The transfer veteran student experience: Exploring college choice, transition, and collegiate experiences of veterans

Shaftone Bryne Dunklin

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The Transfer Veteran Student Experience:
Exploring College Choice, Transition, and Collegiate Experiences of Veterans
by
Shaftone B. Dunklin

Dissertation

Submitted to the Department of Leadership and Counseling
Eastern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Dissertation Committee:
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October 18, 2012
Ypsilanti, MI
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful wife, Melissa, whom I love dearly, and my two beautiful children, Kenyon and Brooklyn. Thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement throughout this process and for allowing me to complete this journey. It is my hope that my children will understand the importance of education and begin their pursuit for knowledge early in life so that they can reap the benefits of their discoveries while they are young.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my parents and siblings for all of the love and support that they’ve given me throughout the years. To my mom, who sacrificed much for me to see my dreams and aspirations come to fruition, and to my dad and siblings, who have been strong pillars and sources of inspiration in my life. I also thank my stepparents for all of their love, support and words of encouragement; they played a huge role in my success.

I also dedicate this to my in-laws who cleared their kitchen table several times a week so that my “study buddy” and I could put in the long hours necessary to make this a reality.
Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank Dr. Eboni Zamani Gallaher, to whom I will be forever grateful. You not only cared about my success as student but you also cared about my success in life. I must also thank Dr. Jaclynn Tracy, who supported me every step of the way, allowing me to grow as both a student and professional. I would also like to express my gratitude to the rest of my committee, Dr. David Anderson and Dr. James Gallaher; thank you for your feedback and assistance throughout this process.

I want to thank my 304 Porter Building family who have always supported, encouraged, and assisted me throughout this process. Thank you to Dr. James Barott who took a special interest in my professional development and helped me to view the world in a different light. I must also thank Sally Rosales who has been there for me and allows me to call whenever I need a favor. I would like to also thank my crew, Dr. James Satterfield, Dr. Usenemie Akpanudo, Dr. Tamara Stevenson, Dr. Mary Osborne, and Jeremiah Shinn; we had some good times and conversations over the years.

A special thanks to Jason, “Coach,” and Mr. and Mrs. Loukides, who helped me to see past my condition and see what was possible. I would also like to thank my entire family, which is too large to list by name; your support has been phenomenal!

Last, thank you not only to the participants in this study but to all the men and women who answer the call to serve and defend this great nation.
Abstract

The tragic series of events that took place on September 11, 2001, changed the course of this nation and became the catalyst for wars that have spanned for more than a decade. As a result, over 2 million veterans have been deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and Operation New Dawn. In 2008, President George W. Bush signed into law provisions for what has been commonly referred to as the Post 9/11 GI Bill. This legislation substantially increased educational benefits for veterans and has led to an increase of veterans enrolling in institutions of higher education across the country. Unfortunately, we still know very little about the student veteran, aside from the recent literature that has largely focused on combat veterans and the issues they face relative to their transition from the military to college. This qualitative collective case study takes a different approach as it focuses on the experiences of 14 transfer student veterans and their satisfaction at Southeast Public University. Tinto’s (1993) model of student attrition was used as a guiding framework, as this study did not focus on the veteran’s decision to depart their previous institution but to explore their current experience at Southeast Public University.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill has brought about a renewed interest in the college veteran. Not since the original GI Bill of rights has the higher education community sought to embrace, study, and serve the veteran on campus. After the original GI Bill of Rights passed in 1944, institutions of higher education witnessed an influx of veterans on campus, and student enrollment across the country soared. Along with the increase in enrollment, the GI Bill gave access to a segment of the population that previously did not have the means or opportunity to gain a degree. Because of the change in campus demographics and the special needs of student veterans, many institutions of higher learning changed how they delivered services. McClellan and Stinger (2009) stated, “The end of World War II transformed student personnel administration. The enterprise grew phenomenally, both the introduction of new programs and services and the expansion of old ones. Philosophical issues in student affairs were secondary to the time and energy needed to serve the returning veteran” (p. 11-12). As a result, colleges and universities opened veteran centers on campus, formed advisory boards and created partnerships both on and off campus that serve the needs of today’s returning Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans. McDonagh (1947) stated:

Colleges and universities will have to meet the earnestness of the veteran with a dynamic appreciation of his probable role in our society. Veterans have sacrificed much to attend our institutions of higher education, and our colleges must assume a responsibility toward each veteran accepted as a student, or there may be dangerous repercussions in the years to come from the cynicism of alumni veterans. (p. 149)

Since September 11, 2001, over 1.9 million veterans have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom
In the coming years, many of these veterans will make the decision to attend one of the 5,000 plus colleges/universities in the United States to pursue their education. The implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, like its World War II predecessor, has once again opened the door to educational opportunities for veterans. The new bill will have a profound impact on veterans; it will also directly affect intuitions of higher learning, creating a vast recruiting market for schools that are facing declining enrollment. Unlike the average college admit, veterans will not have to worry about the financial burden of attending college; the majority of them will have 100 percent of their college tuition paid for by the United States government.

In order to prosper in this new market, colleges and universities must be ready to provide special services for veterans if they intend on swaying their decision to enroll at their institution. Over the past couple of years, the term “military friendly” has become quite popular and has been awarded to schools that have made an attempt to offer special provisions for veterans such as application fee waivers, priority registration, acceptance of military credit, integrated university services, and a dedicated veteran coordinator. In addition, as university officials eagerly await the surge in veteran enrollment, they must also take into consideration the issues that many veterans may face because of their military experience. In a January 2010 statement to the House Committee on Veteran Affairs, the Executive Director of Veterans for Common Sense cited a VA report indicating that OIF/OEF veterans have filed 442,000 VA disability claims, with 134,000 of them being for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many veterans will carry their experience of being deployed in a war zone with them onto the campus, into the classrooms, and, for many, for the rest of their life. This is problematic as it presents issues
relative to how veterans integrate into campus life or the extent to which they may experience less-than-supportive campus climates that can affect their academic and social well-being.

**Statement of the Problem**

Only recently have issues of campus climate emerged to receive any attention as they relate to veterans specifically, not just in terms of their psychological well-being relative to PTSD but their overall well-being across several life domains, that is, academic, social, and community. In 2008, prior to the passage of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, the Student Veterans of America became the flagship national organization for student veterans. Derek Blumke, a student at the University of Michigan and co-founder of the SVA, felt a need to form a student veterans’ organization on campus because he felt isolated and desired an avenue to interact with other veterans, provide support, and lobby for increased programs and services for veterans at the University of Michigan (Greshman, 2008). As Blumke reached out to veterans on other campuses, he realized that he was not alone and that other veterans were experiencing similar issues. These conversations provided the rationale for forming the SVA organization. Over the next two years, the organization’s growth was quite remarkable, with approximately 241 local chapters formed on campuses across the country, clearly highlighting that what Blumke experienced was not just exclusive to the University of Michigan but was a universal phenomenon.

At present, it is commonplace to hear about issues pertaining to veterans on campus, but there still is a gap and need for more policies in relationship to veteran students. One such attempt was the passage of a robust educational benefits package for veterans, which in turn inspired many institutions of higher education to reevaluate the services they provided for veterans on campus. In June of 2008, the president signed into law the 21st Century GI Bill of
Rights, commonly referred to as the Post 9/11 GI Bill. In this bill, Congress approved that veterans serving active duty time after September 11, 2001, would be eligible to receive up to 100 percent of their tuition and fees paid directly to their institution of higher learning. A book stipend of $41.60 per credit hour (up to $1000 per academic year) and a monthly living allowance at the rate of an E-5 service member with dependents (military pay scale) relative to the institution’s zip code was also approved. The benefits under the Post 9/11 GI Bill represented a significant increase over the previous Montgomery GI Bill. This bill was quite different from the Montgomery GI Bill but similar to the World War II era GI Bill with money being paid directly to schools, a provision equally beneficial to both the veteran and institution. The significance of this new bill is monumental because it means that over two million veterans will have the opportunity to earn their degree, but also for institutions of higher education, this will open up a completely new recruitment base, which has given veterans a platform on the college campus.

On January 4, 2011, Congress passed into law S.3447 the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvement Act of 2010, which made slight but significant modifications to the previous bill in an attempt to make it more accessible and equitable for all types of training. The modifications to the law make it possible for veterans to use their GI Bill for non-college degree, on-the-job training, flight, and apprenticeship training programs. The changes added active duty guard members to the list of eligible recipients, who were not included in the original bill. Another provision now allows eligible recipients attending fully online programs to collect a monthly stipend, which is fifty percent of the national housing allowance average. There is now a $17,500 yearly cap for veterans attending any institution other than a public state institution of higher learning. In addition, on August 3, 2011, President Obama signed H.R. 1383 the
Restoring GI Bill Fairness Act, grandfathering veterans enrolled in private and for-profit institutions of higher learning prior to January 3, 2011, to rates under the original bill until 2014. This bill addresses only the seven states with the highest tuition rates: Arizona, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas.

Since the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill there has been some change in terms of student veterans (SVA) galvanizing on campus to make their needs known, but the policy landscape has not kept up to pace relative to attendance of the student veteran. During the Vietnam Era, the college and university climate was not very welcoming of returning veterans, and due to these injustices, it has become politicized and politically correct to be a military friendly institution. This is problematic in a sense that it can foster a climate of institutional rhetoric where the institution may claim to be veteran-friendly but does not have a dedicated veterans’ office, staff, resources, and/or policies specifically to support veterans both academically and socially, and this may present an inaccurate reflection of their institution.

Recognizing that veterans would become a targeted student population, websites such as Military.com began selecting the characteristics veterans should look for when selecting a college; if a school met these criteria they were labeled as “military friendly.” GI Jobs, the magazine, did a survey of institutions across the country, awarding schools with plaques and a name listing in their magazine and website if they met their committee’s criteria of a “military friendly” school. Many schools that received this military friendly recognition by GI Jobs sent out press releases and listed on their website that they were in the top 15% of colleges and universities who were providing veteran-centered services. This sudden characterization of “military friendly” quickly became the new buzzword within the veteran and higher education community; veterans were contacting schools to find out if they were military friendly and
schools were making changes in order to meet the criteria. Rich McCormack, publisher at GI Jobs magazine, stated:

This list (military friendly) is especially important now because the recently enacted Post-9/11 GI Bill has given veterans virtually unlimited financial means to go to school. Veterans can now enroll in any school, provided they’re academically qualified. So schools are clamoring for them like never before. Veterans need a trusted friend to help them decide where to get educated. The Military Friendly Schools list is that trusted friend. (Fazio, 2009, para 5)

The new GI Bill has given veterans more options in college/university selection; the services that institutions provide specific to veterans and their satisfaction with the campus, as a whole, will play a big role in recruiting and retaining veterans. Leslie and Fretwell (1996) state, “Students are arguably the best public relations tool institutions can have. If they have a bad experience, they may talk very publically about their unhappiness. Therefore, whatever else an institution may do well, the experience its undergraduates have is ultimately going to affect its enrollment…” (p. 201).

The student veteran experience has been a relatively unexplored topic in postsecondary education. Much of what we find in the literature focuses on the legacy of the servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the GI Bill, and the role it played in educating World War II era veterans (Bennett, 1996; Crespi, 1946; McDonagh, 1997). In recent years, there have been several articles published that focus primarily on the psychological aspect of combat veterans transitioning from soldier to student (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Callahan & Britto, 2008; Church 2009; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Glover-Graf, Miller, & Fremann, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) as well as the potential impact that the Post 9/11 GI Bill will have on
veteran school choice/attendance. Branker (2009) explored the concept of universal design and how to make the university environment more accommodating for injured veterans. Baechtold and De Sawal’s (2009) article addresses the needs of female veterans attending institutions of higher education, which may differ from that of males, given that 23-30% of female veterans experience sexual assault while on active duty (Sadler, Mengeling, Torner, Cook, & Booth, 2011). This spark of renewed interest is a positive step forward in adding to the knowledge base of what we know about student veterans but does little to expand upon what we know about veteran perceptions of “the college experience” relative to student satisfaction and campus climate among both transfer and non-combat exposed veterans. In an era when postsecondary education is critical for upward mobility and career, advancement on the military track is still a viable option. To the extent that administrators do not think about what the veteran student experience is, their satisfaction, along with their overall quality of life as it relates to academic and social integration, is negligent, especially for institutions that primarily see the veteran as a source of revenue.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of campus climate and overall satisfaction among veteran transfer students. As expected, the Post 9/11 GI Bill ignited a surge in veterans using their educational benefits at institutions of higher learning. As these numbers continue to increase at college and university campuses across the country, there is a need to study factors that influence student veterans’ satisfaction and success. In 2009, five out of the top fifteen schools that had more than a thousand veterans using Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits were community colleges; seven were for-profit schools (Sewel, 2010). Given the high number of veterans enrolled in community colleges, it is logical to believe that many of them will transfer...
to a four-year institution, lending reason for administrators to understand this segment of the student population. Recently, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) published its 2010 annual report summary noting that student veterans did not engage with the university or view their educational experience in a similar way to non-veteran students. The data also suggest that first-year combat veterans feel there is little campus support for veterans, even at a time when most universities are trying to bulk up the level of services they provide for veterans. These findings are very problematic and suggest that “baccalaureate granting institutions should seek ways to more effectively engage student veterans in effective educational practices and provide them with the supportive environments that promote success” (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010, p.18).

Given all of this attention, it is highly likely that veterans realize that as students they are in high demand and are shopping to see which schools offer them the best benefits: in-state tuition, additional student aid, military credit, a veteran’s center, and dedicated staff to assist them throughout their educational journey. College and university officials who look to recruit and retain veteran students must seriously address the issue of veteran satisfaction on campus. In addition, another important fact to remember is that to many veterans, cost will not be an issue, and with favorable veteran admissions policies, many veterans will not be limited to local and regional schools. Thomas and Galambos (2004) stated, “If students are viewed as consumers of higher education, their satisfaction is important to institutional success, both because effective institutions should have satisfied customers and because satisfaction supports the recruitment of additional customers” (p. 252).
Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the proposed study:

1. What factors contribute to college choice among transfer student veterans attending this college?

2. How do academic, social, and community involvement affect veteran transfer student satisfaction with the overall campus climate at this college?

3. In light of the new iterations of the GI Bill, what are the perceived challenges faced by transfer student veterans attending this college?

Significance of the Study

The proposed study is significant because of the far-reaching effects that the passage of the new GI Bill will have on Post 9/11 veterans at institutions of higher education. The signing of the original GI Bill in 1944 by President Franklin Roosevelt changed the composition of higher education in the United States; many believe that this new bill has the potential to provide similar results given the country’s economic condition.

Reminiscent of the mid-1940s, today’s institutions of higher education are embracing and eagerly awaiting the influx of veterans returning home and heading to college to help boost enrollment numbers. Newspapers, magazines, and veteran interest groups are rating colleges on their veteran-friendly policies and practices to help veterans choose schools that have their best interests in mind. Some universities and colleges have formed advisory boards and hired full-time staff/administrators to ensure they are prepared to provide services that meet the needs of incoming Post 9/11 veterans, hoping to make the top of the veteran-friendly lists.

In 2008, Keith Wilson the Director of Education Services for the Department of Veteran Affairs stated publically that the VA expected a 10 percent increase in veterans using their
educational benefits. With the impending increase of veterans on campus, college and university administrators must seek out partnerships and draft policy to deal with potential issues that may arise. Several colleges and universities have already made changes to their billing practices to accommodate delays in GI Bill payments by the VA. On October 2, 2009, the Secretary of Veteran Affairs released a statement acknowledging the fact that the VA was behind in processing enrollment certifications, leaving many veterans in dire financial straits. In order to serve this population adequately, university officials must be flexible and willing to collaborate with outside parties and government agencies.

This study is also significant as university/college officials look to build programs and provide services for veteran students. It is important for administrators to know from the veterans’ perspective what services are both supportive and lacking at their respective institutions. As administrators dig more deeply into the concerns that veterans may have with university services, they may begin to think of how to restructure the services offered at their institution. According to a 2009 report by the Student Affairs Leadership Council, there are four models that categorize veteran services programs on college campuses, ranging from the one-person office to the comprehensive stand-alone resource center. Currently, the most common mode of veteran service delivery is via the financial aid or registrar’s office acting primarily in a certifying official capacity rather than a student veteran advocate (Strawn, 2009). For many institutions there is a quid pro quo relative to devoting resources to expand services for veterans; although most agree they are needed, they are being forced to make cuts to other areas across the university due to decreases in external funding from the states and other resources.

Another area of concern is as more veteran students enter college with combat exposure, school officials will have to be prepared by having capable staff trained to deal with the complex
issues that veterans may have returning from a war zone. In addition, the suicide rate for veterans is significantly high; in 2008, the House Committee on Veteran Affairs addressed the issue in a session entitled, “The truth about veteran suicides.” In 2011, the Subcommittee on Health reported that between 2005 and 2010, a veteran committed suicide on average every 36 hours (Committee on Veteran Affairs, 2011).

**Definition of Terms**

The purpose of this section is to provide the conceptual definition of terms commonly repeated throughout this study:

**Academic Integration:** the combination of both the individual’s grade performance and intellectual development while in college. It also relates to the individual’s overall classroom experience including relationships and interactions with faculty members (Tinto, 1975).

**Campus Climate:** the degree to which a campus’s practices and decisions embrace the members of the campus community as well as the degree to which individual members feel respected. “Campus climate is a measure—real or perceived—of the campus environment as it relates to interpersonal, academic, and professional interactions. In a healthy climate, individuals and groups generally feel welcomed, respected, and valued by the university” (Study Group on University Diversity Campus Climate Report, 2007, p. 1).

**Certifying Official:** The individual(s) at a college/university who certifies a student’s enrollment with the Department of Veteran Affairs for GI Bill benefits.

**Community:** the individual’s sense of belonging on the college campus as condition of campus climate (Hurtado, 1992).
Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA): the national agency that oversees all veteran benefit programs.

Non-Traditional Student: undergraduate students who are typically over the age of 25, including veterans, parents, returning students whose education was interrupted, displaced workers, and so on.

Post 9/11 GI Bill (Ch. 33): the newest veteran benefit authorized by congress in 2008. The new benefit pays full tuition and fees for qualifying veterans.

Service member: to any individual still serving in the military regardless of veteran status; this is to include any member of the National Guard, reserves, or active duty service branch.

Student Satisfaction: the student’s subjective response to the college environment; it refers to the similarity between a student’s campus experience and his or her campus expectations (Astin, 1993).

Student Services: university services that support the academic mission of the institution, which typically align within division of student affairs. These services commonly include Campus Life, Housing and Dining, Career Services, Veteran Services, Admissions, Counseling and Psychological Services, and Judicial Services.

Social Integration: the individual’s ability to engage socially on-campus activities and events as well as his or her willingness to form relationships with peers (Tinto, 1975).

Transfer Student: a student who leaves one institution and enrolls in another institution.

Veteran: an individual who has spent at least one day on active duty, not to include training or schooling.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The Historical Role of Military Policy in American Education in Brief

The relationship between the U.S. military and the American educational system has a long and tangled history, which has sparked several key legislative policies. Early examples like the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 and Land Grant Act of 1890 had a monumental effect on higher education. Introduced by Justin Smith Morrill, a congressional representative from Vermont, the initial Morrill Act proposed that each state would receive 30,000 acres of land for each senate representative the state had, and the proceeds from the sale of the land would be used to fund institutions of higher education (Casazza & Bauer, 2006).

In 1859 Congress passed the first Morrill Land Grant Act; however, it did not have the support of then-President Buchanan, who vetoed it in 1861 (Casazza & Bauer, 2006). Many critics of the Morrill Act felt that the new institutions of higher education would challenge the traditional canon of classical studies and open up access to education, which were primarily elite privately controlled institutions for the wealthiest of families. It was only after the act added a primary focus on agriculture and mechanics, with an emphasis on teaching military tactics, that President Abraham Lincoln approved it on July 2, 1862 (Cross, 1999).

The first Morrill Act illustrates the growing demand for technical education and the early influences of the military on colleges/universities as teaching military tactics was desirable following the Civil War, given the need for a highly skilled, trained military (Cross, 1999). By contrast, the second Morrill Land Grant Act sought to address many issues relative to postsecondary education access and focus of institutional missions. Hence, the second Morrill Land Grant Act created institutions of higher education specifically for Blacks in 1890. The latter act required the former confederate states to provide evidence that race was not an
admissions criterion. States were required to build separate land-grant institution to meet the needs of aspiring Black collegians if they were unable to show proof of equal access.

One distinction between the 1862 and 1890 acts is that the latter granted cash as opposed to land given by the first Morrill Land Grant. Nonetheless, the term land-grant college also legally applies to the 1890 institutions. The unique mission of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) was democratic, open access institutions that fostered practical education. During this period, “civil engineering, mining, and military training were popular choices among students and dominated enrollments in this era” (Thelin, 2004, p. 136). The HBCUs gave Black students the opportunity to enroll in the ROTC and become officers. Three fourths of all black generals and flag officers in the U.S. Armed Forces are graduates of Historical Black Colleges and Universities (Jackson & Nunn, 2003).

The military tactic courses, initiated by the Morrill Land Grant Act, played a major role in increasing the interests of both white and African-American students in military service. The government capitalized on this interest, and in 1916 President Woodrow Wilson signed the National Defense Act (NDA). This act authorized the establishment of Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) and Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) programs in high schools and colleges, respectively. Another important outcome was that it gave the president the authority to federalize the National Guard in times of national emergencies, a right that President George W. Bush invoked in 2001. The NDA also requested the National Research Academy to research ways that physical sciences, mathematics, and biology could be used in defense (Wechsler, Goodchild, et al., 2007).

The Morrill Land Grant Acts and the National Defense Act were major examples of government interaction in higher education. In 1912, after soldiers returned from World War I,
the government failed to properly plan for the re-entry of thousands of returning veterans into the workforce. This lack of preparation resulted in the country falling into one of the worst economic crises in its history, ultimately sparking the Great Depression (Thelin, 2004). To avoid repeating hard-learned lessons of World War I, the government once again intervened and in 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, commonly referred to as the GI Bill. This bill’s primary purpose was to prevent the onset of another depression at the end of World War II; as a result, the government acted proactively to minimize the effect of returning veterans by providing the opportunity to attend college free of charge. This would allow veterans to be absorbed into the economy over a four- to five-year period and avoid a major economic crisis (Casazza and Bauer 2006; Wechsler, Goodchild et al., 2007). Unlike their World War I predecessors who competed for limited factory jobs, the World War II veterans were highly educated/entrepreneurial and sought professional positions as business executives, doctors, lawyers, and engineers, thus earning them the title as the Greatest Generation (Brokaw, 1998). The GI Bill singlehandedly changed the composition of American colleges and universities. By 1947, 1,150,000 veterans were attending college, representing 49.2% of the total student population; the bill was having its intended effect (Bennett, 1996). Economists have stated that for every dollar spent funding the GI Bill, there was a 7:1 return, a success by any measure (U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee (1988).

In 1946, President Harry Truman signed the National School Lunch Act to support the military as a measure of national security (Levine, 2008). After it was made apparent that young men were not qualifying for the draft during WWII because of poor malnutrition, Congress became concerned (Taenzler, 1970). The conditions of the Great Depression led to poor health in the United States, and its effect was very noticeable in the schools, leading Congress to sign a bill
that would provide school-aged children with meals on a three-tier system, which is the foundation for the current school lunch program.

In October of 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, a satellite that successfully orbited the earth, which led the US into crisis mode and catapulted our interest and resources into the great space race. This national security threat led to the signing of the National Defense Education Act of 1958, allowing the federal government to invest in institutions of higher learning that focused on scientific and technical skills. The government also invested in loan programs for students to take coursework in mathematics, science, elementary and secondary studies, and foreign languages in effort to create a highly educated society and to keep the US ahead. The government also gave money for the development of vocational training programs and lent money to graduate students seeking fellowships (Carleton, 2002; Thelin, 2004). The NDEA used financial aid incentives to influence students in an attempt to graduate more of them with math and science degrees (Wolanin, 2001).

The Veterans’ Educational Assistance Program (VEAP), established in 1977, was a benefit offered to Post-Vietnam veterans. Unlike the GI Bill, VEAP offered much less of a financial benefit for veterans attending colleges and universities after the war. Under VEAP, the VA paid matching funds up to two times the contribution amount of the veteran.

In 1984, the “Montgomery” GI Bill, named after Sonny Montgomery, a Mississippi Congressman, World War II veteran, and Bronze Star recipient, was enacted to increase the educational benefit of active duty service members and veterans. This benefit, as with VEAP, required veterans to make a financial contribution. For the Montgomery GI Bill, the service member had a one-time opportunity to agree to contribute $1,200 into their GI Bill benefit over a 12-month period.
In 2005 the Ronald W. Reagan National Defense Authorization Act authorized the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP). The REAP program provided additional educational assistance to members of the National Guard and Reserve who are called to active duty in response to a war or national emergency declared by the president or Congress. This increased benefit came because of the extended use of National Guard and Reserve troops in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom post-September 11, 2001.

In 2008, the United States found itself fully engaged in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. As a result, President George W. Bush signed into law the “GI Bill for the 21st Century,” commonly referred to as the Post 9/11 GI Bill. While innovative during its time, the original GI Bill had a major flaw: it did not keep up with the rate of inflation and the increasing cost of higher education. Over the years there were modifications made to increase the dollar amount of the GI Bill, but the increases failed to align with the rising cost of higher education.

**World War II Veterans on Campus**

As stated in a previous section, the implementation of the GI Bill of Rights had a profound effect on the development and growth of higher education. In the years following World War II, college campuses across the country literally doubled in size, which caused the expansion of physical space, and more course offerings and student related services.

**Academics.** For the most part, universities across the country welcomed the return of both former and new student veterans to their campus, but not all were ecstatic. The presidents of both Harvard University and the University of Chicago expressed their distaste for the access/opportunity that the GI Bill would give to the common man. Harvard President James Conant addressed the impact that the GI Bill would have on traditional entrance standards in his 1943-44 Harvard Presidential report, stating:
“Unless the law is subsequently modified, all our colleges, universities and technical schools will have heavy responsibilities when the wave of demobilized veterans hits our educational system. Unless high standards of performance can be maintained in spite of sentimental pressures and financial temptation, we may find the least capable among the war generation, instead of the most capable, flooding the facilities for advanced education in the United States.” (Conant, 1947, p. 11)

University of Chicago president Robert Hutchins wrote an article entitled "The threat to American education." In this article, Hutchins claimed that the GI Bill would “demoralize education and defraud the veteran” Hutchins (as cited by Olson, 1973, p. 604). Hutchins believed that schools would see the veteran as a paycheck and change their standards and requirements to admit and retain unqualified students. Conant’s and Hutchins’ positions, although influential, were not the dominant thought. Kraines (1945) emphasized that the majority of veterans would be serious about college and respectful of the values of higher education. Luckily, most universities agreed with this philosophy, giving WWII veterans a chance and allowing them to prove the skeptics wrong.

Justice (1946) surveyed veterans from ten different colleges, and an analysis of his results found that veterans were no different from other students except that they were generally older and more serious about their studies. Garmezy and Crose (1948) studied the academic achievement of veteran versus non-veteran students at the University of Iowa and found that veterans’ academic performance was slightly superior to the non-veteran population. Even Harvard turned to recognize the value that veterans brought to campus; in 1945 they sent out a publication titled “What about Harvard” in attempts to recruit veterans to their university. Harvard professor David Riesman wrote that “the G.I. Bill of Rights brought to the universities
everywhere a new surge of seriousness…often matured by the war, frequently married, with a pretty good idea of the careers they were headed for, veterans did not want to fool around with collegiate fun and games” (Riesman, 1973).

