I'm depriving myself of other friendships that I could possibly making, just meeting new people, growing as an individual. . . . Every person is their own entity.

What's the harm in trying to just talk to somebody? If you don't like the person, don't talk to them anymore. But you can't find out who you are really as a human being unless you challenge yourself and talk to people that you disagree with.

Allen echoed the importance of seeing people as individuals and giving them a chance:

“Really getting out there and giving people chances is probably one of the better pieces of advice I could give people, not assuming that everybody is not good.” Inherent in seeing them as individuals is examining the faulty logic of stereotypes: “For some reason, maybe it's a humanistic trait, they lump all civilians into certain categories that are completely untrue. To sum it up quickly, it's just I believe that they think that civilians are beneath them” (Tom).

Carolina pushed herself out of her comfort zone because she knew that it would be disadvantageous to avoid her peers:

Get to know your classmates. It's very easy to fall back on the other veterans, but you're gonna have to deal with the classmates. So get to know them well, and you'll see a different side of them, and it'll make your life a lot easier.

Mac recognized the academic advantage that he was missing by avoiding his peers due to the “chip on [his] shoulder” and feeling like he was “too cool to be hanging out here with these 18- or 19-year-olds.” He could “bounce notes off of them” and understand

what was going on in lecture better; he did not have to maintain the mentality of “I can do this by myself.” He found greater success when he utilized his peers.

Greg challenged himself and his fellow veterans to remember that they “were young once” and that their peers were “just learning to express themselves.” That perspective taking allowed Greg to advise others to consider that

you can talk to them like a normal person because going off on a person is not gonna change their mind. It’s not gonna change their opinion of something . . . you gotta just engage with them, and . . . at least you’re not holding on to that anger.

Seeing things differently allowed them to change their behavior. Insights were powerful activators of agency and adaptation, as with Travis, who decided that isolating himself was not just unhealthy, but it limited the experience and opportunities that had been extended to him through the GI Bill:

I felt like if I’m coming here, I don’t wanna be the nail that sticks out that tries to go against a current when the water is warm and jump in, and I felt like I was depriving myself of that college experience.

Rudy’s question of himself prompted a similar path of adaptation, even as he was acutely aware of how outside his comfort zone the university made him:

Initially, I’m kinda getting, “Oh, why am I here? No!” You know, cry about it. . . . But I always have to bring myself back around and say, “I am the oddity, not the normality,” right? But that doesn’t mean that it has to be a problem, so how can I turn that into an opportunity or a good thing?

Making a connection. The specific behaviors that allowed student veterans to make a connection varied, but it required vulnerability and adaptation. Some of the behaviors that enabled a connection to be forged were the following: they had to find the motivation to connect, they had to allow for connections to be made, they had to adjust their social behaviors towards their peers, and they had to overcome any remaining issues in connecting with civilians by reflecting on their perspective and the perspectives of others.

Motivation. Most of the participants had to see the value in connecting with their peers. Many were able to tap into their desire for future success in the workplace to motivate them to find a way to connect. Ryan's acceptance that interacting with his younger peers was not a problem that would go away helped to motivate him to make a change:

That has eased a lot of my . . . I don't wanna say aggression, but aggression towards them. So instead of getting angry and defensive, I tried to better understand them in order to adapt myself because I knew I'd have to be working with them more in the future. And that was the most successful way that I saw to accomplish my goals.

Rudy reported difficulty in connecting with his peers as a leadership or generational challenge that he would have to overcome in the workplace:

I read a lot of stuff, and there's a lot of complaints about millennials and all this other stuff. . . . The leadership challenge has been raised, and we as leaders . . . have new talent that thinks a different way. . . . What I'm getting to learn is that

firsthand, so I'm a boss or I'm a manager, you know, I got these guys, well, that's the way they wanna communicate. If that's more effective than me putting a memo out or whatever . . . whatever works for them to get the mission done, then that's what we have to do as leaders is adapt ourselves in a way.

He also saw value in the methods of his peers, which motivated him to learn from them and adapt to the generational differences:

They could get stuff done on their phones waiting for the bus, and I'm like, "Oh, wait, I gotta get to my desk, and sit down with my full-size keyboard. Let me make a list, and type it up" [laughs].

For others, their motivation to connect was an aspect of their own well-being and thriving and recognizing the advantage that a strong network presented for their own success. Carolina reflected that the social connections that she allowed herself had a transformative effect on her that changed not only the way she viewed civilians but how she viewed herself and motivated her to connect with others:

I just had it kind of hit me in the face, and I had to interact with the other students and see them as people. So just interacting with them and going to office hours and talking to the professor, and just learning that they're also humans, and remember that I also was a human, a major thing.

Ryan and Allen agreed that the value of the social connection was worth the challenge in creating it but commented that they did not initially recognize the importance of a social network of support. Ryan explained that his experience motivated him to connect to survive and later to thrive:

Once I was able to start developing those networks again, that's when things really went on the up, but it took a prolonged period of time. . . . Once I hit that realization point that, if I don't do this, I will probably die, I probably won't survive, you know? So I had to, I essentially latched on, I did what I think any human would do, I had to latch on to a bunch of different things and like pull them into me. I had to create my own network.

Allen shared that his motivation to connect stemmed from the realization that he was missing a valuable network:

What I've learned at this point is that the network I'm gaining and the community I'm learning about is more important than basically anything else I'm gonna get here. So being able to call on that one person or have some, you know, a network of people that I can, if I have a problem And through their network, they can point me in the direction of somebody that is helpful. . . . So as far as the social aspect, once that started, I took a step back, and I realized that, you know, what's the difference of me coming to [SVSU] or going to some other random school if I'm not going to take advantage of the community here. So it took a pretty jarring situation for me to take a step back and realize I was wasting an opportunity by not inserting myself into the community at [SVSU].

Chris agreed about the value of "just having good relationships with people" and Rudy emphasized the importance of "picking and choosing your support network and building it yourself." Recognizing the value of a network of social support was an essential step

in making a connection because it motivated these participants to create opportunities to make the necessary social adaptations to connect.

Allowing for connection. Participants shared that they had to adjust their attitude of openness to connection and force themselves out of their comfort zone. Travis explained how his openness to connect with others had allowed for friendships to form with classmates over time:

I think another thing that has helped me, and it's sort of . . . the two things like the habits tie into each other. There's just that adjustment process. Coming and being more open. Being able to talk to other classmates is how you're able to make friends . . . you start seeing a lot of familiar faces . . . you sign up for the same classes together So basically, it's gotten to the point where I know two or three people in every single class, and having that support network.

Carolina pointed to this openness as key to her well-being: "I've been able to thrive more since I've been more open with people. I've been just doing very well." For some, they were not necessarily open but were forced to connect through their involvement. Travis discussed that "getting a job [was] another good thing because [he] was forced to work with civilians and people that were 18 or 20-21." Rudy explained that having to go to chamber of commerce events as part of his job and "make friends with all these civilians" helped him to address his military conception of "nasty civilians" as he had to "force [himself] to adapt to interacting with new people."

Adjusting social behaviors. Adjustments to social behaviors included observing others to adapt behaviors, adjusting demeanors to be more socially palatable, and

incorporating strategies to foster more positive group dynamics. Tom reported that he made adjustments based on careful observations of others: “You learn their norms because they’re not the norms that I had, and they could be conversational norms, behavioral norms, and all that stuff. So you have to learn those things by interacting with them.” Rudy’s adjustment in behavior to connect with others in a more positive manner included managing his facial expressions:

I got real good at smiling now, which I wasn’t good at. And so I think it’s funny because it’s almost an automatic thing now, even if I get angry, I start to smile . . . and you’d be surprised how that’ll change your attitude overall.

Greg was able to connect with his peers in a more positive manner by adjusting his behavior and leadership in group work so that he was leading his group in a less direct, overt manner; however, it took time and patience to lead in this egalitarian manner where process was prioritized over results in order to stimulate greater productivity and buy-in from his peers:

I think just trying to get people more involved in a way that’s not telling, but “What’s your idea? What things help you? What do you think we should do? Let’s try that.” Even if I know it’s gonna be an hour wasted. If it means that we get a couple more, like everyone can feel productive later on, then it ends up being worth it.

Susan recognized that she needed to listen more in her group interactions because there was great value in the perspectives of others: “That was nice because more people’s

inputs can help see things. I may see it this way, while somebody else comes from this angle and this angle. . . . And I need to be able to listen.”

Perspective. Gaining perspective was not only a powerful cognitive process that was fundamental to seeing a change in the social engagement behaviors of the participants; it was also a behavioral strategy in that the participants had to learn another perspective and regulate themselves by keeping that perspective in mind when they became frustrated or angry. Greg discussed how he had to remember “that the people [he] was in the class with are younger, and their viewpoints on things may not either be fully developed, or they may not have as high a priority whenever it comes to school.” Carolina expressed that perspective taking and empathy were continuing mechanisms of regulation for her when interacting with her peers:

I feel that I’m pretty adjusted now. I still have to remind myself to calm myself down sometimes. It’s not bad, I just have to remember that all the students are going through the same things, and I have to remember how I was when I was their age. So it’s a lot easier to do it.

Recognizing that, as military personnel, they had different experiences and expectations than the younger students was an important perspective. It was not these younger students’ fault that they lacked those experiences, perspectives, and behaviors. Ryan explained that he had come to terms with opinions that went against everything that he believed in and knew to be true:

That's why they call it "the service." You essentially put yourself on the line so other people don't have to. You go through misery so that . . . it's not their fault, they just weren't forced to grow up overnight like we were.

He also recognized that the military had trained him in ways that society had not done for his younger peers: "They don't have that accountability, and it's not their fault."

Ryan also saw that the "military wasn't the only option, that's not the only perspective," and he was "able to learn from others . . . even from a professional point of view." Ryan credited his ability to adapt to the cultural awareness training that the military had instilled in him as he intentionally worked to understand his younger peers:

I still struggle with it, but . . . time, understanding. The more time you spend around . . . so I made it a goal of mine to . . . because it made me so angry, and I didn't understand it. I made it a goal of mine to integrate, to hang . . . like a lot of my friends, even to this day, are a lot younger, they're the 18-22 demographic. And I'm 28 years old, . . . but to try to better understand . . . it's cultural awareness. That's why the military spends so much time and money on it, because it actually works.

Integrating socially. The participants connected to their peers and forged a social network by joining an organization and getting involved in a community. This motivation to be involved included both taking advantage of the opportunities and recognizing the multiple benefits that being involved provided. For most veterans, the initial community or group that they joined was a veteran-affiliated organization, but many discussed involvement that benefitted them greatly outside of the typical veteran

communities. Tom and Raoul expressed eagerness and strong motivation to capitalize on the involvement opportunities that SVSU offered. Tom shared that this was his primary strategy for adaptation:

I had heard that veterans tend to do better if they're more involved. So I looked into that, and I took it, and I ran with it. My way of adjusting was to jump headlong into the fray, take a bite of everything. I wanted to know what organizations there were, I wanted to join said organizations, I wanted to lead those organizations. So, I mean my adjustment process was to just be involved. . . . I was actually excited, and I wanted to drink everything in, take it in, and enjoy it.

Raoul echoed this approach to adaptation:

Really, the only thing I did was because I wanted to make sure that I did integrate like into the social setting and like the extracurricular stuff. . . . I made a very conscious decision when I got here to [SVSU] . . . to get out and involve myself in extracurriculars . . . include more than just the academics as part of my life. . . . I mean, it did exactly what I thought it was gonna do, like it's been awesome.

It is important to note that both of these participants were referring to their adaptation to SVSU regarding these comments. Both had attended other institutions, and Tom had worked extensively before returning to college. This was more of the secondary level of adaptation, particularly for Raoul, who was responding to what he felt was lacking in his previous institutional experience. Both were strong advocates of veterans taking advantage of the benefits that involvement provided and emphasized that their decision

to become involved was a key component in their successful adaptation. Allen agreed with their assertion:

There's so many people here, and there's so many different avenues to get involved and be in communities and get adjusted and actually be a part of [SVSU]. You just have to find something where you can go and really feel like you belong to that, and that's what successful adjustment means.

The participants identified various benefits of involvement. Some of the benefits that they highlighted were engaging in activities that align with personal interests, meeting important people, being invited to events, expanding the network, gaining social support, and enjoying a sense of belonging. Raoul shared a story in which his involvement with one organization aligned with his interests and provided a valuable connection:

It's a way to get involved . . . something that's along the path of my interests, and I enjoy doing, and I get outside the classroom. And because of that, I got to meet and hang out with the Commandant of the Marine Corps for about 4 hours, and I've made good connections with people that I've interacted with through that. Another organization allowed him "the opportunity to go to [local medical school] and spend a weekend down there and go see everything and do walkthroughs and tours and meet with the Dean of Admissions." He stressed that that his involvement had "definitely paid dividends."

Tia emphasized that most veterans "want to seclude themselves and not get involved" but contended that "networking is the most important thing." Allen strongly

advised other veterans to take advantage of the network despite the desire to have the mentality of “just head down, let’s do it.” Allen’s divorce helped him to recognize the value of “a core network of support within the school” because “before that, [he] was kinda in [his] lane, and [he] was just going, it was go to school, get through school, and be done, and go live life.” His involvement gave him not only a support network but also a sense of belonging: “It’s you inserting yourself in that culture and having a sense of belonging without it feeling awkward.” Involvement allowed Ryan to survive, adapt, and understand his new social environment: “I saw that I had to get involved instead of just quitting, right? I had to immerse myself in this new environment in order to better understand. It was a survival tool, subconsciously, if you will.”

Helping others. Helping others allowed these student veterans to adjust by giving them a purpose and a motivation. Allen explained that helping others was a key ingredient to his successful adaptation:

Getting myself involved in helping people who needed the help really helped me in the long run, even though it sounds . . . or to some people, it might sound counterintuitive to go help other people, and then it’ll help me. But in that process of helping them, I just keep on reinforcing it on my end, and it just helps me in the long run. And that was part of the success strategy for sure.

Allen noted that “helping other students within those classes was just extremely helpful” in reinforcing his learning of the material. He also derived great meaning and purpose in his mission to “get more veterans tied into the community here.”

Many of the veterans shared how helping others was a motivator and assisted in their adaptation because, as they found a niche, meaningful work, and a worthy purpose, they found a deeper connection. Rudy shared that his desire to help and share his wisdom and experience allowed him to connect with his traditional-age peers by “show[ing] leadership from a student perspective towards other students” and explaining the broader perspective and value of what they were learning for their future careers. Logan reported that being motivated to help other veterans had played a role in his adaptation as it permeated his behavior and the community of veterans. It was this approach that supported a brotherhood mentality, even as the environmental setting changed:

Doing stuff like, where I’m helping you now, is like hopefully this will turn into a new [veterans mentoring] program or anything. And it is a tight-knit community and [you] realize that you’re helping your other service members. And maybe one day I’ll be in a position to where I own a company and can hire veterans. Just kinda looking out for each other, just like you would in the service, and taking a hand, if someone is offering you a hand, take that. Like, hey, wouldn’t do it if they didn’t want to or weren’t willing.

Adapting to challenges. Adaptability as a behavior tactic to overcome challenges was a concept that emerged in various forms. Bob used adaptability to adapt his social behaviors, perspective, and approach to overcome challenges that he faced as a student to become more successful and less frustrated:

I try to be the guy . . . that's like, "We got this. Don't worry. It'll be alright." And I sort of mold it in order to that . . . like where I had expectations of people who I was studying with, and they would not meet them So that was the hindrance, but I adapted to it, too. I turned it into more, I'm just a team player now, not as I guess militaristic.

Bob's summarized his adaptive strategy as, "I guess I try to look at every environment . . . do as the Romans do, so I try to do that." Tom explained that adaptation is a fundamental survival behavior requisite for student veterans to thrive, but it is a concept that many student veterans fight:

If you take somebody or something, and you put it in a new environment, and it doesn't adjust to that environment, it's probably gonna die. And if it's not gonna die, it's not gonna be very happy. And you meet a lot of unhappy veterans.

For Allen, adaptability was about being flexible and adjusting when plans went awry. He exhibited resilience, an adaptive behavior in the face of setback, as he adjusted and recovered from a major personal challenge that had affected all areas of his life:

I got my legs kicked out from under me . . . my grades slid . . . and I reassessed where I was. I looked at what the horizon looked like at that point, what the future looked like at that point, and I readjusted. So keeping your head on a swivel, being able to readjust, and not letting one thing just destroy your momentum, is really probably one of the biggest things you can do.

Ryan's adaptation to the university demonstrated a growth mindset where failure and mistakes helped him to learn grow and adapt:

You don't know, nothing you've used before. So like on deployment, right, you know to react to contact. You know how to defend yourself. There's no defense for this. You literally have to go out, fail, and then learn, and then go out, fail again, and then learn and develop.

Moving through failure, having back-up plans, being adaptable, and adjusting as he learned were key to Ryan's success:

There's no checklist. There is no structure. . . . They always say when you're in, have a plan, realize your plan is not gonna work. I know it's condescending, but you gotta have a plan A, B, C, D, E, and F.

Managing stress. One of the specific challenges to which student veterans had to adapt was stress, stemming from their service in the military, their social environment, and the academy. Behavioral strategies that were implemented to manage stress included creating space for hobbies and fitness, maintaining balance, and staying busy. An example of integrating hobbies as a method of stress management was that Chris, a singer, would "turn up the radio and sing along" when he felt stressed or how simply "riding [his] motorcycle" provided a positive outlet for stress. Rudy, Chris, Ryan, and others emphasized the ameliorative effects of working out: "Going to the gym on a regular basis, and so just taking care of my body, and let it take care of me type thing" (Chris).

Ryan, Tom, Tia, and others expressed how staying busy was helpful for them to cope with stress. It allowed Ryan to avoid negative behaviors as well:

I saw that, so once it got to the point where like alcohol and drugs was a big thing and I had to lay off of that, I saw that I had to keep myself busy. And that was something in the military that always helped me from the stress and anxiety, the bad feelings, the nightmares, all that, was if I was busy, I didn't have time to think about that stuff. So, I literally loaded my plate when I was in school. I got involved in stuff on campus. . . . I put so much on my plate that I didn't have time to think about the bad stuff.

Tom shared that he had adapted a similar strategy as a way to manage his anxiety and maintain a healthier mental state: "Diving headlong into the fray is actually therapeutic for me. I had learned that, if I'm sedentary for about 72 hours, I go crazy. I slip into these depressions, these manic episodes. I've learned that about myself." Ryan acknowledged that management of stress equated to a balanced perspective in his academics and social life: "I'd rather get my C's and B's and have a social life and be able to deflate some of that stress."

Family dynamics. Another major area of adaptation was at home with family and significant others. These student veterans faced the challenges of addressing competing priorities with limited time, expectations from family, relationship issues, and demanding responsibilities. They had to adapt to those challenges by establishing ground rules, adjusting priorities, protecting family time, and improving their marriage.

Establishing ground rules and priorities. Mac, Rudy, and Susan pointed to the onslaught of demands and expectations of family upon separation from the military as a challenge that they had to address. Mac found a balance between seeing his nieces and

other family whom he had missed and being academically successful by establishing ground rules:

When I first got here, it's all lovey-dovey. Everyone's so glad to see you back in [state]. But there's still schoolwork to be done. Everyone wants to hang out with you on the weekend. Everyone wants to come by and have dinner. So definitely setting ground rules. . . . I can only spend so much time. I have to get back to knock out my schoolwork.

Susan adapted to the family expectations by communicating her needs:

It was, "Hey, I'm having a hard time here. I need some help from you guys. But I also need you guys to back off a little bit because I'm not coming right into this . . . this is not going to happen overnight."

Some of the family responsibilities required changes in the approach to school as they reflected on their priorities and what mattered most:

My daughter, she's only gonna be 1 year old one time, right. . . . I have to spend time with my daughter because we need to go to the park. . . . Priority is sometimes, as much as it pains me to say, you have to choose against studying.

(Mac)

Protecting family time. Many of the veterans stated that the transition was quite difficult on their marriage or relationships. Key adaptive strategies were to prioritize time with family and then to protect that time, to find a balance between school and family, to appreciate family time, and to be present at home. Greg recognized how his

mission focus on academic success had damaging consequences on the health of his marriage, and he made a course correction:

Making my wife a priority helped. Because like there was a while where it wasn't that I wouldn't try to spend time with her or anything like that, but she wasn't on that list of "Hey, I need to make sure and make time for her," and it definitely had a negative effect on our relationship. But whenever I took the time to "Hey, this is a priority. This is, you know, making sure that like I'm making decisions that are healthy for our relationship." That helped me in the long run because we're happier together because of it.

Mac showed his prioritization in his scheduling time for "a dinner with her every night" but sought balance between classes and family with a consistent schedule. Chris also had to adjust his original approach to protect time with his fiancée in a more balanced manner:

I was kind of treating it like a deployment where I was pretty laser focused and wanted to do all the right things, but I wasn't balancing out my personal life and school life very well . . . and some things that I thought were important. . . . I kinda dropped doing a lot of the extracurricular stuff because I didn't feel like I was benefitting from it. And that allowed me to focus a little bit more on my relationship at home.

Logan and his wife exhibited an attitude of appreciation for whatever time they were able to share:

Better seeing each other at night at least, you know, sleeping in the same bed, than it is to be deployed or be gone for work trips or training or whatever it is. So it's just appreciate what you do have.

Chris adapted by not only making the time but making it quality time by being present and engaged:

Now whenever I go home, I'm home. I'm not at school anymore. Some things, for example, I won't leave campus until I'm ready, I'm at a good point now. But she knows, if I'm home, now I'm hers.

Improving relationship with spouse. The participants shared various adaptive behaviors to improve their relationship with their partners. Mac adapted by communicating more with his wife so they could be a stronger team and work together to overcome obstacles:

I learned to talk to my wife more about it. From the military, we're used to kind of collecting stuff and holding it on our shoulders, and if we have problems, not telling anyone. I learned quickly talking to my wife . . . to say what the problem is so we can work out a plan.

Chris had to learn to incorporate his partner into his life and decisions more and recognize that she was going through a transition and adaptation process of her own:

Now it's a lot better. She's adjusted here. She has a good job and support network, and she takes care of most of the home stuff while I'm in school. Just learning that I can't do everything by myself like I was originally accustomed to.

Greg pointed to numerous changes that he had made to strengthen his relationship with his wife:

Being more open . . . she would definitely say I was closed off, and I wouldn't talk about necessarily my experiences whenever it came to my time in the military. . . . She doesn't necessarily need to know everything, but being able to communicate my emotions or how I feel. I guess by closing off that part of me, I wasn't necessarily doing that. And so it's something I've had to get a lot better at. . . . What helped me personally was being more sensitive to her needs . . . she has her own whole set of things that she's dealing with . . . being more sensitive and listening to each other. . . . It's doing the little things, you know, just finding like, "Oh, here's a little surprise or a heartfelt note," stuff like that. That was really helpful.

Significance of Behavior

Critical to understanding the role of behavior is acknowledging that this behavior did not occur in a vacuum. It was a part of a triadic dynamic in which environment and cognitive processes and personality were inseparable components. Without them, the behaviors most likely would not have occurred. However, it is these behaviors that distinguish successful adaptation; it is the agency that determines adaptation. For these veterans, utilizing positive behaviors learned from the military, preparing, engaging in agentic behavior, implementing strategies for academic success, and changing their behavior for healthier adaptation allowed them to learn how to adapt to college. Discussion of the findings of the role of behavior is presented in detail in Chapter V.