After World War I, many veterans received college credit for their military experience, but many criticized that “soldiers and sailors were granted additional credits beyond what they knew with the result that many failed to make satisfactory progress in advanced courses” (Williamson, 1944, p. 90). In 1942, prior to the end of World War II, several educators from leading universities met and discussed the need to evaluate the military credit that given to students. Out of this meeting, the American Council on Education came up with a plan to evaluate the veteran experience, creating a transcript for schools to use to evaluate credit they would award the veteran (Tyler, 1944).

The “GI Bulge.” According to University of Indiana’s (Bloomington Campus) archives, the university’s enrollment climbed from 4,498 in 1945 to 10,345 in 1946 after the return of World War II veterans (McIlvien, n. d). During this period, North Carolina State University also witnessed a significant increase in their enrollment, from 2,500 pre-WW II to 5,328 in 1947 (Transforming Society: The GI Bill Experience at NC State, Online Exhibition). This rapid growth became known as the “GI Bulge.” As veterans returned from the war and took advantage of the GI Bill, they began enrolling in institutions of higher education in record numbers, and colleges and universities all over the country literally doubled in size, seemingly overnight. Most university/college archival records reference this era, between the years of 1945-1950, as a period of growth for their university both in student population and in physical buildings (i.e. University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Southeast Public University, Syracuse University, etc.).
The increase in the student attendance also brought with it the strain of increased class size and a shortage of faculty to teach courses. Olson (1973) wrote “Larger classes, larger colleges and increased use of graduate students as teachers had accomplished educational wonders for the veterans, who seemed grateful. The uncritical acceptance of largeness became a major legacy of the G.I. Bill” (p. 608). By 1948, the enrollment at Syracuse University had reached almost 20,000 students, nearly four times the enrollment in 1945, causing university administrators to find solutions for the overcrowding. Syracuse University archives referenced that more than 600 trailers, military huts, and makeshift buildings covered the campus in order to accommodate the surge in enrollment (“Remembering the GI Bulge: Veteran Impact on the Campus,” Syracuse University online exhibition).

**The transition.** As veterans transitioned from the battlefield to the classroom, it became commonplace to generalize “the” veteran in describing what they would be like when they returned and the services they would need. Crespi and Shapleigh (1946) warned against this notion, stating that, “It is high time to relinquish the myth of ‘the’ veteran for the less pretentious facts of veteran one, veteran two, and veteran three” (p. 362). Webb and Atkinson (1946) found that:

Misconceptions regarding the prevalence of serious educational maladjustments, which are completely without substantiation when experience with many veterans is reviewed, have been given in the popular articles, which have been published in journals of tremendous circulation. One suspects that persons whose experience with the veteran was limited prepared these articles. Some of the articles are highly idealistic; others select the problems of the few and make them the problems of the many. (p. 238)

Because of the violent nature of war, many assumed veterans would have trouble readjusting and
believed they would be less moral, less independent, and find it difficult to relate with family (Crespi and Shapleigh, 1946).

With these ideas in mind and the general expectation that there would be a need for transition-based services for veterans, many universities established veteran office on campus to help new and returning students. In 1945, the University of California appointed a Coordinator of Veterans’ Affairs to help simplify the entrance process, provide support, and make sure that veterans were able to reach their educational goals (Webb and Atkinson, 1946). The University of Minnesota established the Bureau of Veterans’ Affairs to help veterans make the decision whether to immediately enroll in school or seek employment and to create a veteran-friendly atmosphere at the university. The university created an orientation interview to assist veterans prior to their entrance into the university. The purpose of the orientation interview was to put the veterans at ease about their decision to enroll in school, help them with the application process and registration, and help them set a career goal or plan (Wilkinson, 1949).

The GI Bill for the most part was highly successful; over 2.5 million veterans used their benefits at colleges/universities with more than 7.8 million veterans taking part in some type of formal training. The newness of the GI Bill and the impact that it would/did have inspired several studies and numerous articles during this period, but after World War II, interest in the college veteran literally vanished. The Korean or “forgotten” War, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War did very little to spark the interest of scholars as it relates to their college campus experience. Given this fact, it is not surprising that colleges and universities are dealing with the same issues and having the same conversations as World War II university officials as they relate to meeting the needs of returning combat student veterans.
College Choice

In order to understand how veterans make their college decisions, it is important to understand the college choice process. Regrettably, much of the literature on college choice is based on traditional students, which does not take into consideration the diversity of today’s college student in terms of ethnic background, age, SES, and even veteran status (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). What we do know about the process is that college selection is a “complex, multistage process during, which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university or institution of advanced vocational training” (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989, p. 234).

Paulsen and St. John (2002) studied the financial connection between college choice and persistence; they postulated that college choice is both contextual and situational. They believe that social class, cultural capital, and habitus, a term used to describe the “enduring, internal system of values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions, which is derived from the student’s immediate family, community, and school environments and is common to members of one’s social class” (p. 196), is a major influence in the college choice decision. Lower income first generation students are less likely to attend school full-time and are largely enrolled in public schools rather than private institutions, in contrast to students from more affluent households. Access to financial aid plays a critical role in the college choice decision, and the continued availability of that aid significantly impacts their persistence (Paulsen & St. John, 2002).

The college choice for veterans comes after or, in some cases, during their four to twenty year-plus enlistment in the armed forces. Sources such as Militaryjobs.com and Military.Com have made a business of helping provide students with information on what have been termed “military friendly” schools in order to aid in the college choice process. According to
Bloomberg.com, Keith Wilson, VA Director of Education Services, said that in the past year, veteran college enrollment rose by fourteen percent (Goldman & Lauerman, 2010). An article in the Chronicle of Higher Education noted that for-profit and community colleges accounted for 12 out of the top 15 institutions with veteran enrollment over 1000 (Sewall, 2010). For-profit schools such as Phoenix Online have been a significant player in providing veterans access to higher education, certifying more than 10,000 veterans for Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits. Just recently, Congress investigated allegations against for-profit institutions, relating to unethical practices in recruitment, financial aid, and high student loan default (Krantz, 2010); it will be of particular interest to see if this will play any role in changing the dynamics of veteran college selection.

Many colleges and universities, after World War II, openly welcomed veterans enrolling at their universities. Congress had recently passed a very generous aid package to veterans known as the GI Bill, which paid up to $500 per academic year for tuition, books, and supplies, which was enough to attend just about any school in the country. Another added bonus was that the tuition was paid directly to the institution from the federal government; this guaranteed payment made it very attractive for schools to recruit veterans, very similar to what we are witnessing today with the Post 9/11 G Bill. Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom era veterans who have three years of qualifying active duty time can attend practically any state public school free of cost. Recognizing this, many university officials understand that veterans have a huge college market to choose from and distinguishing themselves from other schools by providing veterans with more benefits and services may be the key to attracting them to their university. Astin (1985) states, “Differences in institutional selectivity result more from student self-selection than from the selection decisions of the institutions themselves” (p. 92).
Astin believes that college choice for traditional college students is largely influenced by parents, counselors, and school teachers because they typically encourage them to apply at schools that are more in line with their high school grades and test scores (Astin, 1985). Given this, it is highly likely that veterans will tend to apply at schools that are not very selective, which may account for the high number of veterans enrolled in for profit institutions and community colleges.

When looking at the traditional college student, Chapman (1981) suggested that an individual’s background characteristics significantly factor into their college choice decision-making process. Of those background characteristics, the individual’s socioeconomic status is likely to carry the most weight and influence the type of college or university that individual will attend. Chapman also acknowledges that external factors such as characteristics of the college, significant persons, and communication efforts by the college play a role in college choice. Many veterans may have never seriously explored the idea of where they would want to attend college during their time in the service. Many others were fortunate to be in a branch of service, such as the Air Force, where airmen have the opportunity to earn an associate’s degree from the Community College of the Air Force just from the training and duties the veteran performed. In addition, the veteran might not have had the luxury of being stationed on a base that had an organized/structured higher educational system at which service members are able to take college courses. Given this, many veterans may feel a little out-of-the-loop about the whole college process, and their college choice may simply be influenced by location and whatever school shows interest in them first. The findings of a recent study focusing on postsecondary choices of nontraditional age students and their decision to enroll in non-credit or credential programs suggest that “a favorable environmental learning climate—including availability of
positive interactions with mentors and peers—may be an underestimated factor influencing participation in postsecondary education by nontraditional-age students” (Kortesoja, 2009, p. 59).

Jackson (1982) suggested that students’ college choice is based on varying degrees of nine tactics or factors: school quality, college offerings, college location, academic help, public subsidy, general aid, targeted aid, general information, and specific information. Jackson looked at college choice from a recruitment point of view as it is geared toward making colleges more attractive to students. School quality tactics encourage schools to improve their curriculum, which may motivate and influence students to continue. College offerings refer to programs or courses that colleges can offer to make them more attractive to students. College location refers to building local or branch campuses. Academic help refers to programs that help students become successful and or prepare for college. Public subsidy refers to public institutions that can figure out a way to reduce tuition. General aid is a way of making financial aid readily available for all prospective college students. Targeted aid is for specific student populations, degree majors, or other limited programs. General information refers to displaying and delivering collected information about a college to a student. Specific information refers to getting a college’s information directly in the hands of the students, oftentimes due to request. Of these nine tactics, Jackson discovered that the top three categories leading college choice were specific information, academic help, and targeted aid (Jackson, 1982). In an effort to make college free for veterans, many schools have either lowered the cost of their tuition or have allocated money for the GI Bill’s Yellow Ribbon Program to meet the additional costs the GI Bill doesn’t cover.

Galotti and Mark (1994) interviewed high school juniors over a two-year period as they were engaged in the college selection process. The interview was targeted primarily at finding
the types of information they looked at to make their college choice decision, how they gathered
the information, what their selection criteria was, how they used the criteria to make their
decision, and how many schools were they considering during the process. Galotti and Mark
(1994) found out through their study that students relied heavily on their parents, friends, and
classmates as a source of information. Students considered about eight different selection criteria
in their college decision-making process, with cost and college type private vs. public ranked as
two of their top selection criteria in the decision making process. College visitation did not stand
out until the third interview, which was towards the end of their selection process (Galotti
&Mark, 1994). Paulsen (1990) also suggested that during this last phase of the college choice
process, the student’s evaluation process is largely influenced by their academic ability and
socioeconomic background, meaning their perceived notions of their ability to gain acceptance
based on test scores/grades and the affordability of the institution.

Prior to the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, veterans enrolled largely at
community colleges. One reason for this could be that the previous Montgomery GI Bill only
covered a fraction of the cost of tuition, room/board, and fees at a four-year university but would
likely cover their entire cost at a community college. In the late 1960s, three fourths of veterans
were highly dependent on the GI Bill for financial support (Astin, 1985). In most studies of
student college choice, cost has been recognized as the major factor in the decision-making
process (Chapman, 1981).

**College and Servicemembers Today**

According to the Air Force Material Command, about 24 percent of enlisted airmen
earned degrees attending the Community College of the Air Force (CCAF), which offers 67
degrees in five areas (Hoffman, 2011). Master Sgt. James Roy believes that, “Through
continuing education we can unlock ideas to create efficiencies, conserve valuable resources and inspire innovation” (para, 3). For active duty military personnel, community colleges play a pivotal role in providing flexible education to a very mobile community. In 2010, the Department of Defense spent $531 million educating 320,000 servicemembers using tuition assistance, a benefit for individuals still serving in the military (United States Government and Accountability Office, 2011). Central Texas College, Community College of the Air Force, Coastline Community College, and Tidewater Community College are all schools commonly listed on veteran military transcripts as they offer a wide range of courses that servicemembers can participate in that are offered both in-residence and online. In addition, several of these schools have programs specific to assisting the military to provide job specific training to its servicemembers.

Adelman (2005) indicated that in the 1990s approximately 40% of traditional-aged students first started out in community colleges; for students 24 and older (the age range that most veterans will fall in) the percentage was 60%. The comprehensive testing and assessment service Prometric, commonly used by servicemembers to gain college credit through DSST testing, stated that “because of persistently rising tuition fees, GI benefits, some argue, have been pressed to keep up putting four-year colleges out of reach for many veterans. In fact, data indicates 90 percent of veterans attend community college, versus only 38 percent of the overall population” (Prometric, para. 2). Although these numbers may seem disproportionately high, they do not factor in that the majority of United States military bases are located on the coastal states of Virginia, Florida, and California, all of which have very extensive community college systems that veterans are likely to attend. According to the Department of Veteran Affairs, San Diego Mesa College and Tidewater Community College (both of which offer associate degree
programs) rank within the top 15 schools where veterans use their Post 9/11 GI Bill Benefits.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 43% of military undergraduates attend public 2-year institutions, while only 21.4% attend public four-year institutions. When polled on how they made their college choice, 75% indicated that their decision was based on location (Adleman, 2005; Radford, Wun, & Weko, 2009). Based on this information, it is logical to conclude that servicemembers/veterans who choose to pursue a higher-level traditional degree are likely to choose local public institutions. Given this, it is important for administrators to have an understanding of issues veteran students face during and after the transfer process, especially for those veterans who may be dealing with other issues relative to their assimilation back into civilian society.

College Transfer

“...(a) transfer receptive culture as an institutional commitment by a four-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfer successfully that is, to navigate the community college, take the appropriate coursework, apply, enroll, and successfully earn a baccalaureate degree in a timely manner.” (Jain, Herrera, & Bernal, 2011, p. 252)

The term transfer student, at its most basic level, is defined as a student leaving one institution and enrolling in another; this definition itself is vague. Traditionally we view the transfer process as student transitioning from a two- to a four-year institution, which does not adequately describes the college transfer process (Townsend & Dever, 1999). In order to understand the transfer process, it must be broken down into several types:

1. 2-4 Transfer: students transferring from a 2-year college to a 4-year college, (also referred to as a vertical transfer);
2. 4-2 Transfer: students transferring from a 4-year institution to a 2-year institution (also referred to as a reverse transfer; and
3. 4-4 Transfers/2-2 Transfer: students transferring from a 4-year college to another 4-year college or from a 2-year college to another 2-year college (also referred to as a horizontal/lateral transfer) (Peng, 1977).

4. Swirlers are students who are co-enrolled or constantly move between several institutions (Townsend & Dever, 1999).

Figure 1 provides a snapshot of the transfer picture for first year students in 1977; nearly 1 in 10 students transferred within their first year, with the majority of the students making horizontal 4-4 year transfers followed by vertical 2-4 year transfers, which are still the most common forms of college student transfer (Bahr, 2009; Peng, 1977).

Figure 1. Percentages and estimated national totals of students who transferred during or at the end of their first year in college. (Initial college is represented by shaded circle.)

Note: Sample N for 4-year college initial enrollment was 5974, and for 2-year college it was 2918.
According to a special report by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (2010), one third of college students will transfer during their educational pursuit, which increases the need to learn more about this student population.

As students engage in the process of selecting a transfer institution, they usually go through the same selection process as they did when selecting their original institution, with the exception of factoring in how many of their credits will transfer to the new institution (Townsend, 2004). With this in mind, it is very likely that students will transfer to a local college that has a strong articulation agreement with their originating institution. Even more important is the receiving institution’s ability to make the transfer process as seamless as possible by having services specifically for transfer students: transfer counselors, transfer days, transfer orientation, transfer services, and so on. It is necessary for both the sending and receiving institution to develop a strong receptive culture. Four-year institutions must invest serious time and effort to perfecting the transfer student process, as transfers at some schools already outnumber the incoming traditional first-year student (Jain, Herrera, & Bernal, 2011).

Lannan (2004) suggested that the process of transferring to a bachelor degree-granting institution involves adjusting to the university’s culture, environment, institutional/campus size, academic demands, and socialization process. Many transfer students experience what has been defined as “transfer shock” as they adjust to increased academic expectations and rigor. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) labeled the process “culture shock,” which relates to both adjusting to the new academic requirements and to the psychological and social adjustments that the students must make during this process. As we attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the students attending our colleges and universities we must look beyond academic indicators to gauge our students’ well-being. Administrators need to understand the effect students have on
the campus but, more importantly, the effect that the campus has on the student, especially in regard to both the transfer and veteran population (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Townsend (2008) identified several strategies, through her interviews with students, of how schools could ease the adjusting process for incoming transfer students. Townsend’s ideas include an orientation specifically for transfer students, which includes elements of traditional freshmen orientation programs; residence halls or floors for transfer students separating them from entering freshmen class; and creating a transfer interest group. Jain, Herrera, and Bernal (2011) add that the receiving school must acknowledge the experiences of their transfer students and how these experiences intersect both family and community. Townsend states that in order to “determine what its transfer students need, institutional faculty and staff need to ascertain the students’ specific issues and concerns and suggestions for improvement” (p. 76).

As referenced above, it is important to understand the transfer student and transfer process, but it is crucial when working with the student veteran population, as many of them have attended multiple institutions throughout their military career. The Servicemembers Opportunity College has attempted to make it easier for these veterans by forming networks of schools that agree to accept other institutions’ credits within the network, essentially creating one large articulation agreement allowing veterans to move forward as they relocate throughout the country. The problem is that there are few of these network institutions, which means in all likelihood if the veteran does not graduate from a network institution, much of his or her coursework and military credits may be lost. This potential loss of credit and time may result in frustration, which may negatively affect the way the students feel about their new institution and their place within it.
Gauging Student Satisfaction

When assessing student satisfaction, there are two major schools of thought: student development (primarily qualitative) and total quality management (primarily quantitative). For the purposes of this dissertation, the primary focus for gauging student satisfaction will be rooted in student development.

Thomas and Galambos (2004) state, “If students are viewed as consumers of higher education, their satisfaction is important to the institutional success, both because effective institutions should have satisfied customers and because satisfaction supports the recruitment of additional customers” (p. 251). The concept of student satisfaction is commonly studied in the literature as a variable of attrition/retention, but rarely is it studied independently from those measures. Another common method for gauging student satisfaction is measuring the student’s level of involvement, both academic and social, to gain an idea of the student’s level of satisfaction. According to Astin (1993), the quality of instruction, in addition to interaction with faculty, peers, engagement in the curriculum, and contact with administrators, often informs measures of student satisfaction and various aspects of the undergraduate experience.

Astin (1993) developed the I-E-O model, which assessed student growth and development during the college years. This model focused on three items: inputs, which represent the characteristics that the student brings to the university with them; environment, describing the educational setting, such as services, faculty, peers, and policies; and outcomes, representing the student’s characteristics after being exposed to the educational environment. If the student’s interaction with the environment was positive and reflected growth, the student was likely to be satisfied with their college experience.
Astin’s (1985) definition of involvement is simplistic, referring to the amount of psychological and physical energy that an individual devotes to his or her studies or academic experience. Astin characterizes a highly involved student as one who spends a considerable amount of effort/energy on his or her studies, engages with the faculty, participates in student groups, and spends time on campus. He also believes that involvement is behavioral, what one actually does, as opposed to psychological, what one thinks defines involvement (Astin, 1985). With this in mind, one of the most important resources as it relates to student involvement is the student’s time. The more time or physical energy that a student is able to devote to a particular area, the more that student is to learn. Naturally, if a student has outside distractions such as work, family, and other personal issues, there will be less time to devote to studies or institutional activities. Astin (1985) also ascertains that students who live on campus have a greater connection to the university and are more likely to be involved. This involvement positively affects a student’s likelihood of persisting as well as finding satisfaction with his or her undergraduate experience. Astin also identified several other areas such as honors program involvement, academic involvement, student-faculty interaction, athletic involvement, and involvement in student government as factors that contribute to student persistence and overall institutional satisfaction.

Alexander Tinto, a noted scholar in the area of college student retention, also contends that persistence relates to student satisfaction. Tinto (1975, 1988) posits that social and academic engagement is critical in curbing student attrition. In fact, he argues that the individual’s ability to integrate into both the academic and social systems of the college/university leads to articulation and persistence. Hence, a student’s ability to comply with both the academic and
social norms of an institution as well as the institution’s meeting the expectations of the individual results in successful integration, thus “satisfaction.”

Tinto (1988) outlines three stages of college student passage: separation, transition to college, and incorporation in college. Separation refers to the student leaving a familiar environment and entering into a new one; transition is the stage where the student sheds their old identity for their newly forming one; and incorporation is the point when the student has fully integrated into his or her new role. These three stages are influenced by Arnold Van Gennep’s “The Rites of Passage” study, in which Van Gennep believes that certain rites of passage are a part of every phase of life that an individual passes through (Gennep, 1966). In Tinto’s model, acclimation to college, feeling incorporated into campus life, require students to adopt norms that are congruent with the new setting while forming a sense of belonging in both the academic and social life of the institution. Tinto (1988) states, “All individuals, regardless of institution, have to make some form of intellectual transition to the academic demands of college life…most individuals have to make some type of adjustment in moving from high school and/or work settings to college” (p. 449).

Tinto (1975) suggests that an individual’s background characteristics (e.g., family background, individual characteristics, past educational experiences and goal commitment) play a significant role in developing the individual’s educational expectations, which in turn act as a predictor of the person’s future experiences, satisfaction, and disappointment with their college context. Tinto also believes that the interaction between the individual and his or her institutional environment (e.g., faculty, administrators, and peers) plays a significant role in student persistence “satisfaction.”
Two concepts of Tinto’s model that are often the focus of studies are his concepts of academic and social integration. Academic integration is a combination of both the individual’s grade performance and intellectual development while in college. Grades are considered rewards for one’s participation in college, and intellectual development is viewed as the individual’s perception/evaluation of the academic system. Thus, “grade performance becomes, then, both a reflection of the person’s ability and of the institution’s preferences for particular styles of academic behavior” (Tinto, 1975, p. 104). A person with high grades typically rates high in intellectual development because they are congruent with the academic climate and vice-versa.

Social integration refers to the level at which a student is able to integrate or find congruency within the institution’s social environment. Social integration, for instance, is an important factor shaping the co-curricular experiences of students; these experiences are primarily informal in nature but foster out-of-class peer group associations via extracurricular activities, whereby students can interact with faculty, and Tinto asserted that successful encounters in these areas are due in large part to the collective support from family and friends, and other forms of social communication. While secondary to socializing with peers, faculty interactions and extracurricular activities are equally important in fostering university commitment, which directly reflects persistence or satisfaction.

Bean and Metzner (1985) recognized that there was a significant difference between the college experiences of traditional and non-traditional students and offered a model of non-traditional student attrition, which took into account those differences. Bean and Metzner realized that social integration was not a significant factor in the non-traditional college student’s experience, which is one major difference between previous models of student attrition. Bean and Metzner’s Conceptual Model of Student Attrition focuses on the background characteristics
of the student (age, enrollment status, gender, high school experience, etc.), academic variables
(study habits, advising, absenteeism, course availability, etc.), environmental variables
(family/family encouragement, finances, hours of employment, etc.), psychological (goal
commitment, stress, satisfaction, etc.) and academic (grade point average) outcomes and how
they affect student departure.

In this model, much of the emphasis is placed on the impact that environmental variables
have on non-traditional student persistence. The model implies that as long as the environmental
variables are kept in balance, the academic variables could falter and the student would be likely
to continue, but if the reverse happens where the environmental variables are at a low, then the
student is less likely to persist. The results are similar when you measure the influence of the
psychological and academic outcomes; if the psychological outcomes are in balance and the
students grade point is low, students are likely to still persist, but if the opposite is true, the
student is more likely to depart (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Campus Climate

“The very presence of individuals from different backgrounds results in diversity.
Climate, on the other hand, refers to the experience of individuals and groups on a campus—and
the quality and extent of the interaction between those various groups and individuals” (UC
Regents, Campus Climate Report). The current research on campus climate for the last several
years has focused on the LGBT community although much of the campus climate research is
rooted in racial campus climate. Campus Pride Climate indicators and LGBT friendly campus
climate indicators have been developed to gauge college/university climate as it relates to a
welcoming and respectful environment. Currently, there are several websites dedicated to
assisting LGBT students with finding schools that are “LGBT” friendly; if veterans follow suit,
they will soon become the newest wave of campus climate interest, which is important because the veterans’ perception of the campus climate directly influences their satisfaction with the institution.

Campus climate can be defined as the individual’s sense of feeling welcomed and belonging on the college campus. Sylvia Hurtado has extensively studied campus climate. In particular, Hurtado (1992) is responsible for one of the most influential studies on racial campus climate to date. In her study, she found that less than one half of students believed that promoting racial and cultural diversity was a high priority of the university, and less than one third felt that their institution was doing anything to change the racial composition of the school. She also reported that minorities reported high levels of racial tension, with African-American students being more critical of their environment. Additional findings illustrate that for institutions where students perceived the university to have a commitment to racial diversity, negative racial incidents was low. Hurtado’s study pointed out the importance of university administrators investing in student services as well as meeting their commitment to diversity with action rather than just verbiage.

In summary, the student veteran has played a significant role in the history and success of American higher education. The GI Bill of Rights singlehandedly changed the landscape of higher education, yet there has been little research conducted in reference to the college student veteran. College choice, social/academic integration, and campus climate are theories commonly used in order to answer how to attract, retain, and satisfy the diverse needs of students on campus. In the case of the student veteran, all of these areas play a significant role in contributing to the understanding of today’s college veteran, an increasing subpopulation on most college campuses.
Conceptual Underpinnings

Tinto’s (1975) model of student departure was used as a guiding framework to gauge veteran student satisfaction. To better understand the transitional issues faced by veteran students, this study uses Tinto's student departure theory to examine the relationship between transfer status and the academic and social adjustment of veteran students. Tinto’s model, shown in Figure 2, examines the student’s pre-entry attributes, goals/commitments, institutional experiences, and integration to the university to understand student departure. Tinto believes that the inability to integrate academically and socially to the institutional environment leads to student departure, whether it be voluntarily (failure to meet personal expectations) or involuntary (failure to meet institutional expectations).

Figure 2. Tinto’s Model of Voluntary Student Departure
Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Tradition

There are two dominant philosophical views of the venture of social science; one is the objective (positivist) view, and the other is the subjective (interpretivist) view, and how an individual conducts his or her research is dependent on which of these two paradigms the researcher subscribes (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990). It is important that I explain the commonly held assumptions of both traditions, because the interpretivist view is often described in reference to the more traditional positivist approach.

I will first discuss the objective, or the positivist, view of the scientific venture. Sociologists who adhere to the positivist view attempt to apply models from the natural sciences to deal with human phenomena (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Durkheim (1938), summarizing Augustus Comte, said that social phenomena are the products of natural facts, which make them subject to natural laws. Positivists believe in the divine order of things: that the real world actually exists, things “are” in the universe because they “are,” and it is because some higher being or power intended for it to be that way.

The positivist epistemological view of knowledge refers to the belief that knowledge is independent from the individual, that things have meaning separate from self (Creswell, 1994) and should be explained free from the sociologist personal biases; knowledge is perceived to be absolute and innate. The positivist view of human nature is that the universe operates under the rule of cause and effect (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); people with this view believe in the rule of stimulus response or determinism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). From a methodological standpoint, positivists seek to make predictions and generalizable conclusions (Glesne, 1999).
Although this research study used the interpretivist view of the scientific venture, I felt it important that I present the positivist view because interpretivism is described most often as the opposite of positivism, meaning that the two have opposite ontological and epistemological beliefs. Glesne (1999) states, “They (interpretivists) regard their research task as coming to understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (p. 5). The interpretivist ontological belief (view of reality) is that we as individuals construct our own or group realities by creating shared meanings through experiences with our environment/other people (Shipman, 1997; Glesne, 1999; Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

The interpretivist epistemological view (nature of knowledge) centers on the belief that we as individuals play a large role in discovering what is “known” or how we come to know things. Our individual perspectives and interactions dictate how we perceive things in the universe; therefore, knowledge is fluid and not absolute; knowledge is acquired through interpretation (Yanow, 2000). Another important factor is that multiple knowledge(s) can exist depending on the social context in which the knowledge is placed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In regard to human nature, interpretivists take the stance that individuals act based on the “meaning” of a particular event or action, and not just the action alone; this is voluntarism, more commonly referred to as symbolic interaction. Herbert Blumer, an early student of the Chicago school of sociology, built upon the symbolic interactionist approach of George Mead (Blumer, 1969). Mead suggested that in human interaction, people respond to the meaning of actions rather than responding to a particular action (Blumer, 1969; Eisner & Peshkin, 1990).