Impediments to Successful Adaptation

Although this study's research question focused on how student veterans adapt, a frequent method by which participants addressed this question was an explanation of how student veterans do *not* adapt or are impeded from adapting successfully. In fact, when asked to define successful adaptation, many student veterans struggled to describe what it was and instead responded by saying what it was not. This proclivity to respond in the negative was important and telling in how they understood this process. For the participants, the path to successful adaptation could vary and provide numerous approaches, but certain cognitive processes, personality types, and behaviors seemed to be paths that definitively foreclosed the ability to adapt successfully. In their explanations of what impedes successful adaptation, cognitive processes, personality, and behavior seemed to be articulated more than environmental factors. However, these student veterans were discussing the adaptation process through the contextual lens of a university with a great deal of environmental support and resources. Figure 4 provides a summative analysis of factors that can impede student veteran adaptation.

Impeding Environmental Factors

Two of the positive environmental factors—ample resources and a large veteran community—had drawbacks that veterans suggested could impede a successful adaptation process. They shared that, for some, ample resources created a dependency on those resources or could create expectations that could not be continued after their time as a student: “I almost feel like they might set a bad precedence in trying to roll out the red carpet, so to speak” (Rudy). In addition, having a large veteran community allowed

Impediments to Successful Adaptation

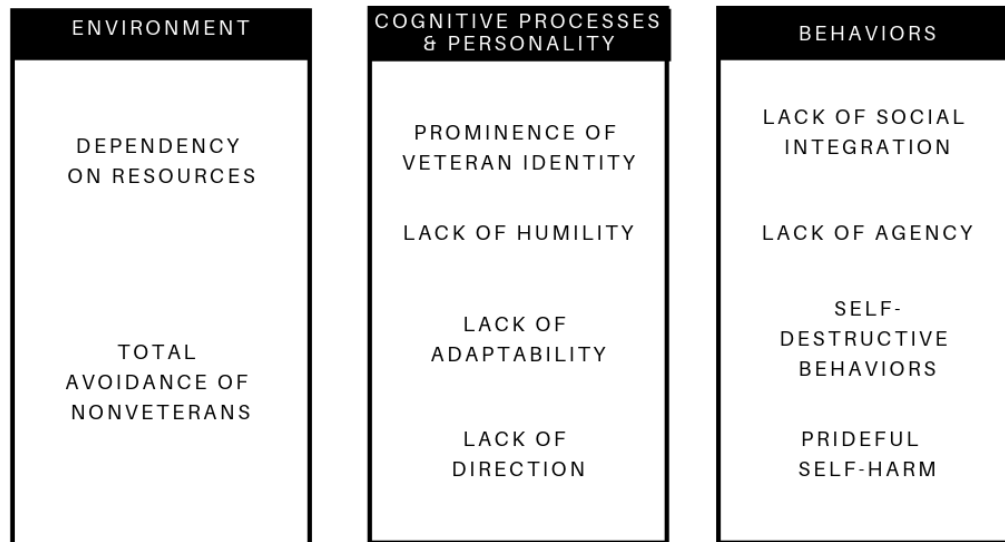


Figure 4. Impediments to successful adaptation.

some student veterans to isolate themselves from civilians and perpetuate negative conceptions of civilians:

I see people who . . . talk negatively about civilians. It's because they're reluctant to give up their status as "not a civilian," and so they just simply don't want to interact with that population. . . . And for some of them, they believe that civilians are beneath them. . . . And the only people they identify with or hang out with are likeminded people, and they're a very small tight-knit group. Luckily for them, they're able to find other people like themselves because, if they didn't, it would be real lonely. (Tom)

Impeding Cognitive Processes and Personality

Prominence of the veteran identity, a lack of humility, a lack of adaptability, and a lack of direction were cognitive processes and personality traits that were often observed in student veterans who were struggling to adapt and thrive. These may be challenges that other student veterans faced, but for some student veterans, these cognitive processes and personality traits became the stumbling block that prevented successful adaptation.

Prominence of the veteran identity. A key hindrance that participants identified as a characteristic of student veterans who were not adapting was an “identity issue” (Chris) in which those student veterans’ concept of self was so intertwined with their military identity that it “could make up their entire identity” (Tom). The participants explained that, for these veterans, this transition was not a desired one and their new civilian status did not resonate and was often seen as worthless in light of their previous experience. For these individuals, it was difficult when they were not able to see the value in anything beyond their military service: “It’s more that kind of loss of identity . . . the military was the best thing that ever happened to them, and they can’t move past that . . . they have such a narrow perspective on things” (Chris). Being defined by one’s military identity made the transition more difficult because these individuals lost an integral component of their self-worth and identity:

People who had so much of who they were was wrapped up in “I’m an Army paratrooper, I’m a whatever.” Like not to say that they didn’t have substance or value in themselves, but so much of it rested on this military identity that it was a

crutch. Take that crutch out from underneath them, like they're not . . . they haven't been standing on their own, they've been relying on this other thing.

(Raoul)

Most veterans face identity dissonance (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), but for those whose military service defined their entire self-worth, they clung to their past identity even more so, which made adaptation nearly impossible. The healthier cognitive process for adaptation was distinguished by Travis as he reflected on the role of identity in his adaptation:

By sort of accepting that as like, I need to be myself, I need to have my own identity, . . . the most successful veterans I know are the ones that don't take their veteran status so seriously. But the ones I see struggling the most are the ones who, they are a veteran, that is their identity, that is who they are. "I am a veteran." There's nothing else about them that they deem as valuable, I guess, or as useful. . . . Yes, you will carry that title, that is something you can treasure for the rest of your life, but your journey can't stop right there. You still got 50 years ahead of you. And if you think that you've learned everything you need to know up to this point in your first 25 years of life, you're sorely mistaken. . . . I just think a lot of adapting to life after the military is accepting that you're not in the military anymore because that's honestly the hardest thing to do . . . and you're always gonna have it, you're always gonna carry that with you. But you can't let it define you. You can't let it be the only thing about you.

Participants pointed out examples of veterans who had not adapted due to “the lack of transition, like people who get out of the military and don’t change what they’re doing, but in a bad way” (Raoul) and those who just “can’t let go” and “all they talk about is their time in the military” (Eric). David talked about how he struggled to let it go:

I think destruction and power is an addiction, and I think I’m addicted to it, and that’s how I feel because there’s something special about it, and there’s not a drug or any drink in the world that can replace that.

For Travis, it was a clear differentiator of successful adaptation and failure to adapt: “The way I view a veteran that’s successful isn’t someone who is living in the past.”

Lack of humility. Some of the most condemning and frustrated comments about peers were about veterans who were “entitled,” had an inflated ego, or had a dangerous invincibility complex:

I hate those people that are honestly like “I’m a veteran, yeah!” and they walk around with their chest sticking out 10 feet. And it’s like, “Dude, shut up, nobody cares. Yes, thank you for your service.” . . . It’s partially what you learn while you’re in the military, is you’re taught that you’re an unstoppable fighting force. But a lot of veterans fail to realize you’re that unstoppable fighting force because you’re a cohesive unit. When you get out, you’re now an individual, and you don’t have all these other people picking up where you might have shortcomings. . . . And I think it’s also a societal thing, because I mean . . . think about what civilians are always saying about veterans, “You’re a hero, you are, you know,

the best thing,” like they get pumped up so much by how society treats veterans. . . . I’m not even ashamed to say I know a lot of shitty veterans out there; they were crappy people before they joined the military and they were crappy people while they were in. I mean I’ve served with several that it’s just like, “You are just a terrible person.” And they get out, and they’re still not that good of a person, but everybody is telling them how great they are. . . . And when they are met with shortcomings of their own, they don’t understand why, like because they were never told why, they didn’t see why. (Travis)

Participants expressed more than just frustration with the way “entitled” or egotistical veteran behavior reflected on other veterans, but they also pointed to how the lack of humility impeded adaptation for many student veterans by making it an obstruction in asking for help or making positive changes: “I guess you don’t wanna prove people wrong by saying, ‘Oh, you’re a veteran, you’re so great.’ And then suddenly, you’re failing. ‘Well, if everyone is saying I’m so great, why am I failing?’” (Travis). Eric shared what he considered key advice for those separating from the military:

So once we got back from there, from that deployment, my company commander gives a speech, and he said, “You deserve respect, but don’t you ever demand it.” And so to anybody getting out, I would say, “You’ve done a service, we thank you. Now just kind of swallow your pride, and don’t be on too much of a high horse when you get out. Just be humble, keep quiet, keep your head low.”

Lack of adaptability. Veterans struggle to adapt because “stubbornness can be very hindering sometimes” (Susan), especially when “they get tunnel vision . . . and they

refuse to see any other avenues . . . or how they can't succeed just by doing what they've done their entire life" (Travis). Commitment was a value prized in their military service but in certain situations, their lack of adaptability was a major roadblock as students who needed to change majors, approach situations differently, or try a different strategy because they viewed to do so as failure.

Growth and change are inherent aspects of adaptation, but some failed to adapt because they refused to adapt. They were unwilling to change or to accept that change had occurred, so they could not move forward:

I think that's the veterans' biggest issue is that they see all this struggle, and they see all this difficulty, and they get reclusive and defensive, and they go back to what they know. And I think that's why they have trouble interacting with people. I think it's why they have anger issues. I think it's why they have a lot of the issues they have is that they're not willing to adapt, they're not willing to accept change. They're not willing to do maybe what I did, where I didn't understand so I had to immerse myself in order to survive. (Ryan)

Their refusal to adapt positioned them in a miserable and stagnant place of wanting to go backward but being unable to, while being unable to move forward because they refused to do so:

It doesn't allow them to adapt. If you take somebody or something and you put it in a new environment and it doesn't adjust to that environment, it's probably gonna die. And if it's not gonna die, it's not gonna be very happy. And you meet a lot of unhappy veterans. (Tom)

Lack of direction. A key way to fail to adapt, according to participants, was to lack direction, motivation, or value of the experience:

I think a part of the adjustment issue for a lot of other individuals is because they get out of the military just saying, you know, “I hate it,” but they don’t really have any goals for the future. And so with no goals, no direction, they’re lost, and that’s how you end up with the individuals that are just broadcasting how great they were, and not really thinking about the future. (Chris)

Chris contended that acquiring this direction was imperative before separating from the military in order to experience a successful transition:

Don’t leave until you have a goal, until you know what you wanna do. Because I see veterans that . . . they got out and didn’t have a goal, and now they’re wasting away their GI Bill because they changed their major like three or four times already. A lot of veterans come in saying, “Yes, I wanna be an engineer” but they don’t really take the time to think “I’m actually horrible at math, so that wouldn’t work out.”

David, a participant who did not adapt successfully, embodies the lack of these cognitive processes and qualities in his college experience and hopes to acquire them in the next transition: “I kinda hope that maybe the crowd will be a little older, and I’ll have a specific goal, not just a garbage degree that is not doing anything that I’m trying to do.”

Impeding Behaviors

The student veterans identified numerous behaviors that inhibited the successful adaptation process, but these behaviors were part of the dynamic interplay of

environmental influences, cognitive processes, personality traits, and behavior. The lack of agency, lack of social integration, prideful self-harm, and self-destructive behaviors were often identified as directly foreclosing paths to successful adaptation. While many student veterans may exhibit some of these behaviors at various points in their transition, the inability to change these behaviors or see the danger in these behaviors was cited as impeding successful adaptation.

Lack of agency. The lack of agency or feeling like external forces control one's life was a powerful and debilitating outlook that influenced behavior in tangible ways as the student veterans they focused their energy on blaming others rather than making positive changes:

I know some veterans that blame everybody for why they didn't do well on a test or why they're just not getting by in life. You know, it's everyone else's fault . . . when it comes to things that are actively within your grasp to change, that's just complaining. Complaining doesn't do anything. (Travis)

Excessive complaining was a trait of a veteran who was not adapting, whom Greg described as the "angry Facebook vet." Complaining rather than seeking a resolution or resources was a key differentiator in successful adaptation:

Not looking for that solution. Not being an active participant in solving their own problems, which you know compounds it . . . when somebody is complaining, is like, "Is this something you could've done? Like the information is out there."
(Raoul)

Feeling a lack of agency was defeating and paralyzing for David and served as an indicator of a behavior that impeded his adaptation:

I don't have control over everything like I thought I did. It's awful. . . . And a serviceman, like if you're out in a bad situation and things start getting a little bad, well, that's okay, "We'll just be even more violent, and we're gonna win . . . we can just keep escalating until we're the victor." What are you gonna do at [SVSU]? Nothing. You're gonna sit there. You're gonna bend over and take it because you're just gonna keep failing the more you try to fight against it, which I learned quickly.