Stimulus------Meaning------Response

It is important to highlight this area because it is indeed the interpretivist goal to understand how people make meaning; this is why interpretivists often use ethnological tools, such as prolonged
immersion in the field/social settings when collecting data. Berg (1998) states, “To understand behavior, one must first understand the definitions and meanings and the process by which they have been created” (p. 10).

Lastly, interpretivists prefer the case study methodological approach to research because they believe that individual and group behavior is situational, and they do not intend to generalize conclusions based on their findings. These findings are generally presented using descriptive language to explain the phenomena as opposed to the presentation of numerical data, synonymous with the positivist approach.

For researchers seeking more in-depth understanding of social phenomena, the interpretive approach was an attempt to plug a hole in what was lacking in positivist research. Interpretivism allowed researchers to get close to individuals to get their stories, realizing that emotions and motivation are very important aspects of the human condition and cannot be left out of the story. In a sense, it allowed researchers the opportunity to understand things that cannot be measured (Shipman, 1997).

In summary, Lincoln and Guba (1985) make clear the aspects of each approach to the scientific venture:

Where positivism is concerned with surface events or appearances, the new paradigm (interpretivist paradigm) takes a deeper look. Where positivism is atomistic, the new paradigm is structural. Where positivism establishes operationally, the new paradigm establishes meaning inferentially. Where positivism sees its central purpose to be prediction, the new paradigm is concerned with understanding. Finally, where positivism is deterministic and built on certainty, the new paradigm is probabilistic and speculative. (p. 30)
Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach in order to study the transfer veteran student experience. Qualitative research, a commonly used method in sociology, is referred to as naturalistic research or interpretative research (Ely et al., 1991; Glesne, 1999). These three methods refer to the same research principles, which emphasize that research is conducted in a natural setting where one can gain a sense of the culture, the multiple perspectives of the people, and the social context in which to place these perspectives. Berg (1998) describes qualitative research by stating that qualitative research seeks to know “the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and description of things” (p. 3) as opposed to quantitative which seeks to count/measure.

Case Study.

We know what we know about teaching much as we know anything of life. We know it partly through personal histories of being taught, partly through our experiences of teaching, partly through the reports of others and our observations of them. We aggregate cases according to some intuitive sampling plan, some weighting system, and tease out what is common, deviant, and typical. Often we find some bottom line, some moral of the story. (Stake, 1994, p. 33)

This qualitative study used a collective case study design, meaning that it relied heavily on narrative and phenomenological description (Scholz & Tietje, 2002). Case studies are often used when the researcher may be able to gain insight into a particular phenomenon by studying a case or several cases (Stake, 1995). This case study approach allowed me to explore the issues of veteran satisfaction and campus climate at Southeast Public University through the experiences
of several transfer student veterans. Stake (1994) points out that in instrumental case studies, the research questions are what guide the study and not the individual responses of the participants.

**Role as Researcher**

I believe that it is important for me to outline what I got out of studying this particular phenomenon, or clearly stating what was in it for me. Schram (2003) states, “It is important that you take into account your purpose at this personal level and acknowledge how they (it) maybe shaping your inquiry” (p. 23). I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that as I entered into this research, I held within me certain biases. To some extent, all researchers hold particular biases; it is their subjectivity that contributes to their interests moving in a particular direction. I am not without exception, for my research extended from the experiences I had as both a veteran and former a Director of Veteran Services. Although researcher bias had little effect on the results of this study, it is important that the researcher’s role be made explicit.

**Entry**

Lofland (1971) stated, “It’s who you know that counts…It seems quite typical for known observers to accomplish access to settings through already established contacts” (p. 95). As a former Director of Veteran Services, I had the opportunity to meet and build relationships with several veterans on campus. One benefit of being an administrator was that I had a high level of access to student veterans, as I was their main contact on campus for issues relative to the university and veteran’s benefits, which inherently allowed me entry into this campus subculture.

Prior to working in this administrative role, I thought I knew a lot about veterans, but it became more evident as I did my research that my understanding had become quite dated. Not to devalue my own experience, but I had to realize that the veteran experience is composed of several different experiences, as the military has changed significantly over the past fifteen years.
Whatever the case may be, I had to begin to look at this population through several different lenses, which is the job of the researcher, to explore multiple perspectives (Glesne, 1999).

As stated previously, my relationship with veterans on campus allowed me through conversations, both formal and informal, to form a picture of what life was like for them at the university. My status as both a veteran and authority figure automatically opened certain doors to me, which provided advantages that might not have been if I were an outside researcher. The obvious advantages of knowing students within the veteran student population and knowing where or whom to go for information are a couple of benefits of being an insider, but there are also certain disadvantages. Glesne (1999) suggest that researchers who study familiar environments need to ensure that they are careful to make sure they see what they see and not make assumptions based on their experiences.

Ethics

As a veteran myself, it is quite natural for me to have formed an attachment to the students as well as being concerned with their overall success. With this in mind, it is necessary that I outline my ethical position in regards to this research.

Deyhle, Hess and LeCompte (1992) outlined five ethical approaches of researchers as defined by William May. The six ethical approaches—teleological, utilitarian, categorical imperative, critical theory, advocacy, and covenantal—all represent, to a certain extent, different frames of thinking when it comes to knowledge and research. Of the five ethical stances, I must say that I identify with utilitarian and covenantal approaches as well as some aspects of critical theory.

Utilitarian ethics is described as gauging what is acceptable ethical behavior by measuring the cost-benefit to the matter being studied. “Producing the greatest good for the
greatest number” (Loewy, 1991, p. 64) is a statement often associated with the utilitarian ethic. When I think of this approach in reference to my research, I agree that researchers should constantly reflect on the costs-benefits of divulging information. It is my belief that I have a responsibility to protect information, which may be important to my research, that might prove harmful to individuals or groups of people as deemed so by various constituents. I include “as deemed so by various constituents,” because I also believe that researchers need to continually bounce off others the ethical struggles that they’re undergoing in their research. Glesne and Peshkin (1999) mentioned forming a support group with people undertaking a similar process to discuss ethical issues.

The covenantal approach (Deyhle, Hess, and LeCompte, 1992) refers to having an agreement between the researcher and the matter being studied. Glesne and Peshkin (1999) refer to this as the reciprocity role of the researcher. The agreement is based on mutual respect and exchanges; people should feel that they are also getting something out being involved in the research. The exchange between researcher and informant can be monetary or just the simple exchange of ideas. Recently I attended a forum where Native American veterans were able to share their stories with an audience; it seemed that award was just in having an interested audience truly “hear” them. “By listening to participants careful and seriously, you give them a sense of importance and specialness, by providing them the opportunity to reflect on and voice answers to your questions, you assist them to understand some aspect of themselves better” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1999). It is my belief that there are many veterans who are eager to tell their story and thankful that someone wants to listen.

Ethical research is based on mutual respect and exchange, so I believe that it would not be ethical in my case to enter into false or covert relationships with individuals to procure
information. I believe that it is very important for me to be honest and upfront about the research that I am doing with people that I solicit for information. The ties that I have to the veterans and the university ensure that I will have an ongoing relationship long after my dissertation is complete; closing doors at this point in my career could definitely hurt me in my future hopes to help make significant changes.

Critical theory and advocacy or advocate ethics (Deyhle, Hess, & LeCompte, 1992; Glesne & Peshkin, 1999) refers to aiding and helping the oppressed or underrepresented. It would be dishonest of me if I did not acknowledge that through this research I do hope to give a voice to the underrepresented veteran student population. I dare not attempt to address the totality of this research through the lens of the critical theorist, but the relationships between the powerful and the powerless, and the advantaged and disadvantaged, does drive me. As a veteran myself, I believe that it would be negligent of me to do a research project of this magnitude without giving the veteran student population a voice.

When doing research that hits close to home, I believe it to be natural to hope that the findings will be taken positively by the population and not victimize any individual or groups of people. Knowing that this would only hold true in a perfect world, there is a great possibility that I will unintentionally offend and possibly hurt someone during this process; this is something that I must come to grips with. It is my hope that I do not hurt or offend individuals. This is something that most researchers struggle with, and is a struggle for me. Rainwater and Pittman (1967) ask the question “How do you know that the constructive effect of our research will outweigh the damage to the reputations of the people we study? Our science is not that good yet. Maybe all that will happen is that we will strengthen prejudices and provide rationalizations for bigotry” (p. 282); to me this is of serious concern.
When discussing ethics in research it is important, as well as a protective legal measure, that the researcher outline how participants will be chosen for the study and how they will be treated during the process. Below I have outlined how I safeguarded human subjects during this research process.

This study required interviews with several members of the student veteran population and did not target any special classes. Participants recruited for this study were chosen based on their ability to provide relevant information to the subject matter. Individuals were informed that their participation in this study was voluntary and that as participants they could elect not to respond to questions that they were not comfortable answering. Participants completed an informed consent that detailed the conditions, risks, and benefits of their participation in the study. Additionally, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, including after they completed their interview. It was hoped that the benefits of participating in this study would outweigh any potential risk, as the participants had the opportunity to discuss their own experience as student veterans. All of the participants wished to remain anonymous and were assigned pseudonyms. All interview transcripts that had any identifying details were kept on a computer, in a password-protected file, which was accessible only by the principal investigator.

Research Site

Southeast Public University was founded in the mid 1800s as a Normal School, later becoming a Normal College in the 1950s and shortly after becoming Southeast Public University. Southeast is one of several public state institutions located in the state and is positioned in very close proximity to prominent, big-name university.
Southeast has a student population of approximately 23,000 students: 18,000 undergraduates and 5,000 graduates. The university has been nationally recognized for community engagement and has been identified as a military friendly school by both GI Jobs the Magazine and Military Advantage magazine. In 2009, the university opened a veteran resource center and promoted the assistant director of veteran services to director. This position’s sole responsibility is serving student veterans and dependents with attaining their educational benefits, processing certifications, transition assistance, and so on. Southeast Public University has a growing veteran population, with more than 500 students receiving veterans’ educational benefits.

Selection of Participants

Southeast’s veteran population is very diverse in age, gender, military experience, and educational background. Although most of the veterans have completed their active duty service, there are still several veterans currently serving on active duty in the Army/Air National Guard or one of the several reserve units located throughout the state. In 2009, because of the increasing veteran student population, a couple of student veterans worked to establish a chapter of the Student Veterans of America on campus. The Student Veterans of America (SVA) is a national collegiate student organization established to support student veterans on campuses across the country. Southeast’s chapter of SVA was initially very active, but after the founding president graduated, the organization slowly went dormant.

The veteran student population was selected as this focus of this study for several reasons. Glesne (1999) emphasized that researchers must decide what issues and dilemmas spark their interest and can motivate them throughout the research process. I have always been interested in the student veteran population; most of the interest derived from my own experience
as a transfer student veteran and university veteran administrator. After exploring several
different research topics, I finally realized that studying the veteran student population would not
only lend to satisfying my own personal interest but could provide valuable insight on what
veterans might be experiencing at this and other institutions. In 2010 approximately a third of all
veterans on campus were transfer students. Table 1 represents the college/university enrollment
patterns of the participants in the study, which indicates that seven of the participants attended at
least three postsecondary institutions prior to Southeast.

Table 1

*Transfer Student Veteran Enrollment Patterns*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Transfer Pattern</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brad</td>
<td>2-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>4-4-4-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
<td>4-4-2-4-4**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>4-4-4-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>4-T-4*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>2-2-4-4**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcia</td>
<td>4-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>2-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>2-4-4-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>2-2-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonya</td>
<td>4-2-4-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travis</td>
<td>2-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vick</td>
<td>4-2-2-2-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zane</td>
<td>4-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Attended a Technical School

**Has transferred out of SPU

The participants for this study were selected using both purposeful and convenience
sampling. Participants were selected based on accessibility as well as their ability to provide
relevant and key information regarding the college veteran experience. Participants had to meet
the criteria of being a veteran (served active duty time) and must have attended at least one
institution of higher education prior to enrolling at Southeast. Students were solicited via e-mail and personal contact; approximately 40 email requests were sent to prospective participants who met the criteria. The emails were informal given the researcher’s relationship with the veterans and the belief that they would be more likely to respond positively to this approach. Nine of the veterans in the study agreed to participate as a result of the email request, and the other five were as a result of personal contact. It is important to point out that qualitative samples are different from quantitative samples in the sense that the target population is purposeful rather than random. In qualitative research, the investigator is normally interested in specific knowledge; random sampling does not present the best method to obtain this kind of information (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Data Collection**

This study used in-depth interviews to understand the transfer veteran college experience. The opportunity to gain information about what you cannot see and the ability to gain alternative insight on what you are privy to is one of the strengths of interviews in ethnographic research (Glesne, 1999). Bogdan and Bilken (1998) suggest that conducting interviews allows the researcher to gain descriptive data from the subjects, which provides information on how they “interpret some piece of the world” (p. 94).

Ten of the participant interviews were conducted in a room located in the Veteran’s Office at Southeast Public University. Of the remaining interviews, two were conducted in the student library, one at a participant’s job, and another at a participant’s home. Prior to the interview, the participants were given the informed consent and asked to read and sign if they agreed to continue to with the interview. The participants were then again informed orally the purpose of the study and it was reiterated that they could withdraw from the study at any time.
and that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identity. Each of the audio-recorded in-depth, face-to-face interviews lasted on average 60 minutes, not including the time spent reviewing the informed consent document. After all of the interviews were conducted, two interview audio files were sent via e-mail to Verbal Ink, a transcription company located in Santa Monica, CA. After the completed transcripts were received, they were compared to the audio recordings for accuracy, after which point the remaining transcripts were then sent for transcription. After review of the transcripts, several follow-up interviews were conducted face to face or via telephone or email in order to gain additional information or provide clarification on things that were stated during the interviews.

After the follow-ups were completed, the transcripts were forwarded to each of the participants to verify that their responses were adequately captured. The participants were also encouraged to make changes if needed and were also allowed to strike from the transcripts any responses that they did not want to be included. Several of the participants responded by providing corrections to military acronyms, jargon, and duty stations that were not correctly interpreted, but none offered any major changes. One participant did decide after reviewing her transcript that she wanted the details removed from a section where she talked about an accident she was involved in while deployed.

Data were maintained in compliance with standards set forth by Southeast Public University’s Human Subjects Board. Individuals who participated in the study were required to complete an informed consent form detailing the participants’ rights. All participants’ data were stored in a password-protected digital file, which was accessible only by the principal investigator.
Analyzing the Data

Data analysis requires that the researcher be comfortable with developing categories and making comparisons and contrasts. It also requires that the researcher be open to other possibilities and see contrary or alternative explanations for their findings (Creswell, 1994). Homans (1950) states, “It (describing the analytical process) picks out a few of the factors at work in particular situations and describes systematically the relations between these factors. Only by cutting down the number of factors considered can it achieve this systematic description” (p. 15).

In qualitative research, the researcher deals with an enormous amount of information that has to be processed. The act of processing or filtering this data is termed by Creswell (1994) as data reduction and interpretation. In this process, information is placed into categories, usually by type of data such as field notes, interviews, observations, and artifacts, as patterns and themes emerge. To do this effectively it is recommended that data analysis be carried out as the data are being collected (Creswell, 1994; Ely et al., 1991; Glesne, 1999). Not only does it help the researcher keep up with data organization, but it also allows the researcher to examine ideas, continually reflect on the researcher as instrument, and check newly gained hunches (Ely et al., 1991).

In this research study, Nvivo 9, a computer-based qualitative data analysis program, was used to manage, sort, and organized the data. First nodes, which are collection of references, were created for each participant in order to sort data quickly by individual participants as well as to assign a classification based on individual characteristics gathered from the background questionnaire. After all of the individual characteristics were assigned, the coding process began. Coding is a form of analysis commonly used with interview transcripts where the interviews are
dissected in order to find relevant themes and patterns. The information is then conceptually labeled and organized into relevant categories (Berg, 1998).

For this research, the initial coding was conducted using a line-by-line coding technique that produced 122 nodes or codes. As this technique requires one to code every line or every couple of lines of text, it lends itself to the duplication of codes with similar meanings. The reduction of codes then required repeated comparison and reduction until the data were narrowed down and organized into useful and meaningful categories, which ultimately represent the major themes.

The data reduction process required several passes through the data, which in turn condensed the codes to 55 and then ultimately to 22 codes. This first attempt to reduce/organize the data is typically referred to as first cycle coding (Saldana, 2009). Theoretical coding was used during the second cycle as it became evident that the semi-structured interview questions, which were based in Tinto’s work, played heavily in many of the participant responses. Five major patterns emerged using the combination of coding techniques, which include college choice, academic experience, social experience, campus climate, and military benefits; there were also several sub-themes or categories that were formed during the process.

**Trustworthiness of the Data**

As observers and interpreters of the world, we are inextricably part of it; we cannot step outside our own experience to obtain some observer-independent account of what we experience. Thus, it is always possible for there to be different, equally valid accounts from different perspectives. (Maxwell, 2002, p. 41)

The issue of validity and reliability has been a longstanding debate in the area of qualitative research. Researchers who have based their work in qualitative inquiry and
ethnographic methods have struggled with the positivist ideals of what constitutes reliability and validity as well as the need to produce validity or define what it means for the discipline. Researchers who engage in quantitative and experimental methods have questioned the strength of qualitative research because of the lack of control over validity threats, the lack of detachment between researcher and participants, and the lack of standardized methods for achieving validity and controlling for researcher bias (Maxwell, 2002; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). In efforts to ward off these criticisms, many researchers attempted to use methods rooted in positivist research. Guba and Lincoln (1989) and Creswell (1994) indicated that researchers struggled for the need for legitimization, and because of the success of methods used by positivist in the hard sciences, they attempted to reproduce their methods for legitimacy in order to gain acceptance for their work in the professional qualitative community. Other qualitative researchers chose to avoid answering the question altogether, in a form of protest, believing that qualitative research does not have to utilize positivist ideas in order to be valid.

What has grown out of this debate is the movement to produce standardized or accepted measures to deal with these issues. From a conventional paradigm, Lincoln and Guba (1991) sought to answer the question of how qualitative researchers make their findings trustworthy. Ely, Anzul, Freidman, Garner, and Steinmetz (1991) also commented on the importance of researchers ensuring that their work is trustworthy, meaning that their work represents the experience of the people, it is ethical, and the researchers’ own biases are assessed. Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined four questions that researchers must ask: 1) Truth Value - How can you establish confidence in your findings? 2) Applicability - How do you determine if your findings hold up in other situations? 3) Consistency - Can the findings be repeated? 4) Neutrality - How do you establish that findings are free from researcher bias? These four questions have also been
characterized as the means by which to attain internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity.

Creswell (1994) makes three suggestions when attempting to address internal validity: discuss plans of data triangulation, engage in member checking, and discuss how participants will be involved throughout the research. I will elaborate on the first two. Data triangulation refers to using different methods for collecting data, different sources and different theoretical perspectives to analyze the data (Glesne, 1999). Denzin (1978) recommends triangulation in research and separates triangulation into four categories: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodology triangulation, in order to provide for maximum accuracy. The importance of triangulation is not in itself the different modes of data collection; the importance lies within the ability to relate the data to confirm or disconfirm information and attempts to increase internal validity (Berg, 1998).

Guba and Lincoln (1989) consider member checking to be the most “crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 239). Member checking gives participants the opportunity to respond to and correct errors in the interpretation of their responses as well as allows individuals the opportunity to add more information to their original response, which might add more breadth to their given response (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Member checking was used in this study to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, as participants were allowed the opportunity to agree, change, or add to their responses to provide a more accurate interpretation of their experience.

Peer review was another form of analysis that was used to validate/disconfirm the researcher’s interpretations. Throughout the process, the researcher met weekly with a fellow doctoral student who was used as a resource to compare interpretations of the data in order to
ensure that the conclusions being drawn were consistent with data (Glesne, 1999). It is essential in qualitative analysis to search for disconfirming evidence gathered as well as information that can help to disprove assumptions.

Glesne (1999) also suggested that internal validity can be increased by the researcher clarifying his or her research bias, making it known, and engaging in continuous reflection. Guba and Lincoln (1989) termed this *progressive subjectivity* and reiterate that “no inquirer enters into research with a blank mind…it is precisely because the inquirer’s mind is not blank that we find him or her engaged in the particular investigation” (p. 238). Glesne (1999) also adds that subjectivity is what provides the impetus for the story that you are telling and that subjectivity should be embraced rather than shunned. However, it is very important, as stated before, that throughout the research process, the researcher constantly evaluates his or her subjectivity; he or she should keep an additional set of notes that describe personal thoughts and feelings on particular matters. Researchers must also make it known to readers their assumptions regarding their view of the scientific venture (Glesne, 1999). The researcher kept a reflexive journal and used the memos feature inside of the Nvivo software to help guard against personal biases entering into the interpretation of the data. This journaling of personal thoughts and feelings provided an outlet for the researcher to express himself as opposed to it entering into the interpretation of the data. It is commonly agreed that qualitative research is different from quantitative in that qualitative studies are not designed to seek findings that can be generalized to a the larger population but are designed to gain an in-depth understanding of particular phenomena (Maxwell, 2002). In this study, I did not intend to generalize findings; rather, I hope the study resonates with readers in that there is transferability whereby the results are useful to
other student veterans and relevant at other colleges/universities endeavoring to meet the needs of divergent veterans on campus.

The issue of reliability also presents an interesting point of discussion in qualitative research. When dealing with human beings it is difficult to predict how they will react in any given situation, so it makes the idea of replicating a study and getting the same results nearly impossible. In efforts to achieve reliability, qualitative researchers must follow a study’s methods in detail. They must become familiar with that researcher’s view of research, their assumptions, their participant and/or informant selection process, and their biases. One must take all of these factors into account when attempting to replicate a study in a different environment, and this does not imply that they will get similar results (Creswell, 1994; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). LeCompte and Goetz (1982) recommend that in an effort to increase external reliability in qualitative inquiry, the research must address five areas: researcher status, informant selection, the social conditions, analytic constructs/premises, and methods used for data collection and interpretation. In brief, for the study to be replicated at a different site, the researcher must have a similar relationship with the participants/informants. Social conditions must be similar and participants must be willing to divulge information to the researcher. Last, all concepts used by the researcher must share similar meaning and they must hold the same assumptions about the research process (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

In regard to internal reliability, one must answer the question, “Would multiple researchers looking at the same phenomena agree?” In efforts to increase internal reliability, researchers should use detailed observational field notes, multiple researchers who observe the same situations and reflect to what they have seen in order to form consensus. This includes insiders who can clarify the accuracy of one’s observations, peer examinations, and mechanical
recorded data (i.e. tape recorders) in efforts to retain as much information as possible (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

**Delimitations**

This study is focused on veterans from only the Gulf War, Operation Iraq Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom eras, as they are the most prevalent on today’s college campus. In addition, the proposed study will squarely focus on veterans who previously attended a four-year public, private, or community college and not those attending vocational or apprenticeship/flight training programs.

**Limitations**

One limitation of this study is that only participants who attend Southeast Public University were interviewed as a part of this study; the findings are likely to differ for veterans attending schools in other states with high veteran populations who have more services and statewide initiatives that are favorable to college student veterans. In addition, the goal of this study is not to draw generalizable conclusions but to understand the experience of student veterans as it relates to their level of satisfaction with this particular institution.
Chapter 4: Profile

The purpose of this bounded instrumental case study was to explore the perceptions of campus climate and overall satisfaction among veteran transfer students at Southeast Public University. The researcher believes that better understanding of this phenomenon will allow university administrators to make more informed decisions relative to transfer student veterans on their campus. This chapter presents the findings gathered from interviews of 14 student veterans representing three branches of the armed forces (Navy, Air Force, and Army Active, Reserves, and National Guard).

Participants’ Profiles

This section is intended to provide an in-depth look into the background of four of the participants involved in the study—Marcia, Brian, Ken, and Rosa—and to introduce the other 10 participants. The purpose of the profiles is to not only familiarize the reader with the specific individuals but also to provide the reader a snapshot of the varying military and educational related experiences of veterans in attendance at Southeast Public University.

Marcia Johnston: Profile

Marcia’s military experience is quite different from the other participants; her quest to serve started while she was in high school as a member of the Military Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) program. The JROTC is a high school-based program aimed at motivating young people to become better citizens, which became more prominent in inner-city high schools in the 1990s because of General Colin Powell’s push to expand the program into high schools. She said that she joined the JROTC because the neighbor that she rode to school with had to be there by 5:00 a.m., and since she had to be there as well, she joined.
Marcia described her experience in the JROTC Program as “kind of sort of good.” She said she was the corps commander, “which is basically the commander of all the Metropolitan Public Schools. So I was that. Then my JROTC instructor suggested Officer University to me, the military academy. From there I just committed myself to attending Officer University.”

One of the things that Marcia indicated that she liked about being in the JROTC program was “being part of a group.” The sense of military camaraderie is one of the most common answers that servicemembers give when asked what they either liked or missed about their military experience. When asked why she decided to attend Officer University, she said it was at the advice of her JROTC instructor. Marcia said that she did not know anything about Officer University or any of the other military academies, which is not unusual given that military academies have not typically been associated with inner city youth; it is more of an elitist education. Marcia noted, “The only thing I knew about was the military in general, like the enlisted ranks. I also knew about senior ROTC from being in JROTC but I didn't know that the military academies or OCS even existed.” Marcia said that she did not have any scholarships or money to attend school, so she was willing to go into the military to get her education paid.

Officer University has trained many of the country’s greatest leaders from U.S. Presidents to great American war heroes. Known for its selective admissions requirements, it stipulates that prospective students obtain either a congressional nomination (U.S. Senator or Representative) or service-connected nomination (career military personnel or JROTC command) to be considered for admission. So when Marcia was given the opportunity to attend Officer University, she felt that she could not pass it up. She said she had been planning to join the ROTC since the fifth grade, so being able to attend Officer University would be an added bonus. After doing a little research, Marcia found out that Officer University had a rich heritage
and was the training ground for many great American leaders. Marcia’s decision to attend was made final after finding out that, if accepted, her schooling would be covered. As for her fifth grade goal to join the ROTC, she said Officer University would be the same thing “plus all of the grandeur.”

After receiving her acceptance into Officer University, Marcia decided to attend Officer University Prep, which is open to high school graduates and active duty soldiers hoping to get into Officer University. Marcia said that she did not necessarily have to go to Prep, but stated, “I didn't believe that I had a strong academic background.” The prep school is designed to help candidates to improve their skills in the three pillars: academics, physical, and military/leadership roles. Marcia’s eleven months at the prep school turned out to be a good experience; she says “We were a tight-knit family so already I felt like going to Officer University I had 256 people that knew me that were aware of my abilities.”

There is the real military and then there’s Officer University.

…When I say it’s not like the real military I mean it’s not like the real military because, and this is what I’m guessing, there’s a lot of rules and customs and traditions there that are just -- because Officer University is a cadet-run institution, I feel like personally some of those rules and traditions, they came upon it because people were really bored, extremely bored. It’s just kids making up stuff because they’re bored and then it’s carried on from year to year to year.