Learning how to make the necessary changes and take agentic actions to improve the situation was not intuitive:

They [the military] don't teach you how to set that up, that's probably the biggest thing, they don't teach you how to set up all this stuff, how to change your behavior, attitude, success, how to change your environment. They don't set you up for that, and I think that's why a lot of veterans just quit, either at life, or use alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism because they don't know. (Ryan)

David expressed that the agentic action was a mystery or a hidden secret for him to achieving what he defined as successful adaptation:

I guess you just look at their life, you know? Can they hold on to a job? Can they walk into a classroom, walk out, feel good? Can they have friends, girlfriends? I mean, are they living a functioning life? Are they running around here like a confused zombie, just mindless, trying to keep their heads above water? I don't

know. There's some guys I look at, man, I'm just thinking, "Wow, man, how are you like, dude, like what you got going on inside that I need to get?" Because I'm just not figuring it out. I don't know.

Raoul and others shared their thoughts on why agentic behavior was so challenging for some veterans as they separated from the military:

They lacked those problem-solving skills and the critical thinking and self-support. And I think that the military specifically, and especially for enlisted men, you can kind of suck at life and like bumpers in a bowling alley, like they'll do just enough to keep you up because it's in their best interest If you don't seek it out, like if you're happy just being propped up and you don't like try to improve yourself, at you're EAS [end of active service] date, like you're not their problem anymore. They're gonna stop propping you up. And then that becomes the transition, and it's not a transition for who you are, it's a transition from being supported to not being supported.

Lack of social integration. Connecting with others in a new environment and forging relationships allows for successful adaptation; however, for some veterans, these behaviors were not ones that they could incorporate into their lives or find the strength or motivation to exhibit. These struggling veterans were described as those who isolated themselves, made special efforts to stand out as veterans, and struggled to maintain work due to their inability to have positive social relationships. David shared that he had isolated himself and created a blockade to adaptation:

I was so alienated at the first part of school, I couldn't even fathom having a friend. And I just drove everyone away. . . . I think the loneliness brought the isolation. With the isolation, it started bringing on like a whole different irrational thought process.

Raoul described what successful adaptation was in the negative by describing how successfully adapted veterans were not those who stood out in their new environment as veterans; they had socially integrated and adapted: "If you stand out in a room because you're still wearing that moto T-shirt or the camo ball, whatever it is, then on some level you haven't transitioned socially." These behaviors for positive social integration not only inhibited successful adaptation to the college environment; they carried over to those who could not maintain employment. Furthermore, those behaviors would probably continue to impede their adaptation post graduation as a civilian employee. For example, David shared fears of his impending graduation that semester and his inability to maintain steady employment:

I've not been able to hold a job. I've been fired from about four of them now. . . .
I think about this a lot, and I'm really nervous to go out into the world. . . .
Honestly, right now, I'm just keeping myself alive. . . . So, I'm nervous, man,
December. I have a lot of anxiety, like I gotta go start over fitting in someplace
new.

Prideful self-harm. They described many behaviors that might be rewarded in the military but in the college environment are quite harmful and make successful adaptation difficult to achieve. One of those behaviors is the belief that they should

“stick with” something even if they hate it or are failing at it. The military instills a sense of invincibility and fighter mentality and connects attitude to identity and achievement, but in the college environment, those attitudes can be self-defeating:

They think that they’re impervious, so that again causes tunnel vision. It causes isolation, depression, all sort of things. . . . You don’t wanna reach out because you’re just, you know, you don’t want people to think that you’re dumb. Because you know that you’re their hero; what would people think? (Travis)

The student veterans also warned against behaviors such as approaching the transition as “an island” (Travis) or having a “I can do it. I’m a Marine, I’m an Army. I jumped out of planes, you know. I blew up things. I killed people. . . . I’m better than anybody else attitude” because “that’s biting several people I think in the ass around here, and they don’t realize it” (Susan). That attitude limits access to resources and people as they refuse to ask for help or resources:

There are those that are doing that right now, and they’re not gonna probably get the help they need to get through, especially at an institution this large . . . you come here and you’re one of [a large student population], that shit ain’t gonna work. (Susan)

Not using those resources can be harmful because “you’re really thrown into the deep end. It’s not a sink-or-swim kinda deal because you do have a lot of help and people and resources. If you choose not to use them, you could drown” (Tom).

Self-destructive behaviors. Behaviors that impeded adaptation included a lack of preparation, lack of prioritization, lack of hard work, lack of focus, and other self-

destructive behaviors. Susan shared an example of the lack of preparation that many veterans exhibit: “We get these phone calls, ‘Hey, I’m so-and-so. I’m out on this ship. I’m out at this base, and I wanna come to [SVSU] next month.’ What the hell are you thinking? Have you looked at the website?” In addition, many veterans have not demonstrated a prioritization of academics, have expected college to be easier, and have not taken the consequences of their lack of prioritization seriously: “A lot of students don’t take it that seriously, and if you don’t take it seriously, it doesn’t matter how good your strategy or understanding is, you’re not gonna succeed because you’re not taking it seriously” (Raoul). Others who do not find success “complain that the professor is a terrible teacher, but they didn’t put in the time” (Chris) or who “look for the easy way out, the path of least resistance” (Mac). David described how his behaviors were destructive in many ways:

I have done a whole lot of self-sabotaging. I just can’t think of too many things I’ve done to better myself along the way. . . . I just get to beating myself up real hard. And I don’t know what to do, so I just go turn to drugs. I go disappearing for days on end, and the family will be looking for me or somebody will be looking for me, hopefully. . . . I’ve just stopped going to classes. I’ve done nothing but destroy myself, and I cannot think of anything that I’ve done to make my time easier here because my time has progressively gotten worse because of me.

Significance of Impediments

Exploration of the impeding environmental factors, cognitive processes and personality, and behaviors was important because it not only presented what the participants deemed to be definitive ways to fail to adapt but also illuminated how participants understood the process. Despite the question, they responded with how they understood and had learned, which revealed the deeply ingrained influence of anti-models and their understanding of success as an avoidance of failure. A discussion of the findings regarding impediments to successful adaptation is presented in Chapter V.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to better understand the adaptation process for undergraduate student veterans at a large research-intensive public university in the southwestern United States. This chapter explored the findings of the study, which were divided into four major categories: (a) role of environmental factors in the adaptation process, (b) role of cognitive processes and personality in the adaptation process, (c) role of behavior in the adaptation process, and (d) impediments to successful adaptation.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to better understand the adaptation process for undergraduate student veterans at a large research-intensive public university in the southwestern United States. Sixteen undergraduate students who served in the military after September 11, 2001, were no longer considered active or reserve duty, and self-described as having adapted to life as a university student were interviewed. A qualitative study utilizing a constructivist paradigm of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to explore the adaptation of veterans to student life. The study addressed the following as the central research question: *How do student veterans learn to adapt to the higher education environment?* Three subquestions were also explored:

1. How does behavior play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?
2. How do cognitive processes and other personality characteristics play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?
3. How do environmental factors play a role in how student veterans learn to adapt?

This chapter explores the findings in relation to the literature and theoretical framework presented in Chapter II. It concludes with an exploration of implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Discussion of Key Findings

Analysis of the qualitative data led to four primary conclusions in response to the research questions: (a) student veterans learn to adapt in a triadic, interactional manner

and through observation; (b) behavior determines whether student veterans will adapt, and changes in behavior indicate adaptation; (c) development of self-efficacy and agentic cognitive processes and personality traits supports successful adaptation by student veterans; and (d) environments that support self-efficacy and are conducive to learning lead to successful student veteran adaptation. These conclusions are discussed below.

Triadic Interaction and Observation

The student veterans in this study learned to adapt in a triadic fashion in which behavior, environment, and cognitive processes/personality traits were interactional and dynamic. This characteristic, herein referred to as *triadic interaction*, has not been identified in previous studies of student veterans and therefore warrants further research to explore its implications. In *triadic interaction*, learning does not occur in a vacuum; it arises from dynamic interactions of three elements that result in learning and shape adaptation by student veterans. The dynamic nature of these three elements—behavior, environment, and cognitive processes/personality traits—in the adaptive learning process of student veterans is illustrated in Figure 5.

This type of learning supports the tenets of social cognitive theory, which “embraces an interactional model of causation in which environmental events, personal factors, and behavior all operate as interacting determinants of each other” (Bandura, 1986, p. xi) and views the process of learning in the social environment as a “triadic reciprocity” (p. 18), which is similar to but different from triadic interaction. For instance, social cognitive theory has been utilized to describe social learning in many

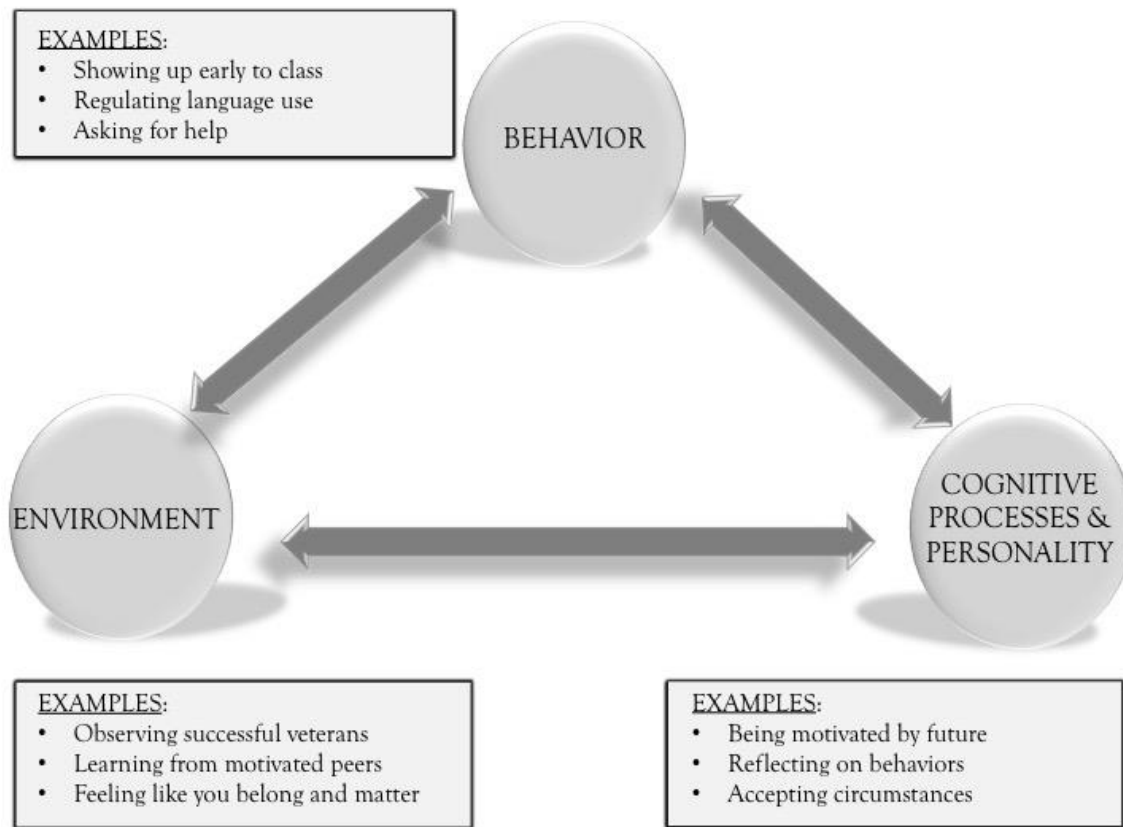


Figure 5. Dynamics of triadic interaction in student veteran adaptation.

populations; however, this is the first study to utilize the theory to understand the adaptation process of student veterans to university life using a triadic interactive lens.

The adaptation experience of study participants was so variable because of the dynamic and interactional nature of this learning. For example, some veterans, such as Raoul, Chris, and others, experienced a smoother adaptation process due to past cognitive processes and environmental experiences, which made adapting to university life desirable. Their transition experience was different because they began the process with inherent cognitive advantages of motivation, passion, purpose, and other preparation. This is supported in Schlossberg's adult transition theory, which asserts that

the cognitive attitude and perception regarding the desirability of the change has a strong influence on the transition experience (Evans et al., 2010). Some of the veterans not only had a defined motivation and a deep purpose, but they also had extensive knowledge and learning that benefitted their successful adaptation before they set foot on campus. This is also indicative of the importance of examining grit (Duckworth, 2016) in student veterans as the differentiating factor for these students was that they have to exhibit both perseverance and passion to adapt and succeed in the face of such challenges. The significance of passion—a deep, purposeful, and sustained motivation with intentional goals—is an important point to consider as many veterans are trained to persevere in the face of setbacks, to work hard, and be resilient; however, development of a deep and purposeful passion is an individualized cognitive process that is not often fostered before veterans embark on their academic journey. Without this passion, they are missing a vital element of grit and may have difficulty successfully adapting to university life.

Alternatively, other student veterans revealed that the environment prompted these cognitive processes to occur upon arrival. Often, the behavior stemmed from observational learning, past learning, or cognitive processing prompted by others in their environment, such as admissions counselors, peers, or family members. Many were reminded of the assets that they already possessed and how their past environment had equipped them with positive behaviors that they could apply in this new environment. They recognized that they had the ability to apply and build on previous learning, which fostered self-efficacy by developing confidence and competency (Bandura, 1986). Cate and Albright (2015) suggested that student veterans possess many of the skills necessary

to be successful in university studies but must be able to see how to translate those skills and adapt them in order to find success. In the orientation that SVSU provides for student veterans, the university teaches veterans how they can begin to translate their skills and begin to adapt. In this example, the former military environment and the current university environment influenced behavior, which influenced cognitive processes, which typically influenced behavior or environmental factors. The triadic nature of this process was evident in the adaptation process of the study participants.

To provide further explication of this complex and integrated “triadic reciprocity” (Bandura, 1986, p. 18), one could examine how participants engaged in observation of their new environment to recognize cues and valued behavior that they should exhibit in order to succeed. They learned to adapt by observation of exemplar models and anti-models, and their learned behavior was greatly influenced by cognitive processes/personality traits and environment. In particular, observation of anti-models seemed to be most impactful, as this learning was cited with greatest frequency. In fact, the prominence and prevalence of these anti-models led to the development of an entire section on impediments in Chapter IV. Observation of these anti-models and the consequences of their behaviors stimulated a pattern of avoidance and critical self-evaluation of their behavior. The environment provided the model to make changes in behavior but it was the cognitive process of agentic thinking that enabled the participants to enact the necessary changes in behavior. The triadic nature of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) illuminates how agency helped these participants utilize their observation of environmental models to implement behaviors that supported success.

It should be noted that, although environment was a powerful influencer, due to the interactional nature of learning, the student veterans were able to influence their environment as well, making changes to the environment. Many of the veterans articulated changes that they had made to their environment in choosing with whom they associated to create an environment that was conducive to their success. It was their own agency that allowed them to make changes to the environment to support success. They eliminated negative influences and reinforced positive adaptive behaviors by surrounding themselves with exemplar models who served as sources of motivation, accountability, and valuable information. This is the same principle that social and wellness accountability groups utilize. In order to make positive changes to one's lifestyle, one must surround oneself with those who are demonstrating or seeking the same goal. The power of environment, especially in one's social group and the models and observation learning to which one is exposed, cannot be understated. While environment does not have to be an accepted state of being, people have the agency to act on the environment and make changes for their own well-being and successful adaptation. Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986, 2001) explicates this, but this is a new concept for student veteran adaptation.

The veterans discussed how the conservative, military-friendly nature of the SVSU environment and the motivated nature of the SVSU students prompted many of them to reflect on their perceptions of their younger peers. Almost all of the participants shared sentiments of frustration toward traditional-age peers and initially saw them as immature, self-centered, and lacking accountability, which mirrors the prevalent

literature on student veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rumann et al., 2011). However, the study participants began to see value in connecting with these younger peers as student veterans recognized that these peers would be future colleagues. They also began to see beyond negative stereotypes. This cognitive process stimulated an even more supportive environment as the veterans expanded their network of connections to their younger peers who possessed additional information and resources, who served as valuable models of academic success, and who increased feelings of belonging. As the university environment became more supportive of self-efficacy, adaptation continued as the student veterans learned more about how to thrive in this environment and adjusted behaviors accordingly. Their selection of associates directly affected their behavior. It also affected their cognitive processes and personality.

Observational learning was powerful as some study participants began to model the strong culture of involvement at SVSU. This finding is unique in that it is in direct contrast with the findings from studies that reported that student veterans do not see the value in connecting or getting involved (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Contrarily, many of the veterans at SVSU strongly advocated for the importance of involvement and finding a niche on campus. It should be noted that this was not the case for all of the participants; however, many without spouses or children directly advised doing so to incoming student veterans and shared how involvement supported their persistence, which is a factor lauded by other researchers (Nichols-Casebolt, 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Summerlot et al., 2009; Tinto,

1975). This behavior may be more indicative of their adaptation and observational learning of the particular campus culture at SVSU, rather than as a requisite pathway to adaptation.

Connection and belonging were essential to adaptation, but these factors can be experienced through myriad avenues, and it may look different for individual veterans. For example, traditional involvement for Tom, Allen, and Raoul was a beneficial adaptive behavior as single student veterans, providing a niche and allowing them to become more integrated into campus life. On the other hand, participants such as Chris and Logan did not prioritize this behavior due to their familial responsibilities and the support that they felt from their spouse. Traditional campus involvement may not be an option for all veterans, and it appears to be a progressive adaptive step rather than a fundamental mandate.

Participants noted that involvement with veterans' organizations, both on campus and in the community, was their initial involvement step, but as some participants adapted, they were more comfortable and inclined to expand their involvement to academic activities or student organizations and programs in which traditional undergraduate students participate. More research in this area would be beneficial to illuminate the need and value of traditional involvement for a student veteran's successful adaptation to campus and to reconcile the nuances and seeming disputes about involvement by veterans among researchers.

Iceberg Principle of Triadic Interaction

Cognitive processes are often not articulated or considered by student veterans. Figure 6 depicts the vast potential and power that cognitive processes and personality have in adaptation. Much like an iceberg in nature, these hidden processes and views can cause great destruction and debilitating harm; however, if they are examined properly, they can allow for more successful navigation of the university environment.

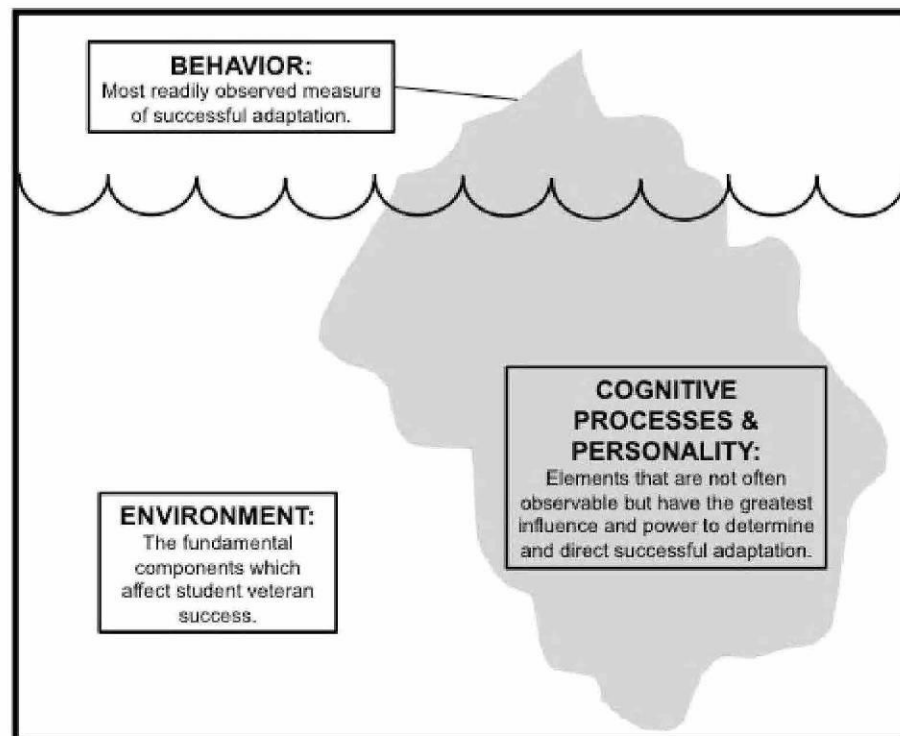


Figure 6. The importance of cognitive processes and personality for successful student veteran adaptation.

The focus of higher education and researchers continues to be on the water—the environmental factors of student adaptation. This focus on student veteran support was fundamental at the onset. Much as water supports the buoyancy of an iceberg, higher education had to examine the context of the adaptation and bolster that environment for positive adaptation. It is time to move forward in understanding the nature of student veteran adaptation beyond the environmental factors to see the more complex perspective of the interaction of all three factors.

Approximately 87% to 90% of an iceberg’s mass is invisible to others (U.S. Coast Guard Navigation Center, 2015), but about 10% of the iceberg is discernable to those who are looking. Student veterans, like icebergs, are exhibiting indicators and elements of their adaptation process and who they are to the campus environment, but faculty and staff are not trained to understand the broad spectrum of adaptation and the diversity of student veterans. Like an iceberg, each veteran is unique and varies in presentation to others, yet faculty and staff approach interaction, evaluation, and engagement in a uniform manner. Their adaptation is evaluated based on associated and convenient measures—grades and graduation, and universities only train staff to look for warning signs of well-being. It is imperative to examine intentionally and strategically the elements of the iceberg that are revealed above the surface—demonstrated behaviors of adaptation—to understand the progression of adaptation of a student veteran and how practitioners can meet them intentionally where they are in their adaptation process. It is logical that university efforts have focused on warning signs and environment as their primary and initial approach, but it is time to move forward to focus intentionally on

student veteran success on campus, which requires a different approach. This study presents six categories of behaviors for successful adaptation that faculty and staff can utilize to evaluate the progress of successful adaptation by student veterans (Figure 3).

The remaining 87% to 90% of the iceberg presents significant opportunities for successful student adaptation and for developing substantial impediments to adaptation. Beneath the surface is a vast repository of beliefs, thoughts, values, and perceptions that is not visible and is not being addressed, even though it serves as a powerful rudder in adaptation by student veterans. For many of the participants in this study, the interview was the first time they had considered or talked about the transformational steps in their adaptation. Bringing light to the invisible but powerful processes of motivation, self-discovery, reflection, and acceptance further illuminated the relationships among environment, behavior, and cognitive processes and personality. As much as some participants might have felt that their personalities were innate or defined, most discussed modeling or observing other veterans whose approach they admired. This modeling most likely was a factor in their approach as they incorporated models that they considered to be successful. It is imperative to capitalize on the considerable potential that cognitive processes and personality factors present to supporting student veteran success on college campuses.

Changes in Behavior Indicate Adaptation

Behavior determined whether study participants adapted, and changes in their behavior indicated adaptation. While some literature has suggested how institutions, faculty, staff, and others can alter campus environment to support veterans as they face

challenges (Bellafiore, 2012; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Gonzalez & Elliott, 2016; Kirchner, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; Nichols-Casebolt, 2012; Osborne, 2014; Rudd et al., 2011), there are only intermittent suggestions about positive student veteran behavior that eases transition issues, such as connecting with student veteran peers (Rumann et al., 2011; Summerlot et al., 2009). Literature or models depicting successful adaptation and the behaviors that are most successful in adaptation for the student veterans are not sufficiently extant. Institutions and systems can consider ample recommendations about how to create an environment that supports student veteran adaptation, but the literature has not provided a means for the individual student veteran to understand the path to successful adaptation. There is a definitive need for research to explicate this process clearly for student veterans and the higher education professionals who support this population. This study is unique in highlighting what worked and addressing the dynamic interplay of behaviors, cognitive processes, and environment. It provides a necessary step forward in clarifying how to adapt to the higher education environment without oversimplifying the complex dynamic of adaptation and the diverse nature of the individuals navigating this process.