Marcia expected the worst for her first year at Officer University; she had heard several rumors about the “hazing-like” rituals that first year cadets experience: “I thought my first year there was going to be super hard, but it wasn’t.” Her second year at Officer University also started well; she even got involved on campus by becoming a manager for the basketball team,
which she enjoyed. Marcia said jokingly, “I was the most important manager on the team. Yes I was. I was in charge of filming, and you know with the film, they use that to analyze their plays, so I was the most important.” Marcia really felt connected to the university as a part of the basketball team, which was the highlight of her experience at Officer University. Aside from basketball, things were not going very well for Marcia at school; she seemed to be getting into trouble all of the time, which was not normal for her:

I kept getting in trouble for stuff, like … silly things like my hair or what else? Me going to help out with the basketball team or what else did I get in trouble for? I got in trouble for a lot of stuff at Officer University… I don't know if it was true and I still don’t know it to this day if I was being picked on or not but I felt like my TAC officer and the TAC officer is basically the senior officer in charge of the company. He’s the actual, actual officer -- he didn’t like me at all. He didn’t like me, period. So he went out of his way to make my life kind of difficult. And it was basically, what I had been expecting when I went there, that whole hazing thing. And then towards that last semester -- that was my last semester academically, but then the stress of constantly getting in trouble, of constantly going out and then thinking to myself, you know, what is I going to get in trouble for now? It was causing stress on my body, my hair started to fall out. My injuries weren’t healing correctly. It just started stressing my body out, my mind; it was just stressing me out. So at that point in time I was, “I know how much I can take.” When I was going into Officer University, I said I wasn’t going to let anybody run me out of here. If I fail a class, I fail a class and I have to just make it up. I don't care how many I fail, I’m going to stay here. But if I start to feel like I’m losing my mind then that’s at that point where it’s just not worth it because actually mental illness runs in my family and
usually some traumatic event or some sort of drug over whatever that kind of sort of sends them over the edge. I was like, if it gets to that point I feel like—and at that end I just felt like half the stuff that was going on there with me just was not really happening. I felt like I was looking at somebody else’s -- looking in on somebody else’s life. I couldn’t believe all this stuff was happening to me. I was constantly getting in trouble; I never get in trouble. I was constantly getting in trouble.

Marcia ended up leaving Officer University and came to the conclusion that, “I wasn’t quite ready for it yet and now I’m getting myself back together, building it back up, building myself back up.” She said, “I feel like towards the end of Officer University I was down here and now I’m starting to slowly build myself back up again to where I want to be to actually better than when I went into Officer University.”

**I always thought of Southeast in the back of my mind anyway.** After leaving Officer University, Marcia initially wanted to attend Big University (BU); she said, “I applied for Southeast first because the application process was extremely easy. Then I ended up missing the deadline at BU so I ended up coming here.” Marcia also noted that Southeast’s ROTC department recruited her when she was in high school so when she was accepted, she “was like why not [come to Southeast]. I always thought of Southeast in the back of my mind anyway.”

Like many students that come to Southeast, she figured that she would transfer to BU after a semester but choose not to; “I had already been established here and I like being here, and I’m tired of transferring all over the place, I just need to stay in one place for a minute.”

For Marcia, the academic aspect of her transfer went smoothly; she expressed that although she came close, she was never able to get above a 3.0 at Officer University, which she attributed to the time she had to spend on basketball, PT, and military development. Marcia said
she got a 4.0 her first semester at Southeast, stating that, “I worked hard there and then I worked hard here but it just showed more here.” Marcia said the major difference she noticed between Officer University and Southeast was,

I felt like Officer University was preparing you more for a doctorate or something like that, everything had to be precise… Here I think the standards are a little bit more lax. I feel like had I graduated from Officer University and gone on to my master’s degree I could seriously transition really super easy into my master’s degree because it was preparing me for higher and higher education whereas with Southeast, I feel it prepares you to work after your bachelor’s degree.

**I cannot have too many people around me.** Although Marcia was able to adjust to Southeast academically, her experience at Officer University influenced her decision not to engage socially at Southeast during her first year. She said that when she left Southeast she wasn’t interested in socializing with anyone; she was more focused on getting herself in the condition she needed to be, both physically and mentally, expressing that, “when I left Officer University--I felt like I was nothing at all, I was just not myself and I didn’t want anybody to have to be witness to that at all.” She said that things are better for her this year and mentioned that she branched out and joined a couple campus organizations and has participated in several on-campus events.

**Well, technically I am.** When Marcia went to Officer University’s Prep, she enlisted in the military as an invitational reservist, which is counted as active duty service time and qualified her for veteran status and the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Marcia said that she is considered a veteran but does not really embrace it because she feels she did not do anything to earn the title. She said when asked if she is a veteran she stated, “I don't really want to say yes because I really do not
view myself as a veteran. I cannot say it. So either I say no or I say well technically I am.”

Marcia went on to say,

When people come into the Veteran’s Office, I say yes; when I’m talking to like friends or family, sometimes I use no and sometimes I use “technically I am.” If I say technically I am then I have to go into this huge discussion on why I think technically I am. And if I say, no it’s easier. And if I say yes over there in the office then I’ve got to pray and hope that they won’t ask me where I’ve been, what unit was I in, what was my occupation. I just pray to hope…Cause I don’t want to tell them I went to Officer University…I don’t feel like I’ve done anything yet to be considered a veteran.

As stated above, Marcia’s active duty service qualified her for the Post 9/11 GI Bill, so she receives 60% of her tuition paid for along with books and the housing allowance. She said that one of its greatest benefits for her is that she does not have to stress about paying her tuition, which was one of the reasons that she decided to go to Officer University. Marcia said that she knows people who have $90,000 in student loans and stated, “I’m just so glad I don’t have that right now. I’m so glad I’m not stressing about that. I get to focus on my academics and not how much I owe and how to pay for it.”

My expectations: Not too much, like Officer University. Marcia did not really have many expectations for Southeast; she just said that she really needed a change from Officer University, and Southeast has provided that. Marcia states, “I haven’t had a problem here, I just go to school, and sometimes I go to events. It’s a typical college to me…I feel like it’s not too big, it’s not too small, it’s just the right size.”
Ken Roberts: Profile

Ken admits that he was not the most engaged student in high school, stating that he barely made it out: “I was fine as far as intelligence, but I just didn’t really care much.” He said that the teachers knew he was not an idiot and wanted him out, so they gave him a credit for having a job, which allowed him to graduate. After graduation, Ken decided he would try community college primarily because it was the next logical thing to do, and he had scholarship money that he had earned to pay for the courses,

It was terrible. It was horrible. I wasn’t into it. I had no idea why I was going because I still didn’t know what I wanted to do. I was just kind of like, “Well, all my friends are in college so I guess I should be, too.” It was just terrible because I wasn’t paying attention. I wasn’t switched off. I wasn’t motivated…and I was just like, I was going to class to sleep and I wasn’t getting anything out of it. It was just like high school again and I kind of realized that I needed to change something so I joined the Navy in 2004 after a bunch of research on different programs and different things I could do.

Ken said at the time he had been reading many fiction books about the Navy SEALs and Army Special Forces as well as playing a lot of military-related video games. Ken realized that he had been reading the books and playing the video games to escape: “I was trying to live this other life that I thought was cooler.” So he said that he was 18 and at a stage in his life where he could do anything he wanted, so he decided to do it.

Ken’s mother’s initial response to his decision to join the military was “only the dregs of society join the Army.” Although she was happy that he was doing something with his life, she was not particularly excited about him joining the military, given the country was at war. Ken
shared with his mom that he was interested in being a Ranger, EOD Tech, or Force Recon, and her response was, “Well, whatever you do, please don’t join the Army.”

**See that’s it, that’s the life.** Unlike the people who watch military-themed movies and the thirty-second television recruitment advertisements glorifying the experiences of US Special Forces and believe, they have what it takes, Ken actually did and proved it by becoming a Navy Explosive Ordinance Disposal Technician (EOD). Ken said that when he first started his EOD training, his class did physical training throughout the day and the rest of the time they “built this crazy camaraderie.” As he was going through his training, he often observed and idolized the individuals who had already made it through, “See that’s it. That’s the life. These guys are so cool. They wear their short shorts and they come in. They PT hard. They do cool shit. They blow shit up.” I was like, “That’s the coolest shit ever.”

Ken started his EOD training in Virginia Beach, went to dive school at Elgin Air Force Base near the Florida Panhandle, and did jump school at Ft. Benning, Georgia, and Tactical training in San Diego, CA. Ken’s specialized training took a total of two years to complete, after which he was stationed in Sicily. It was not much longer after Ken was stationed in Sicily that he ended up deploying to Iraq.

**I’m gonna die today. Today, I’m gonna die.** Ken did combat deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan during his time in the Navy. For Ken, the deployment to Iraq would provide the opportunity to test his years of training under live conditions, but it did not necessarily turn out to be the experience he was hoping for.

It was route clearance every day. Get in your truck, go drive 5 miles an hour for 18 hours to get blown up, see cars get blown up, maybe find an IED or function it, whatever, then come home, eat, go to sleep, get up and do it again. I did that for six months straight and
it was like – and it sucked, too, because the team that we relieved before us had a guy, the team leader lost his leg because an EFP detonated and took off his leg. We met the guys that were in the truck with him, they were fucked up, and it was just like, God. I really started to feel like every day it was like, “I’m gonna die today. Today, I’m gonna die. I’m gonna die today. This is it.” They were putting us on these routes and we’d clear it and then no one would be on it. There was no convoy movement through it. There was no one occupying it. There was no landowner watching it. No one did anything. And so just 12 hours later, here we come again. It was like this weird thing like the only reason they’re gonna put IED’s on this route is to hit us and we’re supposed to clear it for other people. Well, if you’re not putting other people on it, why are we here?

Ken performed these operations for six months and the stress and anger of the situation began to take its toll. Route clearance is not why he joined the Navy; he was an EOD Tech.

We hated what we were doing because we were all – we were taught running and gunning. We were all athletes. We ran, we swam, and we lifted weights. We thought we were hooyah. We’re jumpers, man. We jump out of helicopters. We jump out of airplanes. We dive. And you got us sitting in a truck 18 hours a day just waiting to get blown up. You should have us with the infantry and we should be at least walking around, at least outside kicking some doors or doing some – monkeys could do this, man. Eventually, Ken was able to go on a couple support missions with a striker brigade but said, “I was pretty switched off by then. I was pretty angry. I was pretty aggressive. I was very used to being very tense.”

After Ken returned to Italy he didn’t have the same love for the job as he did in the beginning; he said that he was “anti-EOD at that point. I liked being a Navy EOD tech and I
liked other Navy EOD techs, but I hated the job.” Now that Ken was back in Italy, he was looking forward to getting a good duty assignment like Germany where he’d get to work with “Special Forces guys and do cool shit and really not deploy at all, just go to Germany and get paid real well and say we’re real cool and stuff, or go to Djibouti and just train, that would be fine.” Unfortunately, the Navy had other plans for Ken,

They told me, “Ken, you’re staying on Det 2 and you’re going right back to Iraq, the same compound, in four months.” I freaked out. I was threatening to drop crab [crab is the EOD badge]. I was starting to tell people that, “If you try to send me back to Iraq, I’m gonna get rid of my EOD badge. I’ll go to the fleet. You can send me over to Air Frame. I’ll fucking wrench on airplanes before I’ll go back to Iraq. You can go fuck yourself.” I was super, super pumped; I was just not okay with it. Cause just to go back to that same place, uh.

Fortunately, Ken was able to escape going to Iraq for a second tour; his mentor offered him the opportunity to go to a different location. When asked where he wanted to go, Ken responded, “Djibouti or Germany. Give me the safari det. I want beer and Air Force chicks and giraffes. That’s what I want. I don’t want fucking guns and fucking angry insurgents. I don’t need that shit.” He offered Afghanistan and Ken said it wasn’t Iraq so he would take it.

Afghanistan ended up being a much better deployment for Ken. He mentioned that he was shot at a lot more than he was in Iraq but it wasn’t the same high intensity situations; it was manageable. Also, during this tour he was able to do a lot more of the things he trained to do, being attached to a Special Forces unit.

Although Afghanistan went better than Iraq, Ken had already made the decision to leave the Navy and everyone already knew it. He said that people tried to make bids for him to stay in,
but he was forthright in letting them know that, “I’m getting out. I’m getting a degree. I’m doing something different.” Although Ken wasn’t happy about how things turned out, he was overall pleased with his decision to join and he realized that the “good thing about it was after going through all that, I knew that I could do anything I wanted to. It wasn’t like, well, what can I do? It’s like, well, what do I want to do now? So that’s why I got out and tried to get my education.”

I still wanted to help people, I just didn’t know how. After getting out of the military, Ken eventually decided that he would go through the EMT program at local community college. Ken thought that working in a fire department would meet both his needs: to have a high adrenaline occupation while still allowing him to help people. Ken said after finishing up the clinical portion of his program, he realized that he didn’t want to be a firefighter. Ken also didn’t like the people at the fire station either, stating they were “total douche bags.” He said the guys at the station thought they were the coolest people. He thought, “You guys are not warriors. You are firefighters… You don’t know where I’ve been. I know where you’ve been. You’re 21 years old and you got your paramedic and you think you’re the fucking coolest guys that ever lived.” He also didn’t like how they lived at the house and said that he needed only one family, not two. Although Ken didn’t like the people at the firehouse, he enjoyed the medical aspect of the job. This is when he got interested in nursing and started taking some of the core classes in order to improve his GPA and transfer to a university.

“Well, what about Southeast?” Ken had approximately a 1.8 GPA in college prior to enlisting in the Navy and knew that he needed to improve it in order to transfer to a 4-year school, which he did. After getting it up to an acceptable level, he sent his transcripts out to three schools. Ken mentioned that he was accepted into two of the schools but not Big University (BU), which was the school that he really wanted to attend, “BU was like, “No, see ya. You’re
not in here.” So I was like, “Shit! Well, what about Southeast?” At the time, I was like, man “Southeast, dude? Sucks.”

Ken said he wasn’t initially thrilled about attending Southeast; it was his last option, largely because of the rumors that he’s heard. “Southeast’s got a bad rep so I was just kind of picking up on some negative feedback from other people. “Oh, Southeast, huh? Sorry.” Ken was still really hoping that he would have gotten into BU but since he didn’t, he had the same idea as most: that he would transfer there after a couple of semesters. Ken’s perception of Southeast changed when he actually visited the campus during one of the transfer day events. Ken said that he was able to tour the campus and actually liked it: “It was cool seeing all those old buildings and the transfer was simple, bring your transcripts in or at least have them sent …It was a good way to get everything done.”

**You should really read the book.** Although the transfer process, as far as the paperwork from the community college, was relatively easy, the academic part was a little challenging at first. Ken said that he went to the community college as kind of a refresher, to brush up on the things that make you a successful student; he said he wanted to “kind of get my head around how you take notes again, how you get tested, these are things that are important.” When Ken started at Southeast, he realized it “was definitely a step up.” He went from where at the community college, “you could just take notes from the PowerPoint, and you’d be fine.” When he got to Southeast they told him, “Here’s the PowerPoint but you really need to read the book so you can understand this material,” which was a lot different. All in all, things went very well for Ken, and he ended up being on the dean’s list.

Ken believed that the professors at Southeast were very approachable and he was able to form close relationships with a couple of the faculty members. “Professor [omitted], in the
English Department, I think he was awesome. He was real approachable. He was a staffer, so he was real cool...I’m Facebook friends with him and we yell at each other on Facebook sometimes. So he’s real cool.” Ken also spoke highly of two other professors, one who taught anatomy and physics and another who taught biochemistry. He thought that they were both awesome as well and developed a relationship with them.

Damn it, I’m just getting to know Southeast. For Ken, the time actually did come when he had to decide if he would transfer to BU; he applied and was accepted into their nursing program. He also applied to Southeast’s program but was still waiting to hear back from the nursing school at Southeast and was forced into making the decision to leave. It definitely wasn’t a great experience for him,

When I was accepted at BU, I was like, man, this is a pretty prestigious offer and BU, the school with an edge, blah, blah, blah. I actually went to the nursing school [at Southeast] and I went up to the adviser’s office and I actually walked in on a meeting between all the department heads of the nursing school. I kind of walked in and I was, “Wow, sorry about that.” And she was like, “Well, if you’ve got a question, the minds have assembled.” And I was like, “Okay. Well, I got accepted to another program. I’m here now and if I could, I’d like to stay here and I just wanted to know what would be – could you give me maybe a little bit more of a warm fuzzy about how I’m doing if I told you what my grades are and what classes I’ve taken here? Could you maybe tell me a yay or a nay or a, Yeah, you’ll probably get in, so I could make maybe a bit more of an informed decision?” And they’re like, “No, we can’t do that. If you got in somewhere else, you should go there.” And I was like, “Okay.” And then this one lady’s like, “Well, where did you get in?” And I said, “BU.” And she goes, “Yeah, go there.” I was like, “Well, damn.
Okay.” I guess thanks for giving me a definitive answer. I should appreciate that fact rather than you leading me along. It was just, “Nah, go there. We suck. We’re terrible. Go there. Go to this other school.”

It was very disappointing for Ken to have to leave; he had truly begun to develop affection for the school and he enjoyed what he was doing. “I had a job that I really didn’t mind at all. Being at the Veterans Services Office, that was a good set-up. I got a chance to know the benefits. I knew when things changed that affected me. I got to help other veteran students.”

When Ken was first accepted to Southeast he wasn’t very excited about attending, but things changed after he actually got the opportunity to experience the campus for himself. Ken stated that after he got here he was a “Southeast defender.” He said that if people around him made negative comments about the school, he’d let them know that they knew very little about the school. “It’s awesome, actually. You park your car. You walk to class. At most, you’ve got a ten-minute walk, maybe, if you’re walking slow. Instruction’s good. The guy who’s teaching my class is a Ph.D., same as yours.” Ken stated that Southeast exceeded his expectations, saying, “I didn’t really have – I mean they were low and negative when I went in there but after being there for two semesters, I was like, “This place is awesome.”

**Brian Vestry: Profile**

After Brian graduated from high school, he attended Southern University as a music major but switched to child psychology. Brian attended only a couple of semesters at Southern University before he dropped out, “My main problem, when I was an undergraduate there and as a younger student, I was too involved in the social side. I was goofing off too much. Just wasn’t focused. Not a good student.”
After leaving school, Brian, who is a very good drummer, started doing freelance gigs. “I was playing with one band fulltime, but I was also doing jazz gigs and that kind of stuff too. And some of these gigs had Navy musicians on them. That’s how I found out about the Navy band.” Brian said that in college he did marching band, as well as the drum and bugle corps, so “my first thought was to join the Marine Corps Drum and Bugle Corps. But I realized you can’t get a lot of gigs playing snare drum in a drum and bugle corps.” Even though Brian decided to join the military, he was still thinking about his future as a freelance drummer. Brian stated, “People are hiring drum set players,” which is ultimately why he chose to join the Navy.

Prior to enlisting, Brian took every step necessary to make sure he would be a member of the naval band. When asked if he would have joined the military without the certainty of being in the band he said,

I don’t know about that…That was the good thing about knowing Navy musicians—they said, “Don’t talk to a recruiter until you audition.” Because a lot of times, recruiters, either out of ignorance or out of trying to make a quota, fill up these spots, as opposed to getting a Navy musician. They’ll pass out wrong information. A lot of times, musicians will come in – you know really good musicians will come in, thinking, “Okay. I sign a contract first, and then I can audition.” …Which really – to be guaranteed a spot in the band, it’s a good idea to audition first, so you know the band program wants to take you in as a musician, or if they’re not interested.

**Being a Navy musician, it was fun. It was great gig.** Brian served 20 years in the Navy as a member of the band. He enjoyed his experience, which allowed him to hone his craft, travel, and play some great gigs. Being a member of the band allowed Brian to travel to many different parts of the world. “I was in Italy three times, that took me all over Western and Southeast
Europe, as far east as Azerbaijan, as far south as South Africa to Cape Town, and then all over Africa.” He also mentioned that he’s traveled through most of the states as a member of the base bands. Brian said that most of his fondest memories in the military are related to his travels, being on the road and going out with friends. He also enjoyed the different types of food he was exposed to, expressing how he loved the food in Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, and South America: “One place I really miss is Tunisia, [where] the cuisine is this really interesting fusion of Arabic and French. Because Tunisia was a French colony, so the food there is really good.”

**I was always a musician first.** Brian said that the good thing about both the Navy and Air Force band is that it’s the only thing that you have to do. “They hired you to be a musician. That’s what you’re trained to do, so that’s what you do.” Brian previously stated that he considered joining the Marine Corps, but based on his personal goals it probably wouldn’t have been a good fit. “The Marine band and the Army band, they’re more into: you’re a Marine or soldier first, and being in the band is something that you do when you’re not being a Marine or being a soldier.” Not often will you find someone as forthright and honest as Brian is about his military experience and views specific to his service:

I never really looked at myself as someone who was in the military. It was more something that I did. It didn’t define who I was. Being a musician defines who I am. But being in the Navy that was more – okay, I dress up in bell-bottoms, and costume, and go to work. But I was a musician. I was always a musician first…That was another cool thing about being in the Navy music program…people speak normal. Whereas we’d go – sometimes we’d get sucked into – we’d have to go to like an on-base meeting with the base commander or something like that, and they’d start speaking Navy-speak. And I
would have no idea what they were talking about. They’d tell jokes with acronyms, and the regular Navy people were like – they’d be chuckling it on up. And I’d just be lost. Sometimes it’s hard for both civilians and veterans to remember that the military consist of more than just combat troops. There are those who serve in support of combat operations, and others who serve as ambassadors of military. The Naval Band was perfect for what Brian wanted out of the military and that was simply to play music.

**The last set.** Brian loved playing in the band and opted for performing rather than gaining rank, which ultimately led to him being “booted out for tenure.” In the Navy, you have to make the rank of E-7 before you reach your twenty-year mark, and Brian was an E-6. Although he would have loved to stay in the band, he made a conscious decision not to gain rank. “I’d never really been interested in becoming an E-7 or chief. I prefer to perform. Whereas as a chief, you start taking on a lot of management duties and you’re off your instrument a lot more.” For Brian, it was all about performing, and “they [leaders] were too busy keeping the admiral happy and just keeping the band running. They were outside of the band a lot more, where they couldn’t go on the road as much with the band, and they couldn’t perform with the band.”

Brian knew that the time would come that he would have to leave the Navy, and he prepared for it the best he could by taking college courses towards the end of his career when the time allowed, “I planned on going back to school and started taking classes, but I’m very good at procrastinating as well…It turned out it was the last couple of years, where I decided, or I realized – “If I’m gonna do this, I really need to start taking classes now.” And that was in 2005.” Brian ended up taking several courses through Popular Base University as well as at The School of Music (online). He noted that in contrast to his earlier experience with college, he was a “much more focused student now.”
**I wanted to stay at Popular Base University.** Prior to getting out of the military, Brian researched schools that had information assurance programs. “I didn’t have to do too much shopping. I looked for information assurance, and Southeast was one of the programs that came up in Google.” Brian indicated that he wanted to continue going to school at Popular Base University. Brian said the reasons he didn’t end up finishing there were that they didn’t offer the exact program that he wanted to complete, but, more importantly, the main campus wouldn’t allow veterans to pay in-state tuition. “I was a little surprised, considering how much business the Popular Base University does with the military…I mean they’re one of the big players in military education in on-base education.” The problem is that the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill only covers the cost of in-state tuition, and he would have to make up the difference if he decided to attend. After Brian found out that Southeast offered the exact program he was interested in as well as in-state tuition to veterans, he decided to attend Southeast.

**The biggest problem I’ve had is being an older student.** Brian’s academic transition to Southeast didn’t present much difficulty at all. He said that as a full-time student it was a lot easier because he didn’t have the distractions of going out on the road like he did in the service. He said his problems were in a different area: feeling old.

Being older, I feel a little out of place. And I kind of get that vibe from other people on campus too, especially in – like I’ve done a couple of musicals on campus and stuff. And I always get this feeling like people can’t quite figure me out…Could be my personality too. I don't know. But I do get that feeling from people. They’re like, “Who is this guy?”

You know?

Brian said that he felt more at ease with the younger students who were in his major than the ones he interacted with in is his general education courses. He said that he had a communications
class that had several younger students in it, and “they were falling asleep in class and since it was a communications class, we had to do speeches. And there were several students, where they’d go up and do the speech, and it was obvious that they were winging it.” He said that things were different in his major classes: “They seemed to be up-to-date on what was going on in the world, very up-to-date with the news. So just a different type of student.”

**I do work a lot with students.** Although Brian admitted to not having much of a social life, he did discuss how he’s been able to continue his passion to perform and in doing so has formed a connection to the university. Brian said that when he first arrived at Southeast he told a couple of professors that if they ever needed any clinicians, he’d be interested. He said during his first semester they contacted him because they didn’t have any drummers audition for the big band and they asked him to play, which he accepted. Since that time, Brian has played with several of the school’s bands as well as assisted music students with their year-end recitals, but his relationship with the band and its leaders didn’t start out so smoothly. He said that the bandleaders were a little apprehensive about him at first; come to find out, they were a little intimidated because of his experience in the Navy music program. Brian told them that he wasn’t there to criticize; he was just there to try and make the band sound better.

For Brian, playing with the band was the only real social outlet that he had, and he admits that, “It’d be nice if I had more of a social life outside of campus, but also a lot of it is – especially this semester – I haven’t had any time to do anything. It’s hard enough just to find time to practice.”

**As veterans, there are a lot of perks that we get.** Brian said that the Post 9/11 GI Bill is a great benefit and even though he’s not “rolling in dough” he doesn’t have to work: “As long as I live fairly frugally, I can just go to school fulltime, not worry about working, and concentrate
on my studies.” Brian also has the added benefit of a retiree’s pension, which is approximately half of his active duty salary to survive. Although appreciative, Brian is not an automatic fan of giving veterans special privileges on campus. He stated, “There are a lot of students that – a lot of my peers, they’re running up huge bills, as far as paying for classes and stuff, which I haven’t had to do, so far.” When Brian asked if there was anything more that the university could do to assist veterans, interestingly enough Brian stated, “It’d always be nice if they had more veteran scholarships or something like that, more for the veterans. But that takes money. You know?”

Brian said that overall, he’s been happy with his experience at Southeast. He hasn’t really needed to use any of the services that the campus offers, honestly stating, “I really don’t know what’s available.” Brian said as for his experience here at Southeast, “I haven’t had the experiences here that I’ve had in the Navy. I mean I don’t get to – I’m not driving around in Tanzania or someplace like that. But it’s been a pretty cool experience.” Brian also stated that he doesn’t really feel grown up at Southeast because he hasn’t had any real responsibilities other than going to class and making good grades.

Rosa Herrera: Profile

Rosa made her decision to join the military after having conversations with a friend who had recently gotten out of the military. Her friend told her how good her experience was, and Rosa thought it would be a good way for her to travel and see the world.

In high school, they used to send me the letters. I never thought, in my wildest dreams, I would go into the military, ever. It was not something that I had wanted to do, until that friend of mine was telling me about it and I was like, um-hum, that’s interesting, the travel. It was like travel, I want to travel. It’s really silly, the things that you look at when you are younger.
Prior to joining the military, Rosa graduated from a junior college and started taking courses at West Coast State University. Rosa said that she had a good experience and did well; she just really wasn’t sure what she wanted to do. “I will tell you that I went in and first I thought I wanted to study languages, I already speak Spanish fluently. I took French. I did clothing textiles. I did cosmetology. Wasn’t quite sure what I wanted to do.” So in 1982 she decided that she would join the military but only if she could be stationed in Germany, which she was.

An eye-opening experience. Rosa spent seventeen months at her first duty station in Germany, and she was able to do a lot of traveling throughout Europe. “I went to Spain. I went to Amsterdam. I went to Italy. I can’t think of one country that I didn’t go to, I have been all over.” For a girl who grew up on the west coast, much of what Rosa was experiencing was very eye-opening. She mentioned that, “going through Georgia, it’s just an awakening when you are used to growing up in a big city and you see the small towns. I was stationed in Fort Drum, New York, which was a very eye-opening experience and to go through Canada and look at the wilderness and see cows….” When she was in New York she said, “The snow would pile so high. There are always cultural differences. There are always many differences. So did I experience things like that? Yes. Everyone does. You know, it’s what you go through.”