Key behaviors to support successful adaptation by student veterans included utilizing past experience, preparing in advance for the transition, demonstrating agency, and making responsive changes. Some behaviors were not rewarded or were negatively reinforced. In response to those negative outcomes, study participants considered making behavioral changes. Student veterans described the lack of adaptability, or specifically the refusal to adapt, as impeding adaptation. Adaptability required these

students to desire growth, to engage in perspective taking, and to observe models for learning positive adaptive behaviors. The inability to change was often connected to a lack of observational learning because those veterans did not see the danger or harm in their behaviors or did not understand how to change them. However, for many of the veterans whom the participants described, it was a refusal to adapt, a lack of desire to change, and a prideful rejection of the environment that led to unsuccessful outcomes. This cognitive process fundamentally obstructed any chance of adaptation.

Other behaviors that presented foreclosed paths to adaptation were a lack of agency, a lack of social integration, prideful self-harm, self-destructive behaviors, and a lack of preparation. While some of these are highlighted as challenges in the literature (Brown & Gross, 2011; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann et al., 2011), the representation by the participants, identifying these not as challenges but as behaviors that impeded success, is a novel perspective.

Behaviors that were most intuitive in their implementation were ones that could be transferred from a military environment to the university environment to yield successful results. These intuitive and transferrable behaviors included mission-focused effort, resilient discipline, and grit beyond that which their peers might demonstrate. Mission-focused effort engaged their focus and discipline, but the student veterans needed a mission or purpose. From that purpose, they could break their mission into subtasks that allowed them to achieve their ultimate goal. Their perseverance and resilience demonstrated agentic action as they did not allow external factors to impede their success; their focus was on solutions, not excuses, and they exhibited

accountability for self. However, they also recognized that they could not succeed alone and articulated that the key to their resilience was having solid support systems in place.

In anticipation of the transition from military life to student life, preparatory steps such as setting up housing, saving money, planning, identifying direction, and gathering knowledge and resources were valuable behaviors that student veterans identified as important for their adaptation. Connecting with university personnel early and understanding one's degree plan were also important actions to take. The nature of the transition seemed impactful as well, and as much as possible, they advised that student veterans consider which circumstances might best set them up for success. Some needed remedial instruction in mathematics or an academic preparatory program. Others valued time at a community college to ease the adjustment or time to work and identify a direction. These findings correspond with those by Griffin and Gilbert (2015), who advocated an increase in student veteran support by higher education institutions, particularly support of student veterans as they prepare to make the transition to the university environment in the absence of support from other entities.

A healthy locus of control was exhibited when veterans lauded both seeking resources and planning. They were not defeated by challenges in their environment; rather, they activated their own energy to self-determine their outcomes. Successful student veterans navigated the transition from the "push" environment of the military to the "pull" environment of a college campus. They actively sought and took advantage of resources without expecting those resources to appear of their own accord. Their proactive planning involved committed prioritization, decision making congruent with

prioritization, goal setting, imposing structure, and disciplined task management. Their planning became more self-directed than in the military environment, but they utilized planning practices that they had learned in the military, such as reverse planning and BAMCIS. Their established long- and short-term goals incorporated their purpose, passion, and priorities. They also advocated for imposing structure that provided a consistent and integrated routine.

Environmental cues or cognitive processes typically stimulated key changes in behavior. For example, academic behaviors that student veterans implemented often originated in response to observed behavior of peers who were rewarded. They also enacted behaviors in response to the valued advice of veterans with whom they identified. When they saw value in behavior and recognized how it could support their success and goals, those behaviors were enacted. Such behaviors were talking to professors, active participation in class, sitting in the front of a classroom, and establishing study habits. The change in their academic behavior that these observations stimulated demonstrated successful adaptation to the higher education environment.

The academic adaptation was often the initial and most amenable change, as it was viewed as vital and central to the mission of their success. However, even more indicative of a student veteran's adaptation were the changes that were made to social behaviors, such as self-regulation, acts of vulnerability, connecting with peers, and adapting to social cues. The student veterans had to regulate their language, exhibit self-control, engage in more positive forms of addressing conflict, humble themselves, and slow their pace. They had to learn to choose their battles, back off, have patience, and

deal with a lack of accountability in the university environment. They had to see that some of their accustomed behaviors in the social setting were self-destructive or inappropriate in their new environment. Acts of vulnerability, such as asking for help, required a balance of humility and active energy—agency. Study participants recognized that they lacked knowledge and had room for continued growth and learning. Thus, they had to deconstruct concepts of self-sufficiency in order to strive for a healthier and more interdependent existence. They were motivated to enact this behavior when they observed the benefits derived from reaching out or seeing the success of others. They also recognized the positive reinforcement of such behavior through a higher grade point average or comprehension of course material.

The ability to connect and actually appreciate their traditional-age peers was perhaps the most significant turning point in the adaptation process of student veterans, as it was most indicative of growth and actual adaptation. For many veterans, adaptation was not the goal. It was a subtle differentiation in their response to questions or choice of verbiage, but they hoped to succeed in this new environment without adapting, and thus, becoming like their classmates. Success was the mission and adaptation was the eventual path they had to accept to achieve their mission. They wanted to succeed while still being set apart and not contaminated by civilian ways. However, once they recognized adaptation as the only road to success and through trial and error acceded to that reality, they began to accept their new environment, including appreciation of peers, and the changes inherent in it. This acceptance of the necessity to adapt innately led to more adaptive behaviors and a more successful adaptation process.

The lack of desire to adapt and the difficulty of implementing essential adaptive changes, such as self-regulation, acts of vulnerability, or connection with traditional-age peers, often created a chasm in their path toward success; fundamentally, they had to develop the requisite motivation to build a bridge of adaptation to cross the chasm. For study participants, this involved having to locate the motivation to connect socially with others, which was a formidable task for many of the participants. They saw how their isolation was harmful and how their peers had valuable resources. They recognized that connection would benefit their own well-being and future workplace connections, and they accepted that their peers were not going away. Forming positive connections with peers involved suspending judgments about nonveterans, going outside their comfort zones, becoming involved, giving peers a chance, and considering peers' perspectives. These student veterans had to create opportunities to connect, adjust social behaviors, and overcome issues. Their demeanor became more socially palatable, and they implemented strategies for more positive group dynamics. They valued campus and classroom involvement as it provided support, connection, and pursuit of their interests.

Study participants made many adjustments to their behavior in order to adapt. They adapted to observed social cues; they were flexible and resilient, and they demonstrated a growth mindset. They discussed methods of stress management such as working out or riding motorcycles for a healthier lifestyle. They shared adaptive strategies to support family life in a challenging environment, such as setting ground rules, adjusting priorities, and protecting family time. At home, they made adjustments to strengthen their marriages as they faced new challenges in the university environment

by communicating more, finding balance with competing demands, being present and engaged when at home, making decisions together, and being more open and sensitive to their spouse's needs.

Development of Self-Efficacy and Agency

The development of self-efficacy and agentic cognitive processes and personality traits supported successful adaptation. These cognitive processes were the most intriguing because these internal elements were the primary differentiators in why some students who were exposed to the same positive environment of SVSU adapted and succeeded where others did not. Many veterans identified the cognitive processes that exhibited self-efficacy and agency as essential determinants of successful adaptation. Even though these components were vital, self-efficacy and agency cannot be bestowed on an individual; it can be fostered but it is an internal, cognitive understanding of self and external forces (Bandura, 1986). Although a fair number of the participants demonstrated these qualities throughout the process, others described the development of such characteristics. External entities and circumstances could prompt and stimulate the development of self-efficacy and agency but, as many participants emphasized, the onus was on the individual student veteran. Thus, the process and timing varied among the participants. Key stimulants for this cognitive processing were family members, friends, faculty, staff, other veterans, and older adults, especially those with whom the veterans felt vulnerable enough to receive tough questions and feedback.

Cognitive processes that participants identified as barring successful adaptation were prominence of one's veteran identity, lack of humility, and lack of direction. Being

too dependent on one's veteran identity made adaptation challenging as they experienced a loss of self-worth without their military position, and they rejected their new environment and the affiliated changes. The power of identity dissonance on one's adaptation process is supported in the literature (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). It is also supported in Schlossberg's transition theory, as the level of desirability of a change has a direct impact on the nature of that transition (Evans et al., 2010). A lack of humility was an obstruction for acts of vulnerability to occur, and thus, impeded growth, reflection, and changes in behavior.

Self-efficacy. The student veterans who believed that they could learn and adapt were more successful in doing so. Self-efficacy is instrumental for healthy changes (Bandura, 1986, 2001). If one does not believe in oneself or those desired changes, one will not persist and enact the changes (Bandura, 1986, 2001). Some veterans intrinsically demonstrated this self-efficacy through confidence in their ability to persist and succeed based on past performance. Others found that success bred success in its development of confidence and competence, components of self-efficacy. These mastery experiences could be minor but they created momentum and confidence. Making the connection that this new environment could be approached with a similar adaptation strategy as military deployments was a useful framework and stimulated confidence and competency. When the study participants recognized that they had valuable strengths to utilize for success in the college setting, self-efficacy was promoted.

Agency. Agency provided the student veterans with the healthy perspective to overcome challenges. This perspective originated from past performance and the

continued enactment of discipline and perseverance. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 2001) is characterized by human agency or “the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of one’s life” (Bandura, 2001, p. 1). An individual exerts personal agency through intentional behavior that requires foresight, through self-regulated behaviors moderated by self-reactive acts, and through self-reflection about one’s abilities. The concept of agency is the manner by which one’s nature cannot be attributed entirely to one’s internal drive, and it is not simply a product of external events (Bandura, 1986). This concept allows individuals to exert some level of agency to determine their fate, but it also recognizes the limited ability to have total direction and control (Bandura, 1986). This understanding provides a healthy framework that balances external forces with internal forces and promotes the perspective that one has the power to act, change, and regulate behaviors (Bandura, 1986).

Sincere motivation, engagement in reflection, and demonstration of grit and a growth mindset were significant differentiators for successful adaptation, according to the participants. Locating authentic motivation involved identifying passion and purpose and a process of self-discovery, especially in relation to an identity beyond that of veteran. Knowledge of self and discovery of identity not only ameliorated identity dissonance veterans often faced but also often led to finding purpose and direction. Lack of direction and motivation were identified as central impediments for veterans who were not thriving. The motivation of the participants allowed them not only to persevere and demonstrate resilience but to make difficult changes and adapt. The source of the motivation ranged among the following: others, their future, achievement, survival, and

possibilities. In contrast to the deficit-based perspective and portrayal of the student veteran population in the literature (Ackerman et al., 2009; Grossbard et al., 2014; Livingston et al., 2011; Ramchand et al., 2010; Rudd et al., 2011; Rumann et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2018; Widome et al., 2011), this study's presentation of the veteran voice is more aligned with what Brown and Gross (2011) anecdotally experienced with their student veterans: students who are "serious, motivated, goal-oriented" (p. 48) The difference is seen in the research question, which asks how student veterans adapt, rather than looking only at inherent challenges.

Reflection allowed for acceptance, recognition of issues and potential solutions, and the ability to see things in a healthier manner. The significance of reflection and acceptance was echoed in the literature (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Exhibiting a positive, content attitude and being able to accept past and present circumstances, their lack of control, their own fallibility or shortcomings, changes in plans, and their own failure allowed participants to move forward, to adapt, and to succeed. This attitude and acceptance provided a healthier view of self and the situation, which is a core concept of agency. Coming to terms with their military service experience, the nature of their separation from the military, the challenges of the transition, and their circumstances was vital to move forward and adapt.

Reflection also stimulated learning and change for these student veterans. It allowed them to recognize what behaviors or environmental factors were supporting their success and which factors were impeding it. Reflection allowed them to make active changes to the elements that were being negatively reinforced by harmful

consequences. They gained new perspectives and a greater comprehension of their new environment, which prompted adjustments in behavior such as improved relationships or enhanced strategies. Perhaps the most valuable reflection was in regards to their greatest source of frustration—traditional-age student peers. Their reflection spurred them to recognize value in their peers, to take their perspective, to untether them from fault, and to connect.

Agency required both an acceptance of circumstances and a level of humility, as agency is about a balance of the power of internal and external factors. Certain personality traits in the participants supported success, particularly with regard to their view of work and of change. They described agentic perspectives regarding work such as demonstrating work ethic, focus, goal orientation, high standards, and excellence; they contended that these were instrumental in adaptation. Exhibiting openness, a growth mindset, and grit led to healthier adaptation processes. These veterans had the drive to learn and grow, they suspended their expectations, and they were open to a range of types of people. Humility was a strongly emphasized characteristic that allowed them to adapt, and the lack of humility was cited as a central impediment for adaptation.

Environment Matters

Environment mattered greatly in the adaptation process of these student veterans. In this study, the student veterans learned how to adapt to the setting of higher education by experiencing how the college environment directly affected them, by observing how other student veterans adapted to the college environment, and by understanding how outside entities affected their behavior (Bandura, 1986). An environment should support

the self-efficacy of student veterans and be conducive for learning. The numerous benefits of the SVSU environment set these participants up to adapt successfully by surrounding them with people from various areas of the community to provide support, connection, belonging, mattering, resources, and examples in order to support self-efficacy and learning.

The participants in this study faced and discussed many of the challenges that were discussed in the literature, such as isolation (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011), cultural collision (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; McBain et al., 2012), frustration with traditional-age peers (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rumann et al., 2011), and more. What is significant about this study is the examination of the other part of the story: the story of overcoming these challenges. SVSU's environment provided a major step toward a successful adaptation process for these veterans, especially as SVSU boasts many of the best practices that researchers recommend institutions implement, such as faculty and staff training, veteran-specific orientation, mentor groups, designated staff to serve veterans, and more (Bellafiore, 2012; Daly & Garrity, 2013; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Gonzalez & Elliott, 2016; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Kirchner, 2015; Moon & Schma, 2011; Nichols-Casebolt, 2012; Osborne, 2014; Rudd et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2011). They had strong support staff in financial aid, which is noted in the literature as a significant stressor (Anderson et al., 2012). Many participants described exhibiting isolating behaviors initially and a resistance to asking for help, as described by DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) and Livingston et al. (2011). However, due to SVSU's models presented in their orientation that warned

against isolation, mentor programs that reached out to veterans, and a supportive environment that pushed connection, many participants not only found belonging, positive relationships, and support but advised others to do so.

These veterans cited many of the common challenges described in the literature, such as coping with the change of environment (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; DiRamio et al., 2008; McBain et al., 2012) and difficulty in connecting with other students (Ellison et al., 2012; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). However, there was a deep appreciation for the support that they found in their environment at SVSU. Many participants noted the military-friendly and military-rich traditions of the campus climate, which led to more faculty and staff desiring to assist veterans in their transition (Gonzalez & Elliott, 2016). In addition, SVSU's veteran-specific orientation includes a panel of current students who emphasize the importance of engaging with faculty and staff and features a keynote address by a professor who is favored by the student veteran population.

The immediate environment affected the adaptation process for these student veterans. However, the participants also discussed how the wider context of environment and exposure to models presented in the media affected their adaptation process, particularly in construction of expectations for college and what others expected of veterans. Both sets of expectations led to challenges in the adaptation process as veterans were not prepared for the rigor of college and had a skewed view of what college was. Moreover, many people view veterans from a deficit perspective, as portrayed on television.

The participants indicated that a major means of adapting successfully was a strong community of support composed of family, friends, other veterans, staff, faculty, and other adults. This particular environment supported their self-efficacy in its provision of support in crisis, connection, belonging, acceptance, understanding, mattering, processing, mentorship, and respect. These relationships and the feeling of being known allowed them not only to feel confident and happy, but relationships in which they could be comfortable and vulnerable enough to process and learn were important for their adaptation. These relationships motivated, prodded, and held them accountable in significant ways. The environment was conducive to learning in its provision of resources, information, quality education, wisdom, advice, and insight. Faculty, staff, orientation programs, and the peer mentor programs provided models and instruction for adaptation by advising them regarding admission requirements and choice of major, keeping them on track, connecting them to opportunities and resources, investing in their development, providing guidance, and for some, offering love and acceptance.

On the whole, the faculty and staff of SVSU was described as helpful as they sought to enact what the literature advised and made the environment conducive to learning by making it less stressful, more streamlined, and more consistent for student veterans (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Other support, such as flexibility in work schedules, housing, financial support, or handling family responsibilities made learning possible in that assistance from external entities allowed them to focus on academic pursuits.

Environment cannot be emphasized strongly enough in *triadic interaction*. One might say that the role of environment in the adaptation process of student veterans is akin to the role of roux in gumbo—it is the foundation for the entire dish. Many people describe the process of building a gumbo; it starts with one essential element but allows freedom in the additions from there: okra, filé, chicken, ham, bacon, oysters, crab, shrimp, beef, and so forth. It is the unique interaction of these various elements that creates a flavorful favorite that crosses all class barriers. However, in the process of building a gumbo, the most hotly contested element is the roux. This is because the roux matters greatly; it makes or breaks the entire dish. In a similar manner, the environment matters greatly for student veteran adaptation, and it is hotly contested because it is so vital to the entire process. A student veteran can take a variety of paths to achieve successful adaptation. However, just as gumbo cannot be made without a good roux, student veteran adaptation will not happen without a strong veteran-friendly environment. College campuses must perfect their roux by creating better environments for student veteran adaptation, and student veterans must choose their college campus wisely because the environment is the foundational element for the rest of their adaptation process.

Practical Implications

This study is valuable because it adds to the body of research an examination of the process of student veteran adaptation to the university environment, rather than simply identifying challenges to adaptation. It is an asset-based study that provides numerous exemplar models of how to adapt to the university environment. It is an

accurate study of the process as it examines the holistic and dynamic adaptation process, rather than isolating any one element. This section presents a discussion of how faculty and staff in higher education can support student veteran adaptation. Implications include sharing veteran stories, investing in environments that support self-efficacy and are conducive for learning, highlighting exemplar models, stimulating important cognitive processes, and emphasizing positive adaptive behaviors. Twelve recommendations are presented to demonstrate how this study can inform practice, policy, and approaches of those who work with student veterans.

1. Understand the process. Understanding the adaptation process is significant because investment in student veterans demonstrates that they matter to the nation. The nation has invested in student veterans financially and should seek with intention to ensure that the financial investment produces dividends. This is not a process that should be explored in the dark. This study illuminates the process and suggests how universities, funding units, and individual veterans contribute to the process.

2. Utilize qualitative research as a vehicle of vicarious learning. Some practical implications are an enhanced understanding of the power of qualitative research to affect student veteran adaptation positively by sharing the research with the population directly. Observational learning of those who have shared lived experiences is a powerful vehicle of change and reinforces the rationale for the importance of these student veterans' stories in the research design. Many campuses lack funding, staffing, or an office to support veterans' needs. This research offers veterans on those campuses a vicarious learning opportunity—the opportunity to learn how to adapt to the college

environment not through trial and error but by learning observationally through reading about the adaptation strategies of other veterans who can serve as observational models (Bandura, 1986). This qualitative research study offers a lucrative learning mechanism for student veterans.

3. Support self-efficacy as a campus. Practitioners should strive to create campus environments that support the self-efficacy of student veterans and are conducive to learning. Building confidence in student veterans can support their self-efficacy. Campus environments can help student veterans see how their past successes in the military can be applied in the new situation. Faculty and staff can help veterans to recognize their transferrable skills and to value the strengths that they already possess to thrive in this environment. Practitioners can help student veterans to remember how they learned to adapt to challenging circumstances in the military and develop a veteran's belief that they can adapt to this new environment. As self-efficacy is supported, student veterans are more likely to pursue their goals with effort and perseverance and expect positive outcomes. A strong sense of self-efficacy improves the propensity for growth and change, which is necessary for adaptation.

4. Create conducive learning environments. Environments can become more conducive for learning when stress and anxiety are reduced. The physical and emotional state of student veterans greatly affects their ability to learn, and as such, programs and interventions that promote a healthy state of being in student veterans are vital. Faculty and staff should strive to provide appropriate support and materials for learning. Experiences should be structured so that student veterans experience successful learning

prior to the stress and high-stakes nature of coursework. Examples of such experiences might be academic boot camp programs that provide student veterans with the models, practice, and mastery experience for positive academic behavior.

5. Present intentional and strategic observational models. In selecting observational models for learning, models should be relatable, since the more student veterans can identify with the model, the more likely they will be to implement the behavior. Multiple models should be provided as the diversity of the student veteran population warrants it. The more commonalities and emotional attachments that the model exhibits, the stronger the identification and learning will be. Faculty and staff should visibly highlight relatable examples of success, as these models will serve as a source of inspiration and motivation to implement the observed behaviors. Veteran graduation ceremonies, social media posts, and other modeling efforts should not simply highlight the success of an individual but should be viewed as an opportunity to teach positive behaviors for successful adaptation. Campuses should strategically include these examples at multiple points in the student experience process: recruiting efforts, admissions advising, orientation, advising/counseling/social media posts, during the job search process, and even upon graduation. The models should be coached to connect to their audience first (both in identification and emotionally), and then identify a positive behavior that is important to implement at that point in the process. In recruiting efforts, for example, preparatory behaviors, research, and the choice of environment should be highlighted. Upon graduation, alumni who have been successful in their professional

career might encourage graduates to prepare for a new transition and learn to adapt to their new company.

6. Teach adaptation. Efforts to avoid learning by trial and error and to provide opportunities to learn by observation or vicariously should be prioritized to support the expedient success of student veterans. Successful adaptation can be taught through intentional and strategic efforts. In orientations, allow student veterans to engage in hypothetical situations and to consider solutions and consequences. Communicate the lessons intended for enactment through multiple media, prioritizing relevancy and simplification, in order to achieve accessibility and maximum results. Learning can be reinforced when it is converted to a symbol or memorable phrase for future use. Highly effective modeling was evident as multiple participants cited the learning almost verbatim and reported that they had shared it with others; it had become symbolic. A valuable project would be to create a handbook for student veterans with the veteran voice at the forefront to help them to understand the process of adaptation, teach effective behaviors, and prompt positive cognitive processes.

7. Invest in and attend veteran-friendly institutions. There are strong implications for the Department of Veterans Affairs, other funding sources, campuses, and veterans to consider. Environment matters greatly and funds to improve environmental factors that support self-efficacy and agency are vital. Environment is a fundamental component of learning to adapt. The institution can present barriers and challenges or it can remove those barriers and make the environment conducive for learning and support self-efficacy and agentic action. Veterans should prioritize the

environmental factors when making decisions about which higher education institution to attend.

8. Recognize untapped power of cognitive processes. Although environment is the primary ingredient in adaptation, cognitive processing is the secret sauce of adaptation. These processes are not seen but their impact is visible in the changes in the behaviors of student veterans. Cognitive processes, like reflection, take positive environmental factors to the next level, differentiating student veterans in the same environment. If administrators are not equipping staff to foster these cognitive processes in veterans, they are lacking what could be relatively inexpensive to implement for major results. They must convey with great emphasis that failure to engage in these cognitive processes will result not only in failure to adapt or succeed in the college environment but in failure to thrive in multiple arenas of life after military service.

9. Foster confidence and agency. Those who counsel or advise student veterans should focus their efforts on getting the students to believe in their ability to enact the desired behavior. Encouragement and verbal persuasion are significant in developing self-efficacy, and these voices should originate from an array of sources in their environment: family, friends, faculty, staff, and other veterans. Faculty and staff should recognize the importance of motivation and purpose for learning. Their cognitive and affective processes require attention in order to achieve successful adaptation. Those who support student veterans should recognize the proactive, self-regulating, self-developing, and self-reflecting capabilities of the student veteran and foster confidence in those abilities through critical conversations that develop an agentic perspective.