Rosa spent the majority of her time, eleven years, stationed at Fort Drum in Georgia where she was a medic. While at Fort Drum, Rosa worked in several different units, starting as a field medic and then working at the base family practice. During the Gulf War, Rosa worked with the troop medical clinic in support of mobilizing troops for the Middle East. Rosa said at the time, her youngest was three months old, she was on the list to go to war, and her husband was in Korea; this is just one of the challenges military families face. Rosa said you always have to be ready and have a family plan. “I was prepared with the bags packed and a list of a chain of
family members that, if my number came up, would come pick up my kids and deliver them to my mom.” She said that throughout her military career, her priority was making sure her kids would be okay.

**Being a female soldier in itself is a challenge.** As a senior enlisted officer, Rosa felt that she had to deal with a lot of things that she believed were primarily due to her gender, and that was a challenge. She said that she thought it was worth mentioning that being a female soldier is difficult and people are usually “uncomfortable with having a woman in charge.” Rosa said this was something that she had to deal with throughout her career: “I found myself proving myself and I just dealt with it.” She said that it’s just something you have to deal with as you go up in rank.

Throughout Rosa’s career, she had to take into consideration the effect that her and the Army’s decisions would have on her family. Rosa said that when she was an E7 stationed in Germany, which was towards the end of her career, her “kids wanted to come back. And I said, if I come back, I know my sergeant major already told me, I can stay or there is nothing he can do, I will be deployed to Bosnia. If I go, just be aware this is what’s going to happen. Boom, got there, within three months I was being deployed.”

While Rosa was deployed to Bosnia, she experienced both the highs and lows of being in a combat zone. For the seven months while they were there, Rosa was a platoon sergeant and was responsible for an Italian aid station that served over 1500 soldiers. She shared experiences that ranged from the fear of driving unaccompanied through a combat zone, to the joy of working with and giving candy to kids at a local school.

After serving out the remaining years on her contract, Rosa decided to hang up her boots. She explains,
I will tell you why I got out, many reasons. One was my kids because there was so many times that I felt like I was putting them second. You know, there were times that I felt that I had to steal from the army just to go see them in their classroom or see their recital or do something like that, you know. I can remember I was in a very important formation and there was somebody trying to get the first sergeant’s attention and I didn’t think about it because I was like I’m standing in formation. Well, when I got out of the formation, I realized they were trying to get ahold of him because my daughter had had an accident, but luckily my husband was there and he took care of it. So when I was done, I ran.

The transition. Rosa spent 20 years in the Army and achieved the rank of First Sergeant, which is a senior leadership position. Rosa was used to leading and being in charge. She was used to organization and the systematic way the Army operated, and returning to the “civilian way” presented a challenge for her. “It is a hard transitioning from being a first sergeant to being a civilian, because you are nobody. That’s point blank. You are just nobody.” She said that it took her several years to adjust, having to tone down her voice and giving orders, something that becomes second nature after a career in the military. She said she was used to just telling soldiers to do things, not asking or saying please, which is something that is expected in the civilian world. She also stated that as she has gotten older she’s noticed that the younger generation doesn’t want to listen to you and she feels as if she always has to prove herself, which she’s not really about at this point in her life. Rosa said, “I’m going to be me. You either like me or you don’t like me and that’s the way it is and it’s okay… I’m very self-confident. And I am fine. I’m not a loner, but I like peace.”
Southeast has been very rewarding. Rosa said she decided to go back to school because it was the perfect time: her husband had passed away and her two oldest daughters were now grown. She said that she had been preaching to her other two children about the importance of going to college and finally decided to take her own advice; “I said, what better example than to let me finish college, so I decided to do that.”

Rosa initially thought that she would return to the West Coast to finish up school, but her house wouldn’t sell and she was forced to make a different decision. She saw or read somewhere that Southeast was good; “I only heard good things about it and I wasn’t going to go to BU, you know, too expensive. And I was doing business, you know, well, why not go to the best and it’s right here.”

Rosa said that after she got accepted to Southeast she attended the transfer orientation and was very happy that she did because she was given a lot of useful information. She also mentioned that she met with an advisor in her program who was extremely helpful. She said that she continued to meet with her about every other month to make sure that her classes were in order and get scheduling advice. Unlike most of the other participants, Rosa has used quite a few of the services that Southeast has to offer.

Wow, you were in the Army. Rosa is very proud of her military service, and it is a strong part of her identity, which she doesn’t mind sharing with professors or students. “One of the things I’m very passionate about is like people ask me about my military career.” Rosa said when she shares that she was in the military to students, “Sometimes people are surprised, they go, wow, you were in the army? How long were you in the army? Twenty years, and I’m like, I guess kids don’t realize that.” As for faculty, she said that she’s had awesome professors whom
she has a really good relationship with: “Just being able to go and talk to them and they like to ask me questions because of course they want to know, oh, yeah how was the military…”

**What makes me happy is family.** Although Rosa has taken advantage of many of the services Southeast offers, she hasn’t really been able to attend any extracurricular activities outside of what’s required for her program, but she would like to. She said it’s a matter of time; when she’s not working, she’s studying or with her son. She said it’s a juggling act, stating that she had two finals the next day: “Which one am I going to study for? Which one, I got to take that A and let the other one drop a little bit or bump the other one up, and it’s like where am I going to fit everything in?”

Aside from the fact that she is extremely busy, Rosa has made a conscious decision not to join any campus organization, whether academic or social. “Those days are like a hundred years ago, what makes me happy is my family. You know, my kids, my grandkids, that’s what makes me happy. I’m at peace. If I can watch my Spanish soap opera after I study, I’m happy.”

**I have to finish.** “Somebody asked me, what are you going to do with your degree? I said, I’m going to frame it and put it on my wall so I could look at it.” For Rosa, the attainment of her diploma will not necessarily be the start of the next step of her life but more so the closure of a previous chapter:

My mother, who is 80, says, why are you putting yourself through it? But she goes, I’m proud of you. You know, she goes, are you okay? Because you know, you are studying up till 1, 2, sometimes 3 in the morning and she goes, why do you put yourself through that? I said, because I have to do it. It’s just something that I have to accomplish. I have to finish something, mom. Just like I did my 20 in the year. I did 20. I finished it. Now I have to finish something that I started even before the military and that’s my education.
Rosa has come to understand what things are important to her in this stage of her life and ultimately what really matters to her. For “all the struggles that I went through, it’s that accomplishment at the end. I have peace and that’s the most important thing to me. To have peace, have my family, it’s good and then when I have my degree I’ll feel better.”

For Rosa, Southeast has lived up to her expectations and has been a great overall experience. She found both the faculty and students to be very good; “I have not had one problem in this school from the students to the professors.” She said that when she decided to go back to school, she just really wanted a place where she would feel comfortable, and Southeast has been that place.

**Brad Coker: Introduction**

Brad is a veteran of the United States Navy and is currently studying exercise science at Southeast. Brad went into the Navy directly out of high school; he wanted to travel, and the Navy allowed him to do just that. While Brad was in the military, he was a construction mechanic and learned a lot of valuable skills that he has been able to use in the civilian world. On his decision to enlist in the military, Brad stated,

I had a pretty rough childhood growing up. I wanted to get away from everything. That's why I wanted to join the military. When I talked to the naval officer he’d say I’d travel every – you know, travel a bunch of countries and see a bunch of places and that’s what I wanted to do. I wanted to see the world and that’s what I did in the Navy.

While Brad was in the military, he was deployed two times where he was actively engaged in combat situations that still have an effect on his life today. Brad said of his military career that he was on the fast track. He earned the rank of sergeant fairly quickly and had been sent to various military schools to receive training. Brad stated that right before he was to go on
his third deployment, that all changed; he got in trouble and was involuntarily separated from the Army after four years of service with an other than honorable discharge.

After Brad got out he moved down to the Gulf where he lived with a friend while looking for work. Three months later Katrina hit and destroyed everything he had. For the next couple of years he worked various jobs; one job led him back to Iraq as a contractor, but he was eventually let go after getting a DUI. Brad worked any job he could find, from being a door-to-door vacuum salesman to refurbishing homes until he enrolled in a community college, which for him was a great experience. After getting his associate’s degree, he transferred to Southeast Public University, where he hopes to finish his degree in the next couple of semesters.

**Derek Perry: Introduction**

After graduating from high school, Derek decided he wanted to attend Big State University (BSU), but didn’t get in and had to settle for another big school in the Midwest. While in school, Derek joined the ROTC. When asked why he decided to go into the National Guard, he said,

I still have no idea, to be honest. I couldn’t tell you what my original motives were. I was an ROTC cadet and just got sick of the program, sick of the people and decided I’d rather be enlisted than be given my commission without earning it.

Derek stayed in the National Guard for six years and is now currently a member of the Army Reserves.

After Derek left college in the Midwest, he briefly attended Southeast until he was deployed to Baghdad for 410 days, where he did various jobs related to transportation. While in Baghdad, Derek experienced combat situations, which he said gave him a wake-up call. Derek said his deployment experience wasn’t that bad and could have been a lot worse.
After returning from his deployment, Derek enrolled in a college near BSU because he had several friends who went to BSU. After about two years at the community college, Derek transferred to Southeast but will be transferring to BSU at the end of the semester.

**Jacob Scott: Introduction**

When Jacob first went into the Army, he was assigned to an air defense artillery unit, but throughout his 15 years in the military he had several jobs. Jacob stated that he enlisted because, “I wanted to get out from the under parental scope of things, and just get out and experience life. Time to grow up and move out after high school. Pretty simple.” Most of Jacob’s duty stations were located in southern states (Louisiana, Kentucky, Georgia), except for his last duty station, which was in Hawaii. Although Jacob didn’t deploy, he worked in a support role, preparing soldiers prior to their deployments into the different theaters of combat, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Jacob started taking college courses while he was stationed in Hawaii, which happened to be near the end of his career. He said they had several different college branches on base but he was working towards an associate’s degree with one of the local schools that offered classes there. Jacob said that he was just one credit short of graduating before he left the military and had to come back home.

Jacob decided to try to find work after he got out of the military, so he didn’t go directly to Southeast after he getting out. Jacob said that there were maybe four years that he didn’t do any schooling; he was trying to establish himself in the workforce. Jacob said that when he did decide to come to Southeast, the transition was rather smooth. Jacob has enjoyed his time at Southeast and looks forward to finishing up his two majors in film and media studies and communication technology.
Jennifer Holland: Introduction

Jennifer grew up in Europe, and when she was 18 her family moved to Ireland. After graduating from high school, Jennifer tried out college but wasn’t very successful, saying, “I didn’t want to go to college. And my mom always said to me well, what are you gonna do if you don’t go to college? And my response was always I can always join the military.”

At the age of 22, she decided to enlist in the United States Navy. Jennifer was able to enlist because her mom was born in Metropolitan City, which makes her a United States citizen.

Jennifer said that joining the military from overseas was a slightly different experience than joining in the States because there are so few people joining, the process tends to be all about you. Jennifer said that she anticipated that boot camp would be difficult but ended up enjoying it. Jennifer spent four years in the Navy as a mass communication specialist where she gained a lot of practical experience and training in the area that she’s majoring in a Southeast.

Jennifer deployed to the Gulf for six months on board the USS Reagan. She said that it wasn’t a typical deployment because they didn’t do anything but float around in circles over and over again. She said the only way that you knew you were in the Gulf was because you could see the oil rigs burning and the intense flight ops. Jennifer said that when she reflects on her time in the Navy, it was an “awesome” experience, but when she was in it she complained about everything and had issues all the time.

After Jennifer got out of the military she attended a Broadcast Technical school near Metropolitan City, explaining that she came to this area because she could get in-state tuition. Jennifer said that after she received her degree from the technical school she worked for the next two years in the broadcasting profession until she decided to go back to school, which is when she decided to go to Southeast.
Robert Davis: Introduction

Robert initially became interested in the military after his cousin enlisted and shared with him all of his experiences traveling and seeing the world. Although Robert was fascinated by his cousin’s experience, it wasn’t until an altercation at school, which involved him staring down the barrel of a gun, that he decided to immediately speak to a recruiter and enlist in the United States Navy.

It gave me a chance to get away from my mother, and it taught me how to be a man because I had to take care of myself. In fact, it was one of the best moves of my life cause, again, I had to learn to take care of myself as a man, as a young man.

Robert hoped that he would have the opportunity to retire from the military, but after six years he left the Navy due to complications from asthma.

While Robert was in the Navy, he got the opportunity to see the world as he had hoped. For a kid growing up in Metropolitan City, much of Robert’s experiences abroad served as an eye-opener to how the rest of the world lives. Robert explained that seeing some of the living conditions in other countries makes you appreciate a lot of the things in the United States that we take for granted, like running water. Although the living conditions may vary throughout the world, Robert believes that everyone is the same in the sense that “we are all trying to survive.”

After Robert left the service, he returned to the Metropolitan City area where he worked several different types of jobs, everything from a postal worker to a lifeguard, where he spent most of his working years. Eventually the asthma issues caught up with him and he received a 100% VA disability rating for both his asthma and knee issues. After receiving the disability rating, he qualified for the VA’s Vocational Rehabilitation Program, which is geared to re-train veterans for employment in areas that are suitable for their disability, which is what allowed
Robert to enroll in college twenty-nine years after graduating from high school. Robert decided on a community college near Metropolitan City, where he did well and was on the dean’s list every semester prior to transferring to Southeast.

Steve Roberts: Introduction

Steve, a 41-year-old retired Army veteran with kids, grew up near Metropolitan City. Steve stated that he decided to join the military after talking to people he knew in the service. “I just thought I needed a new direction and said, well, I’ll try it.” He said that he first considered going into the Air Force but after talking to an Army recruiter, he decided that he “would be all he could be.”

When Steve first joined the Army he was part of an artillery unit but held several different positions throughout his twenty-year career. Steve noted that he was a drill sergeant, an observer controller, and an instructor of lethal and less-than-lethal tactics, all of which he enjoyed. Steve mentioned that during his time he was stationed in Greece and Korea and did deployments to both Somalia and Iraq.

Steve started his quest for higher education while he was in the military. He said that he started off at community college out of Texas, transferred, and then ended up earning his associate’s degree while he was stationed at Fort Riley in Kansas. Steve said that he received his associate’s in 1996, so he had a substantial break between receiving his degree and exiting the service. Steve moved back to the Midwest after retiring, which was when he decided to attend Southeast. After a semester at Southeast, Steve was hired by a military contractor to go back to Iraq, which he did for several months until he decided he didn’t want to be there anymore. After returning home, Steve reenrolled in Southeast.
Tonya Jackson: Introduction

Tonya attended a couple of colleges before deciding to go into the military. She said the reason that she joined was to travel,

That’s the only reason why. And school. Like I’d be able to go to school and work at the same time. There I was guaranteed money. You know. I would like to have a safe job and be able to work. Or excuse me, be able to go to school and work.

She said after completing boot camp she reported to her unit in Texas and later deployed to Iraq. She spent most of her time in Oman doing security, which she said was interesting because they were tasked with keeping a watchful eye over the contractors on base. After spending six months in Iraq, she returned and was re-assigned a new duty station in Korea where she spent the next two years.

While in Korea, Tonya began taking coursework and decided to change her major from education because teaching didn’t really line up with her current job as a Laboratory Technician. She also realized that she could make more money working in a lab when she got out than she could as a teacher. During her time in the military, she was able to take several courses and few CLEP exams. She noted that she wasn’t able to take classes until she got to Korea because when she was stationed in Texas she was always working. While in Korea, the classes were offered right on the base, which made it fairly easy for her to participate.

Tonya spent eight years in the Air Force and summed it all up as “an experience.” After she got out she knew that she wanted to go to college full-time, but the day she signed up for school she got offered a job in a molecular lab and took the job. After a year she decided to make a career shift and became an airline stewardess, which led her to Metropolitan City and, ultimately, Southeast.
Travis Richardson: Introduction

Travis, who describes himself as a competitive and humorous person, is a native of Metropolitan City. After graduating from high school, he enrolled in a local community college but after a year he struggled, wondering how he would be able to afford it. Travis said that one of the first things that came to mind was the military, and he decided to meet with an Army recruiter. Travis also stated,

Looking back on it, it helped stall some time for me. You know what I mean? It helped kind of – like I said, initially I needed it for school. But then it got to the point where I just needed the break, and the military kind of provided that break for me. Like to just – let me just step outside the box for a minute and kind of gather myself. You know, it was almost like I don’t want to use the reference of “timeout” or whatever, but I needed an out. I needed some time.

Travis said that he didn’t want anything that would be too hard or easy so he picked transportation as his military occupation. He said that he wanted a “chill job” but it ended up being much the opposite. When Travis joined the Army, 9/11 had not yet happened, but when it did, things began to move more rapidly. He was deployed to Iraq, and suddenly vehicles that were used primarily to transport troops became gun trucks mounted with 50 calibers and Mark 19s. Travis indicated that the time he spent in Iraq was very rough, but when he went back for a second time and was stationed in Kuwait, he finds it difficult to count it as a combat deployment because it was in the rear.

In all, Travis spent six years in the Army and says that he enjoyed his experience. After he left the service, he decided to return to Metropolitan City where he admits it was a strange transition back home. He said people who live around military bases are used to seeing/dealing
with returning veterans, but people in Metropolitan City couldn’t really relate because it really wasn’t in their face. Travis said that after returning home he finished up his courses at the community college that he previously attended and then transferred to Southeast.

**Vick Peters: Introduction**

Vick is a husband, father, and veteran of the United States Navy, all of which he is very proud. Vick served four years as a corpsman and was primarily stationed on the east coast. Vick grew up just outside of Metropolitan City where he lived until a year after he graduated. Vick said that it had always been his goal to attend Southeast but his dad wanted him to attend Baptist College in the south, which is where he ended up going.

Vick said that the he wasn’t really happy at Baptist College, so he didn’t really dedicate himself to becoming a serious student. After things didn’t go well at Baptist, he figured that he could go into the Navy, get his GI Bill, and return to Southeast. Vick ended up joining the Navy around the time of Desert Storm; he said that he chose the Navy because he’s a peaceful person and as a corpsman he would be helping his fellow servicemembers rather than shooting at people. Fortunately for Vick, he was never in the situation where he would be faced with that decision as he spent the majority of his time working at tri-service hospital stateside.

Within the first year and half of entering the service, Vick was married and had a newborn. Things were going well for him in the Navy until he hurt his back and was unable to comply with the mandatory PT/weight requirement. This eventually led to him leaving the service six months early on a medical discharge shortly after having his second child. After Vick got out of the Navy, he ended up staying out east for eighteen years during which time he attended a couple of community colleges prior to returning home and transferring to Southeast.
Zane Cooper: Introduction

Zane is member of the Army National Guard who, interestingly enough, went to boot camp at the same time as her mother. After high school, Zane went to college up north where she became a member of their ROTC program. She later ended up joining the Army National Guard after talking with her mother and a “sneaky” recruiter who informed her that she could be in the Guard while she was in school, which she said was perfect.

Prior to joining the enlisted Guard, Zane said that ROTC was great but after seeing the real Army it was hard for her relate to ROTC students who had the officer mentality, but she stayed in the program until she transferred to Southeast. After about a year and a half at Southeast, Zane ended up getting deployed with a unit that wasn’t her own, which she didn’t know was possible. She mentioned that once you get the orders, school commitments are irrelevant and the mission is primary. Zane said that while she was in Iraq, everything was okay until she was involved in an incident, which she shared but later asked that the specifics be extracted from her transcript.

After Zane came home from her deployment, it didn’t take long for her to go back to school. Although she didn’t take much time off, the deployment really changed Zane a lot, and she admits things aren’t the same as they were before she left. The way that she described her college experience prior to the deployment was more positive than what she is currently experiencing.

Participant Background Information

The following tables represent participant background data, which was collected through the background questionnaire. Table 2 represents basic background demographics, while Table 3 represents demographics specific to the veterans’ educational experience.
Table 2

*Demographic Variables*

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*Source: Background Questionnaire*
Table 3

*Socio-Demographic Variables Specific to Education*

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*Source:* Background Questionnaire
Chapter 5: Themes

The factors that influence college choice, transition, and collegiate satisfaction can be best discussed through the themes that emerged from the participants’ interviews. The five major themes are discussed in the following order: college choice, academic experience, social experience, campus climate, and veteran educational benefits. Several sub-themes also emerged during the research. This section will discuss in great detail the college choice decision-making process as it relates to the veterans’ decision to attend Southeast Public University. It will also discuss how they view both their academic experience and social experience at the university along with their perceptions of campus climate as it relates to the university (i.e. students, staff, faculty, and administrators) creating a welcoming environment for veteran students. The final section will discuss the significance/impact that veteran educational benefits have played in their overall experience at Southeast Public University.

Theme: College Choice

Southeast Public University was not necessarily the first choice for several participants in the study; six of the 14 veterans initially considered attending another school. These six veterans can be grouped into two categories: those seeking to finish their degree at a previous institution and those who had the desire to attend a “prestigious” university. Brian noted initially, he would have rather continued at Popular Base University because he’d already been taking courses there, and Rosa first considered returning west to finish her degree at the university she had left more than twenty years before. Other veterans like Derek, Marcia, Ken, and Tonya all considered one of the state’s two flagship schools before settling on Southeast. Derek applied to and was rejected by Big State University several times; he said he attended Southeast only because “they gave me a scholarship and I got denied from Big State University.” Tonya, Marcia, and Ken all
wanted to go to Big University (BU), which is not surprising given that Marcia was transferring from a prestigious military academy, Ken was a member of an elite military unit, and Tonya was a member of the Air Force working in a clinical lab, all of which imply some level of prestige. Although Tonya never submitted an application to BU, both Marcia and Ken applied but weren’t accepted and inevitably defaulted to Southeast.

**Location.** As they say in the real estate business, “location is everything,” and this holds to be true with over half of the participants in the study citing location as their primary reason for attending Southeast Public University, either in the sense that it is close in proximity to their current domicile or close to the institution they had plans to transfer to. Marcia stated, “First off, it [Southeast] was closer to BU so if I didn’t get accepted into BU I could just come here.” For Jacob the decision to attend Southeast was very simplistic: “I live right here in [location omitted], so there was no question that this was the place to go.” Tonya, Robert, and Steve all had similar responses, with Steve indicating that, “It’s seven minutes away from my house …it’s just right down the road.” Ken, who was accepted into two other schools, eventually chose Southeast because the other schools were on the other side of the state and he didn’t want to drive that far or be away from his wife.

Zane’s and Travis’s decision to attend Southeast relative to location was not based on distance but the school’s physical location. Zane said that one of the reasons she chose Southeast was that it was closer to her National Guard unit than her previous school. Travis’s decision was a little more involved as he thought about what cities other schools were located in and whether the school was “too urban.” He also took into consideration the amount of traffic that would be a part of his commute and the availability of on-campus parking, all of which are important factors
to consider for a student working full-time. After careful consideration, Travis made his decision to attend Southeast, stating “for me I felt like it was ideal.”

**Active duty veterans and school choice.** Brian, Rosa, Steve, Tonya, and Jacob, all veterans who attended school while on active duty, noted that location was essentially the only consideration that factored into their college choice decision, in the sense that the college courses were offered in a medium where their location didn’t matter, such as online, or the courses were offered right on base, which made it easy for them to attend. On most military bases there are educational institutions that offer programs for servicemembers and their families. Often times these institutions even offer courses that servicemembers can attend during their lunch hour, making things convenient.

"Everything was under one roof. There was an education center right on post that had different college branches. I think I was part of three at one point. But everybody was there. They had counselors available kind of like here, but with multiple colleges. So it was really kind of like a melting pot of different schools in area, so that was kind of a bonus." (Jacob)

When Rosa was stationed overseas and attended school, she said in references to her classes, “They weren’t on my base, I had to drive to another base…I thought it was the only choice I had.”

Many servicemembers also attend schools that offer full degrees online, such as at the University of Phoenix, which currently has the largest veteran student enrollment. The flexibility of online education allows servicemembers to stay enrolled even when they are deployed, given that they have a dependable Internet access point. Brian said that when he was in Naples and was pretty sure that he wouldn’t be going out on the road, he would take a combination of both in
class and online courses. Brian, like many other veterans attending schools that offer online courses, was able to better plan around military commitments, deployments, and relocations, over which veterans have no control.

**Connection.** Having a connection to the university was another reason that veterans choose to attend Southeast; for some it was a spouse or friend that lived nearby or previously attended the university. “My family was here. My wife was from here, and school was reasonably close…my wife went here. We have a few friends that have gone here” (Jacob). Rosa stated that her daughter attended Southeast, and a couple of Robert’s friends attended Southeast; he said, “They were just telling me it’s an excellent school and it has an excellent support system for African Americans…I think some of the black students were telling me about it. And that’s kind of what got my attention.” For veterans, the advice of friends or family members likely plays a significant role in their school selection process, especially if they aren’t particularly set on attending a specific college/university.

Vick’s connection to the university extends beyond merely a recommendation of family and friends; it represents the closing of a chapter that his father started many years ago.

I was excited to come, like I said, I always wanted to go to Southeast. My dad came here for a semester so there’s a little bit of history there too. Like my dad would have ended up finishing here but they drafted him for Vietnam because his grades weren’t -- they were good but they weren’t good enough to stay in college so they took him in the draft. When Vick graduates he will be the first person in his generation to graduate with a four-year degree; he said, “The only one that ever graduated out of my mom’s side of the family was my cousin and he only graduated with an associate’s.”
Although the overwhelming majority of veterans noted that favorable things they heard about Southeast encouraged their decision, Ken experienced quite the opposite. Again, Southeast wasn’t his first choice and he initially wasn’t very excited about it, primarily because of what he had heard from others. For Ken, whose wife and several acquaintances attended Big University, the prospect of attending Southeast initially wasn’t very well accepted. Fortunately for Ken, his experience at Southeast contradicted the negative perceptions of the friends and family who spoke negatively of the school.

**School quality and program offerings.** Another reason veterans gave for their decision to attend Southeast was high remarks, accolades, and specific programs that the university offered or received. Southeast has gained national recognition for a couple of its programs, which veterans referenced as influences in their decision to attend. Many of them learned of the school’s accolades from family and friends, and others from public displays in recognition of the honors that the school has received. Jacob said, “So it’s got a good reputation for – and good programs, too. I’ve heard [of] their nursing programs and things like that. They’re good on the map all the way across from what I was told, even before I signed up.” Although Rosa was introduced to Southeast because her daughter attended, she stated, “I had known that it was a good school, because you can’t miss the darn sign that says, we’re number one, you know, how can you miss that?” The decision to attend Southeast for Rosa was like a revelation: “I was saying, Southeast is a good school, that’s where I’m going to go. I’m going to go get my degree at Southeast. It was just like the light just hit. Boom, okay, we are going to do this.”

Brad, Brian, Tonya, and Zane all had clear educational goals and decided to attend Southeast based on the school’s ability to meet their needs. Although location was a factor, Zane was really impressed with the school’s five-year accounting program, saying, “Nobody has a
five-year program, I believe, in the state, where you can get your bachelor’s and your master’s, and you don’t have to take extra credits or anything.” Brad goes into great detail about why he choose Southeast and how it played into his long term goals:

The sport medicine program is one of the best in the state. They compete with [university omitted] for the best sport medicine program in the state and they argue back and forth on who’s better. So, you know, I could have gone to [university omitted] and stayed up there or I could have come down here to Southeast. And the thing with Southeast is that the top five students out of the sports medicine program are an automatic shoe-in at [university omitted] for their physical therapy school.

Brad’s original goal was to finish in the top five of his class so that he could have one of the spots for PT school, but now realizes that is no longer an option after earning a couple low marks.