10. Facilitate reflection. In recruiting, admissions counseling, and orientations, conversations should focus on fostering intentionality, forethought, and preparation for enactment. Based on the results of this study, practitioners could create a set of reflection questions, no longer than one page in length, for student veterans who are contemplating university studies to review and consider, which might initiate positive adaptive cognitive processes that will set them up for a more successful adaptation process. Faculty, staff, and peer mentors can engage in dialogue regarding self-regulation and self-reflection to promote adaptive learning. Regular feedback regarding both positive and negative behaviors will reinforce desired behaviors and learning. Conversations should focus on the discussion of observations of others' actions and the resulting consequences to provide insight into the students' own behavior.

11. Promote adaptation as a means to success. Behavior is a measure of adaptation and success. These behaviors should be taught, but they also require appropriate environmental support and cognitive processes for enactment. The triadic nature of this learning cannot be ignored. An effective method of scaffolding this behavior is to think of adaptation in terms of cultural learning or deployment. Practitioners must understand that the motivation of student veterans is to succeed, not to adapt. This learning must be framed in terms of success and the need to adapt in order to succeed. To effect change, student veterans should be presented more exemplar models, not just anti-models. The strategy for learning should not just be foreclosing negative paths and surrendering to trial and error. A more efficient strategy is to present a variety of models of successful adaptation.

12. Apply social cognitive theory as programmatic framework. Veterans programs and initiatives should utilize the social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework for their curriculum and approach because the “triadic reciprocity” of this theory (Bandura, 1986, p. 18) is an exemplary format to analyze veterans, who were already taught by the military to assess the environment, to utilize their strengths, and to persevere and demonstrate disciplined behavior (Soeters et al., 2006). Moreover, not unlike “triadic reciprocity” (Bandura, 1986, p. 18), *triadic interaction* provides practitioners a method of understanding how various components of the student veteran experience can be analyzed to illuminate the relationships, the influence, and the connection of the learning that occurs in the adaptation process of student veterans on campus.

Veterans could benefit greatly from understanding their transition to college through the lens of a learning process with which they are already subconsciously familiar. Approaching the transition issue as a process of learning not only empowers student veterans with the potential to change, but it also equips small or poorly resourced veterans service centers with a conceptual framework on which to base their services. Taking this approach also allows practitioners to evaluate how they are supporting the learning of student veterans in this new environment. Adaptation is a learning process; it is important that higher education personnel understand the student veteran adaptation process through a lens of learning. If faculty and staff simply resolve an issue and do not help student veterans to learn how to adapt and grow in a self-directed but supportive environment, the veterans may face similar transition issues in their post-college careers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Qualitative or quantitative research designs that could advance this inquiry include a larger population of student veterans with a greater diversity of institutions to allow for wider applicability. Such a research design was beyond the means of this study but would be valuable for expanding and supporting the findings. This study generated additional research questions or problems that warrant further studies. For example, the field should consider examining the impeding behaviors (negative behaviors with negative consequences) of student veteran adaptation more closely. Research that analyzes the power of models and anti-models with student veterans and determines which has a stronger influence or presence would be beneficial. Moreover, a study might holistically consider the impact of quality modeling in student veteran adaptation.

Additional avenues of exploration for research relate to the creation of an evidence-based and tested measure of adaptation that veterans can utilize to self-evaluate, with recommendations. Based on this study, researchers should seek to compare the successful adaptation of student veterans in programs that implement the social cognitive framework and suggested practices and those that do not do so to illuminate the value of this framework in understanding how student veterans learn to adapt.

Efforts to study the counseling and advising practices that enhance the agency, self-efficacy, identification of motivation, and development of purpose in student veterans should be prioritized. In concert with this type of study, research that seeks to discover how families, friends, and others not associated with the university can support

student veterans in developing self-efficacy, agency, and motivation would be valuable in enhancing environmental factors for adaptation. As a whole, more research on these individual characteristics, along with a study of grit and growth mindset in student veterans, could shed light on the cognitive processes element of adaptation that is often missing from dialogue about student veterans.

Conclusion

Adapting to the higher education environment is a challenging experience for student veterans. It is difficult to learn how to adapt successfully because neither higher education nor the military is teaching this population how to do so. Adaptation is a complex interplay of environmental factors, cognitive processes and personality, and behaviors, but there are strategies that lead to success. It is time to illuminate those models and paths to success rather than solely charting obstacles present. The extant literature makes it clear that the adaptation process is riddled with challenges and that the need to support these worthy students is great. Why, then, continue to allow these students to navigate this process by trial and error? It is vital that those who serve student veterans share the paths to success and exemplar models for student veterans to emulate and consider because this population rightly deserves progress in this area of research. This study presents a framework for understanding the adaptive learning process through a lens that is appropriately dynamic and grounds the research in the student voice and identity.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Howdy!

My name is Tearney Woodruff, and I am a doctoral student at Texas A&M University studying Higher Education Administration. I am conducting research that attempts to better understand the adaptation process for undergraduate student veterans at [SVSU]. I am looking for undergraduate students at [SVSU] who served in the military after September 11, 2001, are no longer considered active or reserve duty, and feel they have adapted to life as a university student. Participants should have begun their undergraduate studies no longer than 5 years after separation from the military.

The time required for involvement is minimal. If you agree to be a part of this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that should last approximately one hour in length. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience, and will take place on campus. After the interview, you may be asked to provide clarifications and/or feedback via e-mail or by telephone. Your participation will be audio recorded, but only with your permission. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain completely confidential. Information collected in this study is for my dissertation process as a student. Data gathered from the interviews will be used only for authorized research, and will not be used for competitive advantage or financial gain by anyone.

Please let me know if you are free to meet with me. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, feel free to contact me by phone or e-mail, and I will answer any questions you may have. I look forward to speaking with you and learning more about your unique experiences.

Regards,

Tearney Woodruff

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IRB NUMBER: IRB2017-0452M
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 07/12/2017
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 07/11/2022

APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORM

Project Title: **Deployed to [SVSU]: Adapting to College Life as a Student Veteran**

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Tearney Woodruff, a researcher from Texas A&M University and funded by her. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits you normally would have. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. NOTE: If you are employed then it is your responsibility to work with your employer regarding work leave for participation in this study if during work hours.

Tearney Woodruff, Protocol Director
tearney@gmail.com

Dr. Vicente Lechuga, Principal Investigator
vlechuga@tamu.edu

Why Is This Study Being Done?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the adaptation process for undergraduate student veterans at [SVSU]. This study is being conducted to fulfill the requirements for the completion of a dissertation.

Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are an undergraduate student at [SVSU] who served in the military after September 11, 2001, are no longer considered active or reserve duty, began your university studies no longer than five years after separation from the military, and have adapted to life as a university student.

How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?

12-25 people (participants) will be invited to participate in this study locally.

What Are the Alternatives to being in this study?

The alternative to being in the study is not to participate.

What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?

You will be asked to participate in one face-to-face interview that will last approximately one hour. You may also be contacted after the interview for clarification purposes. In order to assure the accuracy of the information collected, each round of interviews will be audio recorded and hand-written notes will be taken. Your participation in this study will last up to two hours and will include no more than one visit.

Visit 1 (Week 1)

This visit will last about one hour. During this visit, you will be asked questions about your adaptation to college life as a student veteran.

Will Photos, Video or Audio Recordings Be Made Of Me during the Study?

The researchers will make audio recordings during the study to ensure accuracy of the information collected only if you give your permission to do so. Indicate your decision below by initialing in the space provided.

_____ I give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

_____ I do not give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

Are There Any Risks To Me?

The things that you will be doing are no more than risks than you would come across in everyday life. The risks in this study are minimal. The primary risks are emotional or psychological in that explaining ones' emotions and past experiences might stir strong emotions. The researcher will also work to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants by using a pseudonym for each participant, but the risk for a breach of privacy and confidentiality does exist.

Although the researchers have tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions/ procedures that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

Are There Any Benefits To Me?

You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this study. However, the information gained in this study may have the potential to assist universities in developing meaningful programs and strategies to support student veteran success and adaptation to university life.

Will There Be Any Costs To Me?

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?

You will not be paid for being in this study

Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Dr. Vicente Lechuga and Tearney Woodruff will have access to the records. Recordings will be transcribed in two weeks by a third party transcriptionist. Audio files will be destroyed three years from the date of recording.

Information about you will be stored in a locked file cabinet, and computer files will be protected with a password. This consent form will be filed securely in an official area.

People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Research Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

Information about you and related to this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

Who may I Contact for More Information?

You may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Vicente Lechuga, to tell him about a concern or complaint about this research at 979-845-4301 or vlechuga@tamu.edu. You may also contact the Protocol Director, Tearney Woodruff at 979-845-8092 or tearney@gmail.com.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, to provide input regarding research, or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you may call the Texas A&M University Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) by phone at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636, or by email at irb@tamu.edu. The informed consent form and all study materials should include the IRB number, approval date, and expiration date. Please contact the HRPP if they do not.

What if I Change My Mind About Participating?

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide to not begin or to stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or stop being in the study, there will be no effect on your academic standing as a student with [SVSU].

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. I can ask more questions if I want. A copy of this entire consent form will be given to me.

Participant's Signature

Date

Printed Name

Date

INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

Signature of Presenter

Date

Printed Name

Date

APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION COLLECTION

Year in School (please circle): U1 U2 U3 U4 U4+

AGE: _____ GENDER: _____ RACE: _____

BRANCH OF SERVICE: _____ MARITAL STATUS _____

CHILDREN: _____ FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT: _____

DEPLOYMENTS WITH YEAR(S): _____

How would you describe your current military status? _____

How long did you serve in the military? _____

How much time elapsed between finishing your military service and enrolling at [SVSU]?

How long have you been enrolled at [SVSU]? _____

Have you ever previously been enrolled at a post-secondary institution? _____

Which one(s)? _____

Please indicate the institution type of your initial enrollment.

___ 2-year institution ___ For-profit institution ___ 4-year institution

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA RANGE

	Study demographics
Race	9 White, 5 Hispanic, 1 Asian American, 1 African American
Gender	13 male, 3 females
Age	8 (24-29 years) and 8 (30+)
Marital status	5 married, 5 divorced, 5 single, 1 engaged
Children	5 with children
First-generation status	8 first generation
Branch of service	9 USMC, 4 Navy, 2 Army, 1 AF

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What adjustments have you made to succeed as a student in the university environment?
2. What have you learned about yourself as a result of this adjustment process?
3. What behaviors that you brought with you from the military helped you adapt to the university environment as a student?
4. Did you prepare for the impending transition from military life to being a student? If you did, how did you prepare and why?
5. As time went on, what changes to your behaviors, attitudes, success strategies, or to your environment did you feel the need to make so that you could be more successful?
6. Describe how you felt when you first entered the university campus environment – what do you remember feeling or what stuck out to you? Have your feelings or perceptions of these things changed?
7. What personal strengths or qualities helped you transition to life as a university student? Some that hindered your adaptation?
8. Despite any challenges you may face, what keeps you motivated?
9. When you enter into a new environment, you naturally carry your own background and life experiences with you shaping how you perceive and adjust to a new environment. In what ways can you relate to this from your experience transitioning to the university?
10. What interactions with others at the university were most important and helpful in your adaptation and why?
11. What advice would you offer for military personnel preparing to make the transition out of military life to life as a student? What characteristics are key to a successful transition?
12. Thinking about yourself and other student veterans you know, what does it look like when a student veteran has successfully adjusted?

APPENDIX F

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Date	
Time	
Location	
Event	
Number of individuals observed	
Description of individuals observed	

<p>Diagram of room</p>	
<p>Disposition of individuals</p>	
<p>Gestures, eye-contact, non-verbal signals</p>	

Key notes	
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Observation	Commentary

APPENDIX G

SAMPLE CARD

109

Allen 32WD*

So I think that there's a line drawn down, and they're like "okay, well I'm either doing that, or I'm keeping my head down in my lane." /