**Theme: Academic Experience**

**The transfer process.** All of the veterans in the study described the transfer application process as relatively simple. This is not surprising given that the average number of times the participants in the study engaged in the transfer process was 2.28, with the highest being four. Several of the veterans—Zane, Jennifer, Brian, and Jacob—completed the application process online; Jacob explained that “the transfer from schools wasn’t really too difficult. It was just a matter of filling out the right stuff online, all the right documents, and a lot of it took care of itself…” Jacob’s description of the process is fairly accurate, especially for individuals who have experienced a college transfer. After completing the online application, for which there is no fee for veterans, they just need to submit copies of their transcripts from previous schools, and as long as they have at least a 2.0 GPA, they are admitted. If the veteran’s GPA is below a 2.0,
admissions counselors have to take a more in-depth approach in reviewing their application, which often means factoring in how long ago the veteran attempted school and the number of years he or she had in service. Sometimes the veteran is given the benefit of the doubt and admitted, taking into consideration the transformative power that military service has been known to have on individuals, molding them to be responsible, disciplined, and focused, all of which are good characteristics of a successful student.

Several times a year Southeast hosts a Transfer Day event, which allows interested students to bring in their transcripts, apply, and get admitted, advised, and enrolled all in the same day if all of their paperwork is in order. Both Ken and Vick took advantage of this opportunity. Vick was really pleased with his experience; he said of the person who assisted him, “He went out of his way to get me done in two weeks. And that was really surprising.” Vick went on to say, “I was already approved actually the day that I went in; he got me approved the day I was in but the paperwork just had to go through. So he rushed the paperwork through and got that done.” Ken said, “It was cool because they clustered everything. All the things you had to get done you could do in a day and I like that.” Transfer Days seems to be a good option, especially for individuals who have a family or job and find it difficult to come to campus during the workday or even for people who just like to handle things quickly.

Tanya decided to take a more personal approach, even though it was the fourth school that she has attended. Tonya applied online but also made sure she contacted the veteran services’ office and connected with the people in her program. Tonya initially thought that she “was going to have a tough time” but the process was easier than she expected. She said, “I think I just took the opportunity as far as getting to know the individual that would be working on my paperwork. I preferred to go talk to them personally.” Tonya said that being able to talk to
someone who was knowledgeable about veterans’ benefits played a substantial role in her decision to apply to Southeast, as she had a difficult time contacting people at other schools.

**Transfer student orientation.** After students are enrolled at Southeast, they have the option to attend transfer student orientation. The majority of the veterans—Brad, Brian, Derek, Marcia, Robert, Travis, Vick, and Zane—choose not to attend the orientation. There were various reasons why they did not attend: they weren’t a traditional student (Travis), they weren’t a commuter student (Vick), or their advisor told them that they didn’t need to attend (Derek). Although they didn’t attend orientation, it is likely that they would have all benefited because as Derek explained, the process of getting familiar with a new school can be rather daunting:

> It was basically just kind of like jumping off a diving board with a blindfold on. I mean, like I said, luckily I’ve had enough experience that I could figure out how to register for classes. I could figure out what classes I needed and everything like that.

Jacob, Jennifer, and Rosa all attended one of the various programs offered by Southeast to help familiarize them with the campus, which they found to be useful. Rosa said that attending the orientation was worthwhile and a positive experience: “I forget what it’s called, but it was excellent, so I didn’t feel like I’m going to go to the first day of school and be lost, like going to kindergarten.” This initial introduction to the university and the services that are available is likely why Rosa took advantage of the services, unlike most of the veterans who knew little about anything on campus outside of their classes.

Although veterans indicated that the transfer process went relatively smoothly, it wasn’t without issue. There were very few issues that surfaced relative to the actual transfer processes, but Derek mentioned that he initially had issues with his GI Benefits not being processed in a timely manner. He recalled filling his 22-1995, which is a form required by the VA when a
student changes schools, and the Form 1, which is a campus form used to certify the veteran for their GI Bill benefits, six months before the semester started. Derek said that he realized that he had not been certified and had to wait at least a month or two after his classes started before the school was paid and before receiving his housing allowance. Derek said, “Being the type of person that likes to get the paperwork in ahead of time so that there’s enough leeway, I was a little angry…suddenly showing up to find out that none of the paperwork was processed.” Fortunately, Derek hasn’t had any more benefit-related issues and is actually now a work-study student in the Veteran Services Office, where he sees firsthand how the things operate.

Jennifer said that although she has been pleased with her experience at Southeast, she had an issue with her military transcripts being evaluated when she first transferred. Jennifer said that she was upset that nothing from her military transcripts transferred in and she didn’t believe that to be correct. She stated that she contacted the school and they told her that her transcripts were evaluated; she just wasn’t receiving any credit. This explanation was apparently incorrect because by the end of her first semester she went from seventeen to seventy-nine credits. “I was like oh, so apparently they did transfer. So it just took a while. But since that, I mean, I’ve had absolutely no issues.”

**Academic performance.** The overwhelming majority of the veterans involved in the study have done very well academically. Out of the 14 participants in the study, 10 of the veterans have higher than a 3.00 GPA, and of the remaining four veterans, three have over a 2.0; one participant wished not to respond. Most of the veterans attribute their classroom success to hard work. Brian and Jennifer both noted that they’ve had more success with their education now than they did when they went to college right out of high school. Jennifer said,
I’ve been pleasantly surprised because, like I said, I was a horrible student in high school. Like I was atrocious [Laughter]. And then I was worried that I wasn’t gonna be able to – I was worried that I was gonna have the same experience in college here as what I had had in my home country and based on how bad I was in like high school, but it’s not been that way at all. I don’t know why. I just kinda think that my work ethic has probably changed, and I’m, you know, more dedicated to it now.

Although many of the veterans have done well, not all of their classes here have necessarily been a cakewalk, and Brad, Marcia, and Vick note having a couple of difficult semesters. Brad said, “My grade point average is very misleading here. I got like a 3.4 GPA. But I had a 4.0 the first year I was here. So that tells you how the past year has been doing for me.” Marcia also indicated having a difficult semester and felt as if she wasn’t giving her best effort but is positive that she will do better. “This is the only semester where I felt like I wasn’t contributing 110 percent…I didn't start off strong but I can finish a little bit better.”

It is fairly easy to make the assertion that the reason Brian, Ken, Jennifer didn’t have much success at their first attempt at college was because they didn’t really want to be there. It was not that they weren’t mature enough or academically capable, but that they needed something different in their lives at that time and the military provided them with another option. Jennifer and Ken both stated that they didn’t want to be in school at that time and it was reflected in their performance. For Brian, college was not necessarily the best place for him to be at that time because his passion was in music and performing, which the Navy provided.

Two other students, Robert and Zane, indicated that things weren’t going as well as they had in the past. When Robert was at the community college, he was a good student by their
standards but said that he would have done things differently if given the opportunity to do it again:

Personally, I wish I’d come to [Southeast] instead of going to the community college. Not that the community college is not a good school, but there are a couple of classes that I took at the community college that I got As in, and now when I take the second part of that class at Southeast, there’s something missing, you know. I shouldn’t have gotten an A or – well, I shouldn’t have gotten an A because when I was at the community college, I was on the dean’s list the whole time I was there. There was one particular class I took where I know that I shouldn’t have passed. There was no way, no how, and I got a C, and I’m thinking well, how did this happen? Well, again, that’s one of those classes that has come back to bite me here, you know. And it wasn’t that I thought I was getting away with something slick, you know. I was just glad to be finished with the class [Laughter].

But I just thought well, maybe once I get there, I’d be able to get through it.

Robert said that he struggled with the beginning math courses, which a lot of returning students find difficult. So in order to get back on track, Robert was contemplating reducing his course load to help make it through the math courses.

Zane expressed that things were now different in school after returning home from her deployment, which may be why she choose not to provide any information relative to her GPA. Zane expressed that she was doing well in school,

I was doing perfect – like perfect in ’09, and then I deployed. And then I came back, and I found myself having – I don’t know – just problems learning, just problems like listening. I found myself zoning out a lot. So I had to go register at – what’s the name? That health center. I don’t know. My little condition [PTSD] or whatever, I guess – to
seek more help than what I normally would…Now I find myself – it’s harder to just learn than before.

Unfortunately, Zane decided to withdraw from Southeast semester for both academic and personal issues, and her current status in the National Guard has not been determined.

**Professor interaction.** Almost all of the participants in the study described their overall experience working and interacting with faculty members as positive, even though several of them have encountered issues. They believed that the majority of the professors are approachable, willing to help, and even open to criticism. Travis made it simple, expressing that he’s had a good experience approaching faculty members and stating that a bad experience, "would be if I wanted to talk to them and they turned me down. You know, that would be an awful experience. Or if they ever told me they were too busy, that wouldn’t be a good experience.” Robert stated, “I think that, you know, 85% of the professors that I’ve encountered are on the ball and they’re really helpful. And the others [15%] they may be helpful, but for whatever reason, I didn’t need their help.”

Jennifer came in with preconceived notions of how the faculty would be, likely due to her experience with college overseas. Jennifer said, “I thought that the relationship between professors and students was gonna be very, very different from what it is. And I like the fact that the professors and, you know, the staff, in general, are very approachable.” Jennifer expressed again that she was having a very positive experience, especially given the fact that she expected the professors to “talk down to people, and they don’t.”

Derek expressed that he too has had mostly positive experiences with faculty members, especially the ones in his program. Students often times form closer relationships with the faculty members in their program than with those in the general studies program, as class sizes
are often smaller and faculty members tend to teach multiple courses within the program. Derek said that he has had an issue with only one professor at the university; other than that he hasn’t had any complaints.

I would say the construction management program’s great about that. I mean all of my professors there that I’ve had are very approachable. I can just go up and say, you know, I don’t have to use the general formalities of calling someone “Doctor” every time I speak to them. But just, you know, very nice, very friendly, help you figure out what you need and take care…”

Ken talked about the personal relationships that he’s formed with faculty members and that he’s Facebook friends with about three of them and they regularly comment on each other’s page. Vick says he likes the fact that he’s had professors who have been more personal and have put in the extra effort to insure that students know that they are there to help and that they actually care about their well-being. “My teachers this semester and the last semester were very, very supportive. They actually emailed me and cared about the things that were going on.” Vick also stated,

My teachers are actually -- even the one that failed me, she’s really nice to me whenever I see her. Most of my teachers tell me no matter what it is to come see them. I’ve had four teachers that said come see them if I need any help, even if it isn’t their class later on down the road, they’ll help me with it. I found that, the fact that the teachers actually care about their students and they’re not looking at just numbers and stuff like that, I think that’s really awesome. I never had that at any college before, besides Bible College.

Rosa and Steve both like that they are able to approach and express their opinions with faculty even if it may not change the outcome of the situation. They both referenced age playing
a role in them believing they had the right to be upfront with their professors, and both expressed having out-of-classroom conversations with faculty members. Rosa described how she’s the type of person to express herself, which could be due to her 20 years of military service where she’s been responsible for the health and safety of thousands of troops. Rosa told how at times during her career she had to challenge the orders of senior officers, so confronting a faculty member is only natural. “I think younger students are shy, but me, I go talk to the professor, because what’s he going to do to me, they are about my age, who cares…as long as I speak to them professionally…” Rosa went on to say that, she has a pretty good rapport with her professors.

Steve, who is also a 20-year retiree, described a couple situations where he “expressed” himself to a faculty member, which didn’t necessarily change the professor’s opinion but they were able to express and acknowledge their differing views. Here Steve talks about a conversation that he had with a professor,

We kind of got into it a little bit and he’s like, “Why didn’t you come and talk to me?” He was like, “You should have come and talked to me.” He speaks broken English. I understand, but you’ve got to look at it from my point. I said, “I sent you two emails asking you a simple question and all I got back was negativity, so why would I want to come and talk to you then?” “No, no, but -.” I said, “I’m not gonna argue with you. I’m gonna tell you my side of the story. But yes, I should have come and talked to you, but I chose not to.”

Steve said that he doesn’t refer to this type of conversation as a confrontation or argument but it’s him expressing himself. Steve states, “Most of the instructors appreciate my candor, but they might not have done anything about it, but most of them appreciate my input…” As stated earlier, both Rosa and Steve are retirees and felt free to express their views to faculty.
As stated previously, not all of the interactions that the participants have had with faculty members have been positive, even though it summarizes their overall experience. Over half of the participants in the study talked about an unpleasant experience either within a class or one-on-one with a professor. Jennifer, Vick, and Steve talked about experiences that they had with foreign professors and how their weakness in the English language created bad classroom experiences. Jennifer said that she had one or two faculty members whom she wasn’t impressed with. She mentioned about her first class at Southeast, “I was so worried that it was gonna be typical [laughter], but luckily it wasn’t. I mean, she was just the worst [Laughter]. It was awful. She spoke basically broken English, and she was teaching a public administration class.” She went on to say that if a student raised a question because they couldn’t understand something, “she would change what she was saying to go along with what the student was saying.” Vick also stated that he had a professor who didn’t speak English very well. He said that he had a Japanese professor who admitted she was trying her best to learn but struggled with some of the language. He said, “She didn't know how to teach us some things because she didn't understand how to translate that from her Japanese to American. She knew what she was doing; she was very intelligent but she had a language barrier.” Vick mentioned that she improved as the semester went on, but it took him and a couple other students talking to the department head, who ended up helping her improve her method of delivery. Vick believed that he would have pulled off at least a half grader higher under different conditions. It is clear that neither Vick or Jennifer had a an issue with the fact that the professors were foreigners, especially given that Jennifer is a foreigner herself, but it was with the professor’s inability to confidently communicate the course content.
Several of the veterans had no problems expressing their feelings to their department heads or to faculty members directly when they didn’t agree with what a professor said or did within the classroom environment. Robert, Brad, Steve, and Tonya all have had to confront a faculty member on at least one occasion. Steve believes that sometimes it takes a person like him to go talk to the department head; as he states, “Kids aren’t gonna say anything. If they have a conflict with a teacher or if they’re not getting a good grade, what do you think they’re gonna do?”

Steve recognizes that his age or maybe confidence, or expressiveness, allows him to address professors in a way that most young traditional students would shy away from. Robert described a situation where a professor told him that he was wasting time and money because he had no intention of working full-time after he completed his degree, partially because he wasn’t showing much excitement about her course. Robert expressed to her that, “…maybe it’s a waste to you, you know, but I’m not gung-ho about the subject the way you are and I don’t want to act like I am. I just want to get through the course.”

Tonya and Brad’s experiences were quite different as the altercations were personal and resulted in a heated exchange or brought back unpleasant memories. Tonya mentioned that she just had to talk to the department head the other day about a professor that she says is “very mean.” She described the professor’s behavior as inappropriate, saying that he “literally yelled at a student to the point it was humiliating. Down talking to him like he was a child. It was pretty bad. To the point where after class the guy was talking to me just broke out crying.” Tonya said that the professor had told the department head about the situation and didn’t apologize, but was apologetic about what happened. Tonya went on to say,
I thought maybe he was a racist, played the race card. Because he’s mean, it seems like to the minority students, and I’m the only black female in there, so I get some of the little attitude, but I think it’s just mainly he’s frustrated with people who ask a lot of questions. And I like to ask questions a lot, and I don’t think he likes that.

Although the professor’s comments weren’t directly targeted at her that day, she felt that she needed to speak up. This situation reminded her of an unpleasant experience that she had with an anti-military professor while taking courses on base while she was in the military.

Brad’s experience was also pretty extreme, but it again reflects the comfort level that some of the participants have with expressing their opinion to faculty. Brad said that he’s had both good and bad professors since he’s been at Southeast; he elaborated on an argument that he had with a chemistry teacher, prefacing his story by stating, “Sometimes I’m a little more vocal than I should be about situations and I'm working on that, kind of got a little anger problem. But I'm working on it.” He said that he just doesn’t like seeing staff doing things that are stupid and if he thinks something is stupid “I'm gonna let 'em know.” He said that he and the professor got into about the professor not allowing him to take his test at the disability center.

I wrote him an e-mail that – I said, “You better let me take it. Blah, blah, blah. I got a letter right here stating I'm disabled.” He gave me a hard time about it and then I wrote him a letter saying that I’d have his job. [Laughter] You know, just a real – it was actually a really forward letter. It wasn’t mean but it just got straight to the point and told him how it is and he gave me my spot over there at the. He was really finicky about people cheating and I kind of understand where he comes from. And then when I told him I was a disabled veteran he was in the Air Force. All of a sudden, we’re all talking
and having a good time now, you know. So that’s just the way it works. Sometimes your worst enemy becomes your best friend.

Although Brad didn’t handle his situation in the most appropriate way, his willingness to express his feelings to his professor ended up producing a good result.

Only two students, Ken and Derek, questioned the preparation of a faculty member and their ability to teach certain courses. Ken stated that he had a couple of teachers who weren’t good, who lacked social skills, and who didn’t really want to be there. He said, “Maybe they knew the material real well and that’s all they thought they needed to be an instructor or teacher, professor, but they were garbage.” Derek said that he would probably enjoy one of the classes that he’s currently in a lot more if the professor had any teaching skills. He said that the class discussions don’t relate to what they’re covering in class or even the exams. He doesn’t feel that he should be allowed to teach a class that is an important part of the major. Brian stated, “The general impression I get from everyone in the program (at least that I’ve spoken to) is that he’s just – he’s somewhat of a prick. And he definitely shows that…”

When you take into consideration all of the comments expressed about the faculty, both good and bad, the general consensus is that most of the faculty is very knowledgeable, approachable, and willing to help in any way possible. The veterans recognize that the few issues that they have had are isolated incidents and not indicative of their total experience at Southeast.

**Older students: I’m pushing 40.** One of the themes that emerged was the consciousness of being an older student on campus; 10 out of the 14 participants mentioned something relative to age and how either their age affected how they perceived others or how age plays a role in their ability to fit in on campus.
Steve is easily the most outspoken and direct participant in the study and made several comments throughout the interview addressing issues related to the younger students, or “kids,” as he commonly refers to them. Steve mentioned a situation that happened in his math class where one of the students was complaining about not understanding what was going on in the class,

I told her to shut up. She was sitting there whining… she sat there reading Vogue and texting on her frickin’ phone and Facebook and then she sat there and bitched about how, “I just don’t get this.” And I turned around and said, “Well, maybe if you’d just shut the hell up and stop reading your magazine and paying attention to what the hell is going on, you’d frickin’ learn it.” She didn’t like that very much. She ended up dropping the class.

But that’s what I’m saying. If you don’t apply yourself, no, you’re not gonna do well. I understand totally how it is, because when I was young, woo, you know? But they’re kids. I just remember that they’re kids.

Although he acknowledges that they are “kids,” he is very critical of them. This could correlate with the fact that he was a drill sergeant and worked with a lot kids who were around the same age as his classroom peers. One similarity that his younger peers share with the average recruit is that at this age they are generally at their worst, but where they differ is that the recruits are at least compliant and respectful, which seemed to be lacking with this student in class.

Derek mentioned that he has a hard time relating to younger students and although he’s twenty-five himself, his upbringing and military experiences have made him a man beyond his years. Derek stated, “I feel like a 40-year-old trapped in a 25-year-olds body.” He said that when he interacts with the traditional-aged student population he feels like an old man. Derek said that because of this, “I’m not terribly social when it comes to the college environment.”
Other students like Brian, Travis, and Jennifer found it difficult to fit in and felt out of place. Brian, a 45-year-old full-time student, mentioned that he’s been at Southeast for three years and the biggest issue he has is being an older student; he said, “I haven’t really gotten over feeling creepy walking around the campus… I’m still a guy, so there’s plenty of eye candy. But it’s trying to not look or anything like that. You know? Just going from class to class.” Travis put it this way,

I’m going to be honest with you. Sometimes I feel like I’m lost in time, which is not that bad because I’m seeing a little older people [on campus]. You know, it makes me feel a little bit better. But sometimes, I’ll see the traditional students. Eighteen. Their fresh, pearly white eyes. You know what I mean? Just hopping along on campus, and then I think man, I’ve got to finish and get into the other program [master’s program], because it starts reminding me. You know what I mean? And I got the boyish good looks so I can kind of blend in there a little bit, but then sometimes they know you’re not one of them.

They are like this guy, who’s he? This is a square, man. He’s not even twenty. You know. Travis didn’t want to feel or be treated as if he were old by other students. He mentioned that he keeps sweats in the car so that after he left work he could dress down and look more like the traditional student, rather than sit in the class with a shirt and tie on. Neither Brian nor Travis thought of themselves as old, but their environment told them differently. For Brian, the university can be a very lonely place given that he doesn’t really identify with being a veteran and as an older student feels out of place. Luckily, Brian has had the opportunity to play with the school band, which is something he truly enjoys.

Rosa, Robert, and Vick all had really good experience interacting with younger students. Robert said the only thing he runs into being an older is that students typically want him to be the
group leader, which he doesn’t like. Vick said that the younger students accepted him and he thought it was cool. He said that it was different from his last school where he was one of the few older students. He said it’s been different at Southeast because there are a lot of older students and all pretty much “mesh.” Vick stated, “I don't go out and party with them or anything like that but when we're in the classrooms and they treat me just as their equal and aren't afraid to talk to me or get to know me or whatever.”

Rosa said she worried about how the students would respond to her being in class: "It was just things that naturally, you would go through saying, wow, they probably think I’m old as the hills,” but she didn’t have any problems at all and actually there were students in the class who may have even been older than she. She said the students have really treated her well, what’s really nice is when your cell phone rings or you get an email and it’s a student in your class asking for your opinion or wanting to know, can we get together to study this? I’m like, that is such, they don’t realize it, but that is, that’s a good feeling to know that they respect or they want to hear what you think or what the problem is... I run into students, sometimes we sit down and talk and sometimes I look back and I go, wow, I don’t feel like I’m 54. I feel like I’m just a student. You know what I mean? I’m a mom. I went to the military, you know…but everything has been pretty receptive, people want to hear about what I did in the military or people who were in the military ask me advice.

Steve, who has been very critical of younger students, expresses that he has issues with some of the older students as well. He said that older students often expect for things to always come easy for them; “Some of the classes are supposed to be hard. I think some of the older people get pissed off. ‘I’m not used to not getting an A.’ Because you’re taking bullshit classes!”
Steve believes in working hard to be successful and said that often times both young and old students don’t put enough effort into their studies to perform well.

**Classroom experiences.** When participants described their academic experience at Southeast, the term “challenging” was commonly used. Seven of the 14 participants claimed that the course work had been challenging; some made it specific to their major courses, and others were just speaking in general. Several of the participants appreciated the fact that the courses required them to work hard to be successful. Vick said that several of his courses have been challenging and that this semester his professors have pushed him “to go above and beyond.” Vick went on to say, “I think they really push diversity to pull you out of your comfort zone and challenge you. I think that’s pretty cool…Like I said the classes are challenging. They’re not impossible to reach; most of the teachers have set up the syllabus so you know what to expect.”

Derek, Jacob, and Steve all acknowledge that some of the coursework is challenging but they like it. Steve said,

I kind of appreciate that a little bit, that they make it hard, because it makes you work for it. Yeah, a lot of kids will go up on the website and rate your teacher. I don’t do that. They find out what teachers students don’t like, because they make it challenging, so they don’t take them. But to each their own. I don’t want an easy grade. I want to do the work. I want to get credit for what I do. If I get an “A,” I get an “A.” If I get a “C,” I get a “C.” Would I like an “A”? Yes. But am I learning the information and probably gonna retain more, because I’m working hard? Yeah.

Brian said that things are a lot easier as a full-time student than they were while he was trying to juggle classes at Popular University and playing in the Navy Band. Even though things have been easier at Southeast, Brian still states that the courses have been challenging. Travis
noted that the courses have challenged him but he doesn’t think that Southeast’s curriculum is on the same level as the Ivy League schools or Big U’s throughout the country. Travis noted that the courses at Southeast are doable, which is one of the reasons he said he selected it. “I don’t know the curriculum across the nation, but I know there are more prestigious colleges and universities as well. If I’d gone to – I don’t know, Princeton, Yale, or Harvard, it might be a little bit difficult I imagine.”

More than half of the veterans responded that they like the fact that the courses are challenging and that they push them, which for many was the allure of the military. “Be all you can be,” “Army strong,” “the few, the proud,” and “aim high” are all military slogans, which imply that in order to be the best you’re going to have to go through something but at the end of the day you are better for it.

**The military advantage or not.** Tonya and Marcia both talked about the impact that the military had on their academic adjustment to Southeast. They both referenced how attention to detail, one principle that every branch of the military adheres to, affected their ability to get into the flow of things in the classroom. Marcia transferred in from Officer University where every assignment had to be in the correct format, in the right folder, in the correct order, and, most importantly, everything had to be in on time, which was one thing that was different about Southeast. Marcia said that, “If you didn’t finish your work on time or something like that, then they would contact your TAC officer and you would get some disciplinary orders...so it’s just a carryover thing where I still feel like I need to get my work in on time even if it’s not up to par.” Marcia had to realize that although there are assignment deadlines at Southeast, the penalties for turning work in late was not as severe as they were at Officer University. However, Marcia did
note that although she had to learn how to relax, her professors appreciated the fact that she followed the assignment details/instructions to the letter.

Tonya’s military conditioning also made her transition more difficult; she described her first semester at Southeast as being stressed out.

It was hard just as far as getting that military mindset of how everything’s supposed to be done a certain way. Get it done. Having it done on time. That was hard for me. You know? But in a nutshell, I guess I got over it. I had to figure out that I don’t have to be as anal. Assignments. Like okay, if the teacher wanted something done, I had to do it a certain way, and I had to relax. I had to learn how to relax and not be so technical on everything. I had to go speak to the professor just to know that okay, it doesn’t need to be done like so – I needed to get the military out of my brain. Does that make sense? I didn’t need to be so militant about everything. So I had to literally personally talk to the professor in order to understand that things didn’t need to be as technical as I was making it…I was stressing myself out. So being that I was just getting stressed out so easily, and I was stressing over everything, I needed to figure out another route. So then going and talking to the professors or whatever, that kind of helped me figure out things that I needed to do. Especially when it came to Biology classes…Professor [omitted], she helped me out a lot. She was very – what’s the word? I can’t even think of a word to describe her right now. But she helped me a lot just as far as not stroking my ego, but calming me down. Like okay, you don’t technically need to do it like this. When I say do this, doesn’t mean you have to be so anal about it.

Marcia and Tonya were both conditioned to follow instructions, as the military has a very systematic way of performing almost every work-related task. Marcia’s and Tonya’s experiences
highlight the fact that there may be some level of military “deprogramming” necessary to better assimilate into less structured environments. Marcia and Tonya found out that the military’s attention to detail is very different than the civilian world.

**Hard work and dedication.** Jennifer and Robert both attribute their success in the classroom to being dedicated and focused. Robert noted the benefits of going to college at this stage in his life rather than 30 years ago, because now he’s “more focused.” Robert said, “The work is not hard, it’s just busy work, but I think there’s a degree of appreciation being 52 and still trying to graduate. I’m on a pace to graduate, you know, when I’m 54…”

Jennifer, who said that she was horrible in school, noted that she’s done well and the only real issue she’s had has been with the math courses. She said, “You know, I’m just not good at math, I’m never gonna be good at math.” She said that the math department told her that it would be easier to take it at a community college and “they were right.” Math courses aside, Jennifer was able to graduate from her program in fifteen months.

Rosa also stated the math and statistics were areas she struggled with and had to use the math labs on campus, adding, “They know me by heart.” Rosa expressed not only that she struggles with math but also how she shares it with her son, who has also been a part of this process. Rosa said that her son loves math and he’ll say to her, “Mom, it’s easy, all you got to do is this.” Rosa also said that he’ll tell her that he understands why she struggles with certain concepts and introduced her to the wonderful world of Google.

**Formula for success.**

I’ll be honest with you, a lot of times I’d pass these classes because of my communication with the faculty members. Because what I would do – and I’m not ashamed, I don’t care about being cool in class, man. You know what I mean? Like when
class is over, I’m hollering at the teacher for a minute. To reiterate and to make sure that
I’m understanding something that seems very simple. You know what I mean? And I
mean I’m talking to them so much they’re going to get tired of me, but I’m going to make
sure so they know who I am. (Travis)
Travis said that he learned early how to be successful in the classroom, or at least what works for
him. He admits that his grade point average is around a 2.7 or 2.8, but he said, “Don’t get me
wrong, I have higher expectations for myself. I mean, I need to get that three” but also indicated
that school isn’t the only thing that he’s doing; he has a full-time job and a lot going on.
…after a while, you figure out yourself. I don’t know when it happens. Different people,
different times. But you figure it out. Like you know, you work to your experience. You
dress to your experience. You talk to your experience. You present to your experience.
And you go to school to your experience. I figured out – I don’t know when it happened,
but I figured out that I’m good at communicating with people, and talking to them… So I
figured it out, you know what I mean?
Travis said that being deployed helped him become more professional about school and loosen
up; he said that he’s not uptight like he used to be. “I almost got killed twice, man, so I’m not –
you know what I mean? There are a lot of things I’m not – like school, I’m happy about doing
this rather than what I could be doing.”
Like Travis, things have been better academically for Derek after returning from his
deployment.
I attribute the fact that my grades have improved to where they’re not quite where they
should be, but close, strictly based on that deployment and the fact that it kind of snapped
my head on straight. When I had to fill out my statement for Big State University of why
I think I should go there, I told them – if you look at my transcripts pre- and post-deployment, you’re looking at a completely different person because that deployment taught me what I wanted to do, where I wanted to do it, and what it was going to take to accomplish it. And I attribute that success entirely towards being a veteran and doing the things that I had to do.

Life in a combat zone forces you to grow up quickly and place things in their proper perspective. As Travis said, he could be in a worse place, which means in an environment where he has to be on guard 100% of the time or you may end up in a situation where your life is at risk, which he knows firsthand after falling asleep at the wheel in a busy intersection in Iraq and nearly being shot. For Derek and Travis, their deployment was a wake-up call, but for Zane it was the opposite.

Zane, like Travis and Derek, also said things weren’t the same after returning home from her deployment, but they weren’t for the better. Zane said if she didn’t experience and see what she did during her deployment things would have been different for her. Also, if she hadn’t experienced such a tragic ordeal [Zane requested that the details about the incident be removed], “I would have come back untouched, unharmed, untarnished, without anything. But I don't know. It was like that thing just – it just ruined everything.” She said that the transition coming back to school was difficult for her. She said that when you’re deployed, basically all you have to do is be alert, but when you go back to school things are different

You got to be alert in class. You got to do homework. You got to study. I don't know – it was just an eye-opener. When I was doing it, I was like, “I really did this before?” I don't know. It was just so much harder.
**Academic organizations.** Three of the 14 participants—Brian, Jennifer, and Jacob—stated that they are members of academic organizations that are associated with their majors, while three others said they were interested in joining. The remaining participants stated they weren’t interested or were involved in other off-campus activities. Jennifer said that she was a member of Pi Kappa Phi but wasn’t really active. She said that she joined the organization to try to meet people in the area, “because that was me, you know, thinking at the time that I was being unsociable [Laughter].” Brian, an information assurance major, mentioned that he joined two student academic organizations, High Tech Crime Investigators and ISACA (Information Systems Audit and Control Association), and Jacob said that he’s a member of the Southeast Filmmakers Association and is heavily involved.

Rosa, Travis, and Steve all mentioned that they were interested in joining an organization. Steve said that he thought about joining one of the business organizations, because he thought it might help with networking. Travis mentioned that he hasn’t joined an organization yet, but he’s done some volunteering. Rosa expressed an interest in the Student Human Resource Management organization, but the meeting hours didn’t work for her. Aside from school, Rosa has a job and a young child who is also involved in extracurricular activities, so as she stated, “I have to balance it all out…I wanted to, but no time. I have to work. I have kids. I have grandkids. I really did want to, but it didn’t fit it in.” For veterans who commute or have other off-campus responsibilities, participation in both academic and social organizations can be difficult given they are typically on campus only during class hours and aren’t usually willing to return for an organization meeting or campus event. Although they were interested in joining organization, they had to prioritize, or as Rosa stated, “balance” school with other outside responsibilities.
Tonya said that she doesn’t have the time to participate; she only has time to go to school and work, and Vick wasn’t interested in joining anything, saying that he’s focused on church, home, and school, which for him are all very important. Zane, on the other hand, who is more withdrawn, said that prior to her deployment to Iraq, she was very involved with academic organizations and clubs, mentioning that, “I was part of the accounting club. I was about to be part of Beta Alpha Psi, which is the honor society for accounting. I was part of Circle K International…I did the Humane Society too.” Now that she has returned, her life primarily revolves around work and school.

Theme: Social Experience

I don’t need to tattoo the university’s initials on my chest. Just about all of the veterans in the study described themselves as not being sociable. Some of them attributed their lack of involvement on campus to age and others to time. A couple of the veterans had no desire to engage with the university outside of the classroom at all.

Jacob, a Film and Electronic Media major, associated being social to the military: “Well, it’s kind of like the military. If we’re in study groups and things like that, I’ll kind of keep that relationship.” Although Jacob has met a couple friends in his program who are around his age, he said that his goal is to get through classes and get his degree.

Derek lives in an apartment complex right across the street from campus, but he doesn’t participate in any on campus events. Derek is one of four participants who has worked or is currently working as a work-study student in the Veteran Services Office. Derek says that he spends most of his time “in the office working, being in class, or managing a small business in town. That’s 99 percent of my time right there. If I had free time I wouldn’t know what to do with it.” Derek admitted that he wasn’t “terribly social” on campus because he doesn’t
necessarily fit in with typical college students, which is common among the veterans. Derek noted that it’s a product of both his childhood and military experience.

Basically, my life’s history since the time I was about 16 years old: I was kicked out of the house and pretty much have raised myself. I lived in some crappy situations, lived in some good situations. Feel like I was kind of forced to grow up a little earlier than I planned and I feel like when I look at the average student on campus I just see an immature kid that I have no way of relating to…I mean it’s kind of hard to take someone seriously who’s just out of high school, been in college for a year and is just sitting back enjoying life, going to class. I kind of look at them, I feel that – to a degree, I kind of look down on them. But for me it’s harder to take someone like that seriously, who has no real-world experience, that hasn’t had to deal with the crap that a lot of us have had to deal with.

Zane and Brad both mentioned their Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a reason why they don’t socially engage with university.

I don’t feel I’m in the right mind for it. I don't know. Just all the time I had to be somewhere [when she was involved]. And then if something happened to me and people are like “she’s weird.” So I just stick to what I know. You know? People that - if I start looking – you know what I’m saying? Everybody is – “Okay. We know what’s going on.” Nah. I feel more comfortable just being around veterans and people that are going through the same situation as me.

Zane mentioned that it’s good that Southeast is set up the way it is; it makes it easy for her not to interact with anyone, as she can do just about everything online. She said that here at Southeast, “You can literally be the type of student you want to be. Like you can be one of those students
that go to class and go home, or you can be the social one…So my personality is go to class, go home.”

Brad, who is also suffering from PTSD, said that he’s been to a couple of veteran-sponsored events on campus and a basketball game, but that’s about it. Brad mentioned that he has a pretty high disability rating through the VA for his PTSD, so “social wise I don’t really talk to people. And if I do, I don’t feel comfortable talking to them. I feel I’m different than others.” Brad mentioned that when he lived with his mom he would be around his younger brother’s friends and he would talk to them if they came over and that was his social life at that time. He said that he no longer lives at home and things are different for him now; he has a girlfriend whom he hangs out with, mostly at the house. He said that he talks to his neighbor and he will occasionally come over to watch a football game. He said that when he does hang out it’s typically with one or two people, “not in big crowds.” Brad said when he was at his previous school he did a lot of drinking and hanging around the party group, because he worked in a bar. He said when he got to Southeast, “I found myself not moving towards that direction. I found myself getting away from alcohol and just staying away from that type of people. Get you in trouble. Right now I mean I’m happy with the way things are.”

Tonya also attributed part of her lack of desire to be involved on campus to military experiences, aside from not having the time to participate. When Tonya was in the military she had some bad experiences that she chose not to elaborate on but just said that, “…certain branches are more you take care of your own [look out for each other]. And the Air Force is not really like that to me.” Tonya explains her decision not to get involved:

I don’t have really a social life. There’s nothing going on socially. Because I’m so focused I guess. I’m just really goal-oriented that I don’t – I prefer not to have a social
life, or not to be socially involved because I think that would really – sometimes your
goals get detoured once you let people in. And I’m the type of person that I don’t like to
let people in… It’s a trust issue I guess I’ve had since the military. I don’t know… I mean
my military career wasn’t a horrible career, but I just had trust issues from it I guess you
could say.

Brian said that being an older student, “I’m feeling a little awkward on campus, so I kind of keep
to myself.” This is when Brian isn’t assisting the music majors with their recitals and the band.

Robert, who is also an older student, said that he’s in the College of Education, which is mostly
females, “So I don’t want to appear to come on to someone or offend anyone. It’s not that I’m
antisocial, but it’s sort of like you know, only speak when spoken to, you know.” Robert also
stated, “I’ve always kept my personal life separate from my work life, and this here is like work
to me because if you don’t then there is no difference.” Robert also stated,

I don’t think I’ll ever attend any of the functions. Maybe it’s my age, you know. I
wouldn’t go to a football game, and I love football, you know. I may go to a swim meet,
but I guess not because I haven’t been to one.

Travis, unlike the other combat veterans, mentioned that he does hang out occasionally
with some of the students; he stated “You’re going to laugh as this” but when he does go to a
party, “I’ve got to tone it down a little bit. I’ll dress down. I’ll try to bring my IQ and my
maturity level down, and then it’s kind of like you can be more accepted.” He mentioned that
although it was crazy, it was a good experience because he missed out on that the first time he
went to college.

Jennifer and Marcia both initially made a conscious decision not to be social. Jennifer
stated that, “I had a period of time in which I had to get this done, and I needed – you know I
was concentrating on that and because of that, I kind a felt like I made the choice to not be so social.” Marcia said that after leaving Officer University she was mad and wasn’t interested in socializing; she said she was more focused on “getting my mind and body back to the way I felt I should be.” With time, both Marcia and Jennifer felt the need to get involved; Jennifer said that it was while attending a seminar that focused on female veterans expressing how after they get out of the military they find it difficult to find friends who weren’t in the military. She said, “I actually realized that I’m actually kind of that person because all my friends that I talk to on a regular basis and I see regularly are people that I was in the military with or [who] have also served…” Jennifer said that the seminar made her decide to try to be more social, so she joined the academic honor society and tried other things like taking classes she thought would help.

I made a point to take classes that are more – like I’m taking a swing dance class because I know that that’s something where I get to meet people more and I go to the rec and I do the classes there. And that’s a way for me to be a little bit more social and meet people. But I always feel like I’m the old one there. So, I mean, it’s not awkward. It’s just what typical students want to do is not what I want to be doing.

Marcia said this year, “I’m so happy for myself. I go to lot of events; I’m involved this semester...” She said that she joined a social organization: “I just wanted people to converse with. If I want to go out to a bar or a club or something, I want to be able to call this person up and be like do you want to go?” Marcia also believed that she needed to branch out a little more, because most sectors of work require you to be sociable on some level.

Steve, Vick, and Ken all have participated in a couple of campus events but said that their social life happens primarily off-campus: Vick with his family and church, Steve with his
girlfriend and kid, and Ken with his wife and friends. Ken said that he made one friend on campus who was in the Marine Corps “He had been to Iraq. We kind of had some stuff in common. We were both about the same age and we both had this similar critique of most of our fellow students, so it was good.” When Ken was asked if he was socially attached to the university, he said not really but wasn’t sure if it was because he was a commuter, older student, or veteran. He said that an 18-year-old student is likely to bond with the university especially if they live on campus. He said that he’s already had his thing, “I was a Navy EOD tech. That was my thing. So at school, well, this is just my school. This is where I’m coming to learn and just get educated. I don’t need to tattoo the university’s initials on my chest.”

**Theme: Campus Climate**

**Military friendly.** Jennifer stated, “It was the reason I looked at Southeast, because it was advertised as a military friendly school.” She said that she couldn’t remember where she saw it advertised, but it was the reason she looked at Southeast and found out they’d take the credits from the tech school she attended. She said, “Southeast was the only one that I could get an answer from right away. If I had a question and I called, they would be able to tell me immediately...I wasn’t impressed with the other schools, to be honest.” Tonya also believed that Southeast was more responsive and knowledgeable about VA educational benefits.

Derek read an article in the paper that referenced Southeast as being a veteran-friendly school and said, “I consider Southeast to be veteran-friendly because Southeast’s one of the few I’ve dealt with that has a separate office devoted entirely to dealing with students who have VA educational benefits.” He said that he likes having someone who knows the benefits in and out and didn’t just read a 20-minute PowerPoint.
The students need somebody who, at least in some way, has an idea of what they’ve been through, and has an idea of what they want to do and how to accomplish it. And I think that’s the greatest thing about this university is that at least for me, it has this office. And that it has people here who are veterans who’ve been through the same things that the rest of the veterans that come in here have been through. And then they’ve also got the people here who know the system in and out and can help you when you’ve got questions.

Several other veterans referenced the fact that Southeast has an office specifically for veterans as one of the reasons they believed the school to be veteran-friendly. Brad said that the overall campus is good and very friendly to veterans; “You know, I go online and check things out too and I compare them to other schools.” Brad also stated that the campus has an ROTC department, and, as a result, there are always people walking around the university in uniform, so people are used to seeing and working with veterans.

Marcia also feels that Southeast is veteran-friendly and compares it to other schools. “I don’t want to bash any universities but with the more big name universities they’re not as perceptive of their student veterans as a smaller university could be.” Marcia also simply noted that “military friendly” to her meant that the school is trying to work more with veterans and their experiences in the military, which describes Southeast.

Travis and Jacob also thought highly of Southeast. Jacob’s opinion is that Southeast is “not too bad actually.” Jacob says that others may think differently about the curriculum, but he feels that overall, it’s a good experience. He also said, “It’s a pretty good experience to run into vets. If you don’t feel like you’re the only one, it’s nice.” Travis said that he likes the direction that the Veteran Services Office is going, adding, “I’m going to tell you right now, it’s only getting stronger. It’s only getting better.” Travis wasn’t really sure if the decision to create the
office was initiated by the school because they were concerned about their veterans or if it was for some other reason, saying, “I think there might have been some pressure on Southeast, because they don’t want the word to get out that we’re not a veteran-friendly university. Or we’re not supportive of that. But from what I see, it’s great.”

Ken and Steve both reflected on the past when responding, noting that the surrounding community hasn’t always been as welcoming to veterans as they have in recent years. Steve said of the community, “I knew that [city omitted], like Seattle, Washington, was a bunch of tree huggers, no smokers, and they don’t like military. But I’ve never really had any issues.” Ken also believed the university/community to be veteran-friendly:

I think it’s good. People today are pretty understanding. I don’t know if it’s the “Support the troops, don’t support the war,” or whatever popular catch phrase is out there. I think it’s you get support. I think people understand more. I mean obviously I wasn’t around for Vietnam or anything like that but it seems some of the stories you hear about some of the guys coming home from Vietnam and it’s just like we’re getting a lot more support and people are a lot more understanding of who we are and maybe what we’ve done.

Rosa mentioned that she often has veterans and soldiers in her classes, and there is always a sense of pride there. She said that it’s awesome “they have a place for us. And when I see a soldier and they haven’t been here [VSO], I tell them you haven’t gone there?” As for the school being a veteran-friendly environment, she said you have to open people’s eyes when you get the opportunity; “I think people are receptive here and they understand, they feel appreciative that you were a veteran.”

Every participant in the study described Southeast as veteran-friendly campus or at least indicated that they haven’t had any negative experiences as a result of being a veteran and feel
that it is highly unlikely to occur. Southeast has worked hard over the past couple of years to create a welcoming environment for veterans. As was mentioned previously, the university opened a Veteran Services Office, which was established to better meet the needs of their veteran student population as well as provide them with a home on campus. Prior to the establishment of the Veteran Services Office, services were provided out of the registrar’s office, which was more of a “business” environment.

I’m a veteran. The participants in the study said that they would most likely never come right out and say that they’re veterans; someone would either have to ask, or it would have to emerge via a class paper or presentation. A couple of the participants stated that they wouldn’t share it because they didn’t want any special treatment, positive or negative. All of the participants except for one felt that they would be received positively if they mentioned they’re veterans.

Brian, Rosa, Travis, and Jennifer all stated that they have shared the fact that they are a veteran in classes. Brian stated, “Usually when a class is first starting up, the professor will want us to get up, and talk about ourselves and what we were doing before and sometimes I’ll say, I was a Navy Musician…” Jennifer said, “It’s not just something that I just broadcast and say hey, I’m a veteran [laughter].” Jennifer said the only time she mentions that she’s a veteran is if it’s tied into a class assignment. Rosa, who is very proud of her veteran status, mentioned that people see her camouflaged bag and know. Like Brian and Jennifer, both Rosa and Travis said that it usually comes up in class. Rosa said that she spent 20 years in the service so that is where she’s had most of her experience with life. Travis stated, “I shared it in some of my courses. Especially right after I left Iraq because it was fresh in my mind, which it is still now… but I don’t just blatantly come out and say it, it has to flow.”
Jacob and Ken both mentioned that it might come up in a conversation but they don’t make it a point to share. Ken expressed that if he did share he believes that it would be viewed positively and said, “I don’t ever hide the fact that I’m a veteran but I don’t come out and say it, but that’s just me. I’m not like, “Hi, what’s up? Ken, EOD. How are you doing? Retired.”

Tonya, Vick, and Derek all had similar feelings on why they don’t share that they are veterans: They didn’t want to be treated special. Vick said he doesn’t share, “not at first, only because I don’t want special – well I mean I haven’t really had any special treatment being a veteran; never had any negative problems with anyone knowing I was a veteran either.” Tonya said that one of the reasons why she doesn’t share is that she doesn’t like how professors treat veterans differently. “I don’t like how they treat certain people. I don’t need to be favored, you know? I already had an experience with the guy overseas who was so antimilitary, I don’t want to have the same conflict with another professor.” Tonya doesn’t think that she would have that kind of experience at Southeast and said that she’s only witnessed favoritism towards veterans. She said that certain professors would allow them to take a quiz or test that they missed when they wouldn’t allow any other student to do it. Tonya also went on to say, “I don’t want to be held to a certain standard; sometimes people feel as though they have to give you something, preference. And I don’t want to feel that. I don’t want to make other people feel that way.”

Derek stated that he doesn’t acknowledge that he’s a veteran and doesn’t want to be treated differently because of it.

I would prefer to be treated like any other person walking down the street. I don’t want to be treated any differently. I don’t want to be looked at differently, and when I am, it makes me incredibly uncomfortable. So I don’t think it changes my expectations. I would prefer the school treat me like everybody else. But I know that my thought in that process
is probably in the minority. I can appreciate if the school wanted to make special exceptions and handle veterans differently, but me personally, I would prefer to be treated like every other person that applied.

Brad was the only participant that thought he might be treated negatively if he told professors that he was a veteran. Even though Brad is eligible to receive accommodations through the university’s disability services, he doesn’t always share that he’s a veteran unless he absolutely needs to, saying,

most of the teachers have been veteran-friendly, but I’ve caught a few that were, maybe biased towards the war or they’re extremely democratic or they make you feel like you’re in Vietnam or something, you know, coming back. You can actually sense some of the tension and some of the reactions with a very – there’s very few. I want to say like one or two percent of the teachers that would probably hold that against you if you told ‘em that, you have a disability or I’m a veteran here. It’s not in every case, you know, the way it seems where, “Hey, this guy’s a veteran. You know, let’s try and help this guy out.” That’s not the case in every situation. For the most part it is, but there are some out there that do not like veterans at all. And they do not – are not partial to this war. And you could sense it. A lot of the teachers I won’t even mention anything about it unless I feel it’s necessary to use my disability to my advantage like especially in the science classes. Like in the physics and chemistry when I take the tests it takes me a lot longer to figure out the math problems that are involved so I need some extra time. If you want me to have a degree, you’ll give me some extra time.
Theme: Veteran’s Benefits

The term veteran’s benefits was used because the majority of the participants in the study are using the Post 9/11 GI Bill, but there are three veterans using Vocational Rehabilitation to pay for their education at Southeast. Vocational Rehabilitation is a program designed to train disabled veterans for employment in areas conducive to their disability.

Post 9/11 GI Bill. Derek, Marcia, and Zane all said that the Post 9/11 GI Bill has made things easier for them to go to school. Derek stated that before he got deployed he was only getting Chapter 1606. “To me it felt like kind of a joke. It’s like here I am paying thousands of dollars for commission, and I’m getting like a max of a thousand a month just as a – it’s like that’s not really an educational benefit.” Chapter 1606 is a benefit for the National Guard and Reserve component of the military and is the lowest level of educational benefits that a servicemember can receive, primarily because they’ve had no active service. Derek’s benefits increased as a result of his deployment because he became eligible for the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Although his benefits increased, he’s still not in agreement with how the benefits are structured.

The new GI Bill I’d say is a major improvement but I think at the same time it’s also hindrance because it’s designed more to help active duty soldiers. You’ve got Reserve soldiers who may only have one deployment – may not have that opportunity for three or four deployments to get 100 percentage coverage and are stuck with 50, 60 percent. So I’d say that to a degree it’s helped me a lot. I mean I’d certainly be in a lot more debt if it weren’t for the GI Bill. But to a degree, I’d also say that it disappoints me to see that the GI Bill is strictly based on active duty soldiers.

Derek is correct that the Post 9/11 GI Bill is an active duty benefit as was the Montgomery GI Bill, for which the Guard and Reservist weren’t eligible. Members of the National Guard and
Reserves have only become eligible for the active duty benefit because of the major role they’ve played in fighting this war as active duty soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen.

When Derek was asked his thoughts on the new changes to the GI Bill and if they would affect him in any way, he responded, “I would say not really just because if there have been changes I’ve been completely unaware.” All of the participants who responded gave a similar answer: they probably wouldn’t know unless it affects their pay in some way.

Zane, who also received 1606 benefits prior to being deployed, talked about how much she loves the GI Bill. She said the worst thing as a student is to be stressed over money. “When you stress over money, it’s hard to focus on school all the way. But the G.I. Bill reduces financial concerns. You just go to class. It’s paid for.” Both Derek and Zane are entitled to have 60% of their tuition paid for by the Post 9/11 GI Bill. In addition, both are eligible for Army Tuition Assistance, which can pay up to an additional $4,500 per academic year for courses not covered by the Post 9/11, and because Zane is in the National Guard, she receives an additional $800 grant from the university every year.

Jacob, Ken, Tonya, and Steve are also thankful for the GI Bill because without it, none of them would have decided to or have been able to go back to college. Jacob said, “It’s helped because they’ve been covering all of my tuition. I wouldn’t have been able to do this if I hadn’t had those funds from the military.” Jacob is married and has a brand new child, so the monthly housing allowance allows him to provide some financial support to the household. Ken also expressed that the housing allowance, which is provided under the Post 9/11 GI Bill, helps him and his wife to manage their household expenses.

Tonya said that the GI Bill has been good and that if she didn’t have it, “I wouldn’t even be here, if that was the case. If I didn’t have a job, I would not have been here. I wouldn’t have
even attempted to go back to school. I just would have worked most likely.” Steve also said without the GI Bill, “…I wouldn’t be able to go to school. There would be no way. I could probably take a class here or there, but I wouldn’t be able to go full time. There’s no way.”

Although all of the veterans were happy with what their veteran’s benefits have allowed them to do, the GI Bill hasn’t necessarily been without flaws. Luckily, only two out of the 11 participants using the Post 9/11 GI Bill ever had any major issue, Derek and Marcia. Derek mentioned that he didn’t like how the VA sends out, “long, drawn-out, overly complicated letters that students just look at and go “I don’t know what I’m looking at!” and throw it away.” He said they need to break things down so that veterans can understand what they’re saying. He also complained about how long it sometimes takes to inform veterans if they owe the VA back money. Derek said,

…they [the VA] sent me a letter literally five years after the debt incurred. And said five years later, “By the way, you owe us $3,000.” Didn’t tell me why. Didn’t tell me why they waited five years to tell me! They just said that they wanted their money and they wanted it now. Well, that’s great, but why didn’t you ask me before? Why didn’t you tell me at any point in the last five years – by the way, you owe us some money, and let’s figure out a way to pay us back?

Marcia’s problems stemmed from the VA awarding her an incorrect percentage rating when she left Officer University. She received a rating of 80% for the first year and half she was at Southeast when she should have only received 60%. Fortunately for Marcia, the VA didn’t require her to pay the extra money back that she received due to the error; this is not always the case.
**Vocational rehabilitation.** Vick, Robert, and Brad are all going to school under the Vocational Rehabilitation program and consider it a blessing. Vick, who was injured while in the Navy, said, “I think this is probably a service that’s one of the most fair things they’ve ever done for us veterans…whoever set up the voc rehab I think it is a very fair shake for us that are hurt.” Vick said that he most likely wouldn’t be in school without it because he would be afraid that he couldn’t pay back all of the student loans he would have to take out and he has a family to take care of. Brad said that he was extremely excited when he got accepted into the program; at the time “I was struggling and trying to find jobs. I didn't want to work in the mechanic field anymore, it was always so loud …It was affecting my disability.”

Robert was confident that he would never go to school; he said that “prior to my getting this additional rate [increased disability rating], I was like I’m never going back to school. I would never.” He said that he remembers talking to a guy who works in construction and “… he was telling me man, if you ever get a chance to go back to school, take advantage of it. Man, I’m never going to school cause I never thought I would actually have the opportunity.” After Robert got an increase in his rating his counselor told him he qualified for the program and he changed his mind; “…once I had a chance to come back to school to actually further my education and the VA is sponsoring it, I thought that that was excellent. Absolutely.”

Again, as with the GI Bill, Vocational Rehabilitation is a great benefit but there are areas that the veterans feel need to be addressed, primarily the lack of contact they’ve had with their newly assigned counselor. All of the Voc Rehab students were experiencing difficulties with their counselor and voiced their displeasure. The VA Regional office just recently made changes that switched counselors at several schools in the area, and Southeast was one of them. Brad said that he has contacted his new counselor on several occasions to let her know that his bill hadn’t
been paid and that the school was holding up his financial aid until they receive payment. Brad said he depends on his financial aid to pay rent and eat, so the whole ordeal was frustrating. He tried to handle the situation without including the Director of Veteran Services at the school but ultimately ended up contacting her to see if she could help get his financial aid released, which she did. Robert’s and Vick’s major problem was the lack of communication and untimely correspondence by their new counselor; they were much happier with their previous counselor.

Summary

There were five themes that emerged from the participant interviews: college choice, academic experience, social experience, campus climate, and veteran’s benefits. Veterans choose to attend Southeast primarily for three reasons: location, institutional connection, and school quality/course offerings. Veterans were overall satisfied with the quality of the education that they were receiving at Southeast and were performing well academically. Although veterans had disagreements or issues with a few faculty members, they believed that most are very approachable and welling to help. Nearly all of the veterans at some point made the conscious decision not to get involved socially with both fellow students and university activities, primarily citing age differences and other personal priorities. Veterans described the campus environment as veteran-friendly even though most chose not to share their veteran status. Finally, veterans are appreciative of what the GI Bill has allowed them to do and have had relatively few issues with payment.
Chapter 6: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The goal of this study was to gauge perceptions of college choice, transition, and satisfaction among transfer student veterans at Southeast Public University. The analysis of the participant interviews provides insight on what factors veterans considered when making their college choice decision, along with how they viewed their transfer/transition process to Southeast Public University. In addition, this study also discusses how participants describe their academic and social experience at Southeast as well as their perceptions of campus climate as it relates to student veterans on campus. The conclusions, implications, and recommendations that follow are the result of the evidence that emerged while addressing the following research questions: What factors contribute to college choice among transfer student veterans attending this college? How do academic, social, and community integration affect veteran transfer student satisfaction with the overall campus climate at this college? In light of the new iterations of the GI Bill, what are the perceived challenges faced by transfer student veterans attending this college?

Discussion

The majority of veterans who participated in the study indicated that they attended college prior to enlisting into the military. Of these veterans, more than half of them attended a community college while the others attended a four-year institution. Veterans mentioned several reasons for leaving school, which include needing financial assistance, disliking school, and poor grades. Only one of the participants indicated that they considered military service prior to college, which indicates that for the rest of them military service might not have been a viable option at the time.
Recent reports have shown that the number of individuals enlisting in the military with college experience has increased steadily over the past several years. The Army reported that the number of recruits entering with some college experience increased from 9,186 in 20120 to 12,538 in 2010 (Support Army Recruiting, 2011). Due to the downed U.S economy, college graduates continue to struggle to find employment, and military service becomes a practical option. Orvis and Asch (2002) suggest that society’s view of the military and the current labor market conditions play a role in influencing one’s propensity to enlist in the military. As the Department of Defense (DOD) moves to increase retention rates and decrease training costs, there has been a push to recruit high quality individuals. The DOD refers to individuals with previous college experience and those who score in the top half of the ASVAB aptitude assessment “high quality recruits.” Given the push to create a “smarter” military, it is likely that the number of service-bound college students is likely to increase in the coming years. In order to facilitate this growth, the DOD has taken measures to revisit their incentive programs to insure that they align with the educational goals of this population as it relates to student loan repayment and both in- and post-service educational benefits.

According to a 2010 report, only 25% of the population meets the minimum criteria to enlist in the military, 10% of whom have plans to attend or are enroll in college. Thirty-five percent of youth don’t meet the health requirements. Twenty-five percent have criminal convictions, don’t meet the minimum required ASVAB score, or have too many dependents to enlist. In addition, 18% have issues related to drugs or alcohol, which renders them ineligible (Report to the Subcommittee on Military Personnel, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, 2010). What this means is that in order for the military to increase their recruitment pool, the DOD has to figure out how to attract young adults who are on the college
A National Defense Research Institute (U.S.) national survey found that a $65,000 student loan repayment program would have the biggest impact on influencing college students’ decision to enlist. The study also found that military pay, college stipends, and enlistment bonuses were also positive incentives for individuals with college experience.

For the participants in the study, financial incentive was only one of the factors that influenced their enlistment decision; there was also the need for a change. Some of the participants mentioned that the military presented the opportunity for them to travel the world. Other participants believed that they just needed the opportunity to get away from the issues that encapsulated their life at that time, as two participants indicated having rough childhoods. The need to “grow up” was also a common reason for enlistment recognizing that the military has a time-honored tradition of building responsible, dedicated, and respectable citizens. In the end, regardless of their reason for joining, the overwhelming majority of the participants expressed appreciation for their time in the service, even if in retrospect.

Of the 14 participants, six of the veterans took advantage of post-secondary educational opportunities while on active duty. Several military installations around the world have educational centers on base where colleges and universities offer degree programs to servicemembers and their dependents. In the past, the unavailability of an on-base center or local college/university would have been a significant barrier to educational attainment and the utilization of tuition assistance benefits. Now, with the expansion of distance learning programs, educational opportunities have become a reality for more servicemembers as access requires only a reliable Internet connection.

The Air Force Personnel office posted their most recent demographic statistics, which indicated that 67% of their active duty enlisted population has some college experience (Air
Force Personnel Center, 2012), down from a reported 89% in 2006 (United States Air Force Statistical digest, 2006). These relatively large percentages are primarily due to the Community College of the Air force (CCAF), which is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award associate’s degrees primarily to enlisted airmen. The CCAF is a rather unique situation for the Air Force, so the percentages of servicemembers with some college experience in other branches are likely to be significantly lower.

Nearly half of the veterans in the study reported that they would have preferred to remain in the military. Veterans listed several reasons for their untimely departure from the military: 1) injuries related to military service resulting in a medical discharge; 2) difficulty getting along with superiors; 3) failing to meet re-enlistment promotion requirements; and 4) getting kicked out of the military. Most of these individuals truly enjoyed their military experience when things were going well and had hopes to depart on their own terms.

As a whole, the participants had relatively few issues in relation to their transfer/transition to Southeast. Issues that did arise but were ultimately resolved hinged on the late submission of paperwork relative to VA educational benefits and the slow processing of military transcripts. Overall, there was no real indication of transfer shock as veterans were able to adjust academically, although a couple of veterans indicated there were higher academic expectations at Southeast than at the community college they previously attended. In addition, two of the veterans had to “deprogram” the military way of doing things out of their system in order to properly function in this academic environment. As Tonya expressed, they had to learn to relax and “didn’t need to be so militant about everything” as they learned the military’s concept of attention to detail was significantly different from what professors required of their
classroom assignments. Although it was not a barrier, most participants lacked a general understanding of the services provided by the university, which they readily admitted.

Social isolation or the intentional decision to not engage with the university community outside of the classroom was a concept that all of the participants shared at some point during their time as Southeast. Participants continually referenced that fact that they were focused on reaching their educational goals and felt little need to interact with the university outside of the classroom. Also, several participants noted that they live busy lives and when they are not working their part/full-time jobs or studying, they choose to invest all of their available time into their family or close friends. Although few veterans acted upon it, many veterans did express interest in joining an organization specific to their academic major, as they understood that the ability to network plays in integral role in being successful.

The participants generally believed the faculty to be knowledgeable and approachable. Although there were a few negative exchanges between veterans and faculty members, most veterans provided examples of positive experiences they had with the faculty and believed they were genuinely concerned about their academic success and personal well-being. Participants seemed to form closer relationships with professors in their major concentration as opposed to the general education professors, which is not unusual given the smaller class sizes. Participants formed few friendships with fellow classmates as most believed that due to their age, attitude, and experiences, they had little in common and were unable to relate to the traditional student.

Participants believed Southeast to be “veteran-friendly” or at least not “unfriendly,” as most could not recall any situation where they felt they were treated negatively because of the veteran status, which they rarely had the tendency to share. Overall, the participants were generally happy with their experience at Southeast and believed that the school either met or
exceeded their expectations, taking into consideration that several had either no or very low expectations prior to experiencing the university.

The participants of this study can be classified into two categories as it relates to their college choice decision: those who wanted to go to Southeast and those who failed to get accepted to their institution of choice. From these two categories emerged the relevant sub-themes, which ultimately guided their final college choice decision: location, university connection, and program/course offerings.

Three of the participants initially sought out to attend schools that have very selective admissions criteria and make no special allowances for veterans in the admissions process. Given that these veterans failed to be admitted into their institution of choice, the question becomes, “Has the Post 9/11 GI Bill actually increased access to higher education or just provided veterans with more financial resources?” If access is defined as entry, then the statistics related to the type of institutions veterans are using their benefits for since the advent of the Post 9/11 GI Bill have seen no significant change, although for-profit schools have emerged to become significant players in veteran education. Radford (2011) reported that 43 percent of military undergraduates attended two-year institutions, while 21% attended public four-year, and 12% attended non-profit institutions. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, veterans more often attend two-year schools, and 14.7% of veterans used their benefits at private-for-profits.

Veterans whose intent was to attend Southeast had relatively no issues regarding access. Unlike Big University, Southeast does not have an enrollment cap on incoming students. In fact, it is quite the opposite as administrators look to boost their enrollment numbers and explore new markets, to include veterans exiting the military. Southeast’s favorable admissions policy for
veterans all but ensures their admission if they have at least 90 days of active duty service and transfer credit averages of at least a 2.0.

According to the research, college selection decisions don’t seem to vary much among entering freshmen, non-traditional, or transfer students. The research suggests that location is the number one factor in college choice decision, while program/course offerings, university connection, and reputation follow in varying orders. Radford (2011) found that location was the primary reason veterans selected the college they were attending, followed by program/course offerings, university connection, and reputation, which is fairly consistent with the participants in this study. Gibbons and Vignoles (2009) also found in their study of access and college choice in England’s higher education system that the number one factor in contributing to college choice decision among students was location.

Tinto’s (1975) model of voluntary student departure was used as a guiding framework to gauge veteran student satisfaction at Southeast Public University. In his model, Tinto examined four critical areas to explain student departure: 1) Pre-entry attributes (background), 2) Goals Commitments (expectations), 3) Institutional Experiences (Academic and Social), and 4) Integration (Academic and Social). According to Tinto’s model, student dropout is best explained by the individual’s inability to integrate seamlessly academically and socially to the institutional environment. Persistence or satisfaction can then be best explained by the individual’s ability to successfully integrate to the university and meet both personal and institutional expectations.

**Background.** The two common experiences that participants shared was the fact that they all had active-duty service and attended at least one university other than Southeast. Aside from these two concrete examples, the background of the participants varied widely. The ages of
the participants ranged from 22-54 with an average age of 35. Of the 14 participants, there were nine males and five females; six participants had children, five were married, one was divorced, and one was widowed. Eight of the participants identified themselves as White, four Black, one Hispanic, and another multiracial.

The branches of the military that were represented by participants in the study include the Army, Air Force, and Navy (there were no Marine Corps or Coast Guard participants). The number of years in service ranged from one to twenty, with four veterans having 15 or more years of service. Of the nine participants who deployed, five had actual combat experience, with two individuals stating they suffer from PTSD. Tinto believed that the student’s background was important as it lays the foundation for the individual’s goals, expectations, and level of commitment (Tinto, 1975).

**Goals and commitments.** As it relates to goals and commitments, Tinto (1975) believes that the individual’s expectations or future goals are good indicators of the level of commitment that an individual will likely have to persist. If the individual has already identified a specific profession or expressed aspirations for graduate school he/she is more likely to be committed than someone that is undecided and don’t have clear career goals. For the participants, the mere fact that they were still pursuing their education was a testament to their level of commitment. Several of the veterans attended school prior to enlisting in the military and while in the service took courses at various institutions in an effort to reach degree completion. Most participants had either very low expectations or didn’t know what to expect. Several of the veterans stated that they did expect the courses to be challenging and that their education would prepare them for their career field. One expectation that was commonly shared was that they did not have any social expectations, as they were clearly focused only on completing academic requirements so
they can do as Tonya stated, “get a degree and get the hell out of here.” This is a reasonable expectation when you take into consideration that for at least two of veterans, their first college courses were taken more than 20 years before enrolling at Southeast.

**Academic performance.** As a whole, the participants in the study performed well academically. Participants self-reported their grade point average range, and 11 of the participants reported having over a 3.0 cumulative grade point average, with four of them having averages between 3.6 and 4.0. Two of the participants reported having averages between a 2.0 and 2.5, while one student (Zane) decided not to provide a response to this particular question. Based on Zane’s interview responses, it was evident that she struggled with her coursework and had trouble focusing in class as a result of her PTSD, which she was seeking treatment for at the time on campus. The participants, for the most part, were satisfied with their academic performance although a couple acknowledged that they needed to do better or provided excuses for their drop in performance.

**Faculty interaction.** Participants reported having both positive and negative faculty interactions, but generally the contact was positive. Veterans believed they were in a supportive environment given that the faculty members were approachable and concerned about their success. Also, the fact that they consulted with the faculty on both personal and academic issues and challenged faculty members’ classroom decisions indicated a certain level of ownership in their academic process.

**Social interaction.** The participants formed very few social connections on campus, as it generally was not a goal for them. Veterans indicated feeling out of place and not being able to relate to the younger students in their classes. The majority of the students noted that their social needs were met outside of the campus environment through interactions with family and friends,
and they weren’t likely to participate in any university-sponsored activity or event. Although veterans repeatedly voiced the desire not to be involved on campus, several of them were members of campus chapters of professional organizations related to their major, worked on campus, and even volunteered their musical talents to the music department.

**Academic integration.** In Tinto’s model, the primary indicator of successful academic integration is grade performance. According to Tinto (1975),

Grade performance reflects, in part, the notion that the student is also being evaluated and judged by that system—in evaluation of the student’s attributes and achievements in relation to the system’s values and objectives. Grade performance becomes, then, both a reflection of the person’s ability and of the institution’s preferences for particular styles of academic behavior. (p. 104)

Although the participants had varying levels in their grade performance, they were serious about their academic success. This was evident as many of the veterans commented on the fact that they appreciated being challenged in their coursework, which implies an appreciation for the learning that was taking place. Participants made several references to the younger students or “kids” in their classes and their lack of effort towards their studies. This is not at all shocking given the participants’ average age was 35 and they were in courses with students who were still trying to find their way. Overall, even though many of the participants had outside commitments with family and work, they were committed to their academic success. Given this, the majority of the participants had little difficulty adjusting to the institution’s academic expectations.

One participant did not fare so well after returning from her deployment. Zane professed that she was doing well academically prior to deploying, but after returning from Iraq, things
were different. She admitted that things weren’t as easy for her as they once were and keeping up was truly a challenge, and as a result Zane performed poorly the following two semesters. Although Zane’s situation is quite discouraging, this is the reality members of the National Guard or Reserves deal with on a daily basis as they are expected to withdraw from school, deploy for a year, and come back and pick right back up where they left off. The fact remains that veterans have different experiences during their deployment; some are able to quickly transition back into the classroom and be successful, while others struggle and have more difficulty.

Social Integration. Tinto (1993) stated, “Lest we forget, most students commute to college and a majority work while in college. For them and for many others, the classroom is often the only place where they meet other students and the faculty. If involvement does not occur in those smaller places of engagement, it is unlikely it will easily occur elsewhere.” Tinto isn’t suggesting that students are more likely to drop out if they don’t join a student organization, get involved in extra-curricular activities, or attend university events, but he does believe that an involved student has a greater propensity to connect with their institutional environment, which increases persistence.

The more in-class and out-of-class experiences a veteran has, the more likely he or she is to feel connected to the university. Although several participants did choose to join a student organization, they made it clear that they had no expectations to get involved on campus, which is typical of most non-traditional students. Travis and Marcia were the two exceptions as they occasionally participated in off-campus student activities. Travis said that he wanted to experience college differently than he did the first time, and Marcia just needed an outlet. For students attending Southeast, interactions among students in the classroom were a common
occurrence. These interactions provided opportunities for student veterans, who are often not on
campus, to connect with their peers in meaningful ways but failed to foster any lasting
friendships.

**University commitment/campus climate.** Over the past few years, the administration at
Southeast has made a commitment to improving services for their student veterans. This
commitment is reflected in their establishment and support of a veteran resource center, which is
staffed by a full-time administrator whose sole responsibility is to address the needs of the
veteran student population, including certifying veterans’ benefits, recruitment, advocacy, and
programming. Veterans believed the campus to be friendly and didn’t have any real concerns
about being treated unfairly because of their military service. Veterans mentioned that the
presence of the Army ROTC on campus helps, they and believe that students, staff, and faculty
members have been acclimated to seeing students in Army regalia on a daily basis, making it
easier for them to accept veterans. Veterans did not generally like to share the fact that they were
veterans unless it came up as part of a course assignment or classroom introduction. Veterans
wanted no special treatment on campus and rarely used the fact that they were veterans to their
advantage. In fact, some of the participants said they feel uncomfortable because they don’t want
to make people feel they have to do anything for them or even thank them for their service.
Today, society in general is doing a better job honoring the service of our vets, unlike in previous
wars where veterans came back home to hostile college environments. Given all of this attention
and support for veterans at Southeast, the campus climate is both accepting and conducive to
learning.

**Goals/commitments.** At this stage in Tinto’s model, the individuals examine whether
their experiences at the institution are in-line with their original or modified goals and make their
decisions to continue, dropout, transfer, and so on, based on how they measure up. In accordance with the assumptions of Tinto’s model, satisfaction can then be determined by the individual’s decision to continue at the institution as a result of meeting one’s own educational goals/expectations. The participants in the study were generally satisfied with their experience at Southeast and believed that the university met or exceeded their expectations. Most of the participants’ primary goal was to graduate, which several of them have done since their participation in this study, but others had different goals. A few participants expected to attend Southeast for a couple of semester and then transfer out. Two of the participants were able to achieve that goal, although for one it was not necessarily his goal at that time. Out of the 14 participants, one student decided to leave the university. Zane was never able to fully transition back to the school environment or successfully re-integrate academically, which ultimately led to her poor grade performance.

It was evident early in the interview process that veterans were not aware of the changes that were being made to the Post 9/11 GI Bill, which only validates the need to provide more outreach to veterans as it relates to their benefits. The general perception gathered from the interviews was that veterans were only concerned about changes that would affect their benefits. This is understandable given that the Post 9/11 GI Bill has had several modifications since 2009, which have had little effect on students attending four-year public institutions like Southeast.

Although the intricacies of VA educational benefits can be difficult to follow and understand, playing a passive role in the process can become problematic because when an issue does occur, it is likely too late to make any corrective action. For example, this latest round of changes eliminated break pay for all GI Bill benefit chapters, which has the potential to create a financial predicament for recipients who don’t properly plan for the reduction in pay. Break pay
was the money that veterans received during gaps in enrollment or between semesters. For example, if an individual enrolled in a semester that ends December 12 and is registered for the next term starting January 8, the VA would have paid benefits for the full months of December and January; now with the elimination of break pay they only receive prorated payments for both months. Veterans must understand that, as in all government-funded programs, there are rules and regulations that they must be aware of because ultimately they are responsible for adhering to the guidelines set forth by Congress. The Post 9/11 GI Bill is not simply a blank check; it does have certain restrictions, which regulate course selection and payable fees. It also outlines the penalties for failing and withdrawing from courses.

Since August 2009, the Post 9/11 GI Bill has provided several hundred thousand veterans the opportunity to pursue higher education, as many of the participants stated that they would not have attended without it as it allows them to focus more on their academics and less on finances. Although it has been overwhelmingly beneficial, it has not been without problems. Although most of the veterans in the study hadn’t experienced any issues relative to payment, it can be a trying experience and create an extreme financial hardship. Errors can occur as result of a VA processor who works the award or a school certifying official who submits the student’s enrollment certification. Fortunately for Marcia, she benefited from a VA processing mistake that allowed her to receive a higher payment percentage than she was rated, which is not the norm. For Derek, his situation occurred as a result of the school certifying official not performing his job in a timely manner, resulting in Derek not receiving his housing allowance for the first two months of the semester. Fortunately, Derek had the financial resources to cover the time period that he didn’t receive a payment, but this could have created a substantial hardship if he had been fully dependent on those payments for food, clothing, and shelter.
Implications and Recommendations

The results of this study suggest that veterans, who have made degree attainment a high priority, will likely persist to graduation. The participants in this study clearly demonstrate that the goal of graduation is more important than the educational path or journey it takes to get there. As mentioned previously, over half of the participants were enrolled in college prior to enlisting in the military, while several got their start while on active duty. Of the 14 participants, only two veterans left the military without any college experience. Veterans indicated that their college choice decision while in the military was largely based on what was available at their location. Veterans who spend any significant amount of time in the military are likely to experience many duty station relocations, which in turn impacts their choice of educational institutions. The participants displayed the various enrollment patterns, demonstrating vertical, horizontal, reverse, and various combinations of the three, commonly referred to as swirling (Peng, 1977; Townsend & Dever, 1999). The research indicates that the fewer institutions an individual attends, the less likely he or she is to receive a four-year college degree (Adelman, 1999). This study suggests that this may differ for servicemembers, as multiple college transfers represent the individual’s commitment to press towards graduation. It also suggests that during this process, veterans have little institutional loyalty and each school is viewed as a means to an end.

Implications for theory. In this study, Tinto’s theory did not hold up particularly well for transfer student veterans. In defense of the model, it was originally developed to explain attrition among traditional-aged college students. Tinto did indicate that the concept of social integration was not a necessary component for student success for non-traditional students. Tinto asserts that social integration is more of a necessity if the individual is not academically
integrated into the university and/or has poor grades; based on the latter, social connections could possibly provide linkages to help navigate the academic setting (Tinto, 1988).

For the participants in this study, Tinto’s stage of separation reflects the veterans’ departure from military services. Several of the veterans in the study had mixed feelings about their departure from the military as they indicated that leaving wasn’t their decision. However, most have come to terms with the circumstances surrounding their separation, whether that was for medical, promotion, or disciplinary action. As it relates to this stage of transition, it was clear that veterans find it difficult to shed their military identity, which is primarily by choice. Veterans are proud of their service and military experience, and it seems to become a lasting part of their identity, even years after they leave the service. Tinto’s idea of transition focuses on adopting an identity relative to their college experience, but for veterans, the relevant transition is going from servicemember to civilian. Incorporation, the stage where students fully integrate into the institution, was not achieved by the participants in this study primarily because integration was not a priority. Although the participants had relatively no social integration, the veterans integrated academically to the extent necessary to progress towards graduation.

Figure 3 represents a modification of Tinto’s model for transfer student veterans.
Figure 3. Dunklin’s Model of Student Departure for Veteran Transfer Students as modified from Tinto (1988).

In this model, pre-entry attributes would include the veteran’s military background (occupation, military education, military experience, combat exposure, etc.), skills and attributes, and prior college experience. The veterans’ military backgrounds play a critical role in how they interact with the world after their separation. Many veterans carry forward with them the experiences in the military, both good and bad. For some, the military is a positive point of reflection as it expanded their view of the world through travel and the bonds that they formed with fellow soldiers, marines, airmen, and seamen, often referred to as military camaraderie. For others, the politics, unmet expectations, and scars/wounds of combat are at the forefront of their experience. Skills and abilities refer to the valuable assets that veterans bring to college with them, the generality that they are committed, dependable, task/detailed oriented, responsible, and so on. The veterans’ prior college experiences take into account the various educational
experiences that they gained prior, during, and after military, and how those impact their current experience.

Goals and commitments remain the same as Tinto described in his model, but for transfer student veterans, the primary and perhaps only goal may be graduation with very little institutional expectations except for to provide the education, skills, and training necessary to achieve their occupational goal. The most significant difference in the models is reflected within the area of institutional experiences. In Tinto’s model, the individual’s ability to achieve some level of integration both academic and socially are imperative for academic success. Academic integration for non-traditional veterans is manifested via classroom experiences and faculty interaction. For these veterans, the interactions and relationships formed with faculty members are viewed as peer-to-peer, primarily as a result of their age and experience. Although Tinto has noted that social integration is not as important for non-traditional students is it is for traditional students, this model suggests that it is not a relevant factor at all for transfer student veterans and is therefore not included in the model.

Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model of student attrition, which is geared towards transfer students, emphasizes the powerful influence that the individuals’ external commitments have on their institutional success. In this model, external commitments serve a dual purpose, to motivate as well as distract. When students enter college in the later stages of life, they typically have obligations that are external to the school environment (family, job, religion, military obligation, etc.) and which at times become a competing priority with their academic success. Unlike many traditional students, non-traditional students have to successfully balance the demands of school with family and work obligations, at times sacrificing the success in one area for success in another. On the other hand, these same external commitments can often serve as the primary
motivating factor for degree completion, which may be to start a new career or create better opportunities for the family. Overall, to the extent that the veterans were able to have academic success and balance their external obligations, they were satisfied with their college experience, given that their initial goals and expectations are relatively low.

**Implications for policy and recommendations for practice.**

*Accommodate for college swirl and multi-institutional attendance.* As institutional leaders look to attract veterans to their campus, it is important that they make an effort to understand the nature of veteran degree attainment, which includes attendance at multiple institutions, military credit, and both DANTES and CLEP testing. Institutions that are willing to take the time with veterans to properly assess all of their educational experiences and award credit accordingly are likely to increase veteran interest at the institution. Colleges/universities that are truly serious about supporting the educational needs of degree-seeking servicemembers should consider becoming a full member of the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC). SOC is a consortium of colleges and universities that have entered into an agreement to accept credit taken from member institutions. This is beneficial to servicemembers because they understand that as long as they take courses within the network of schools, they are progressing towards degree completion. The benefit for the institutions is that upon exiting the military, the veteran will likely be more inclined to enroll and complete their degree at a member institution. According to Lang (2009), twenty-five percent of states in the U.S. have an articulation agreement system, which means that the concept of articulation is not an idea that university administrators are opposed to; it’s likely more of determining whether the value added is worth engaging in the process.
Establish polices for returning combat veterans. Student veterans who serve as members of the National Guard and Reserve deal with the reality that their education will likely be interrupted as a result of their unit being deployed to either Iraq or Afghanistan at some time during their college tenure. In this study, both of the students who were in the National Guard deployed but had different experiences upon their return to the university. Derek was able to transition back into his role as student with little incident, but Zane struggled, which ultimately led to her departure. Zane’s experience should be of great concern to university officials as veteran students who have made investments in their education and the institution are departing, primarily due to their inability to readjust to the university setting. Zane addressed that fact that she met with counselors on campus to work through her issues with PTSD, but the counseling was either insufficient or was not enough alone to keep her at the university. University officials should enact policy specifically to address the in-school deployments of National Guard and Reserve students in relation to the services that they receive when they return to the university. For many veterans, their experience will be similar to Derek’s, but for the few whose experiences parallel Zane’s, the university must be willing to recognize that they may not be able to provide the services necessary to aid in the recovery that is imperative to their academic success. This is where creating partnerships with the VA and local agencies that specialize in working with combat veterans relative to counseling, healthcare, and so on might better serve these students. Many schools have drafted policy to address the issue of veterans being deployed mid-term relative to how they handle the return of financial aid and withdrawals, but there also needs to be policy that addresses the university’s commitment to their success upon their return.
**Create a veteran services model that is inclusive to all veterans.** This study clearly indicates that although “veterans” share the distinction of holding that title, it does little to represent the various experiences and feelings that they have about their military service. As administrators look to create a veteran service model for their campus, they must take into consideration that, depending on their experience, they may not consider themselves veterans or fail to relate with certain types of veterans. Some veterans may feel that they served their time while in the military and are now embracing being a civilian. Administrators must balance between creating an environment that embodies the essence of the student veteran while at the same time not creating or fostering a military environment where veterans feel uncomfortable. Whatever the case may be, administrators should involve student veterans in the process and not just have the “if we build it they will come” mentality. With an influx of veterans to campus, many universities have expanded the services they offer and have increased staff, space, and resources in order to help address the needs of this growing student population. Many of the universities have also formed advisory boards, which include campus representatives and local veterans’ advocacy groups to help weigh in as university officials draft policy and make decisions that impact student veterans. Over the past four years, universities and colleges have made huge strides in serving the student veteran on campus and addressing their needs.

**Create a transfer student veteran orientation.** The participants in this study emphasized their lack of interest in interacting with the university outside of the classroom environment, which disconnects them from not only the social aspect of the college experience but also the valuable resources that the institution has to offer. Only three of the participants said that they participated in some form of campus tour/orientation and found it to be helpful as it gave them an overview of the services that university offered. Several of the other veterans did indicate that
attending an orientation would have been helpful because they weren’t knowledgeable of the services that were offered on campus. Institutions should look to create transfer student veteran orientation programs where veterans get exposure to the university and resources that are offered along with in-depth training on their VA educational benefits and the requirements for certification at that particular university. Given that not all veterans would participate in an on-campus orientation process, the orientation should be provided in an online format as well.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

While this research provided insight into perceptions of college choice, transition, and satisfaction among student veterans, additional research is needed. Educational institutions need to explore to engage student veterans on campus. This research indicated that veteran participants made the conscious decision not to get involved socially or participate in university-sponsored events. Veterans bring to campus an incredible wealth of knowledge and practical experience as many have years of experience in the area in which they are seeking a degree. Faculty and administrators need to foster greater student involvement among this special population, as they are a valuable resource. At the same time, the findings from this study suggest that engagement for transfer student veterans is characterized as a veteran-to-faculty member relationship as opposed to peer-to-peer relationship (i.e., between veteran transfer students and other collegians on campus). Future research should explore this concept as institutions look to involve student veterans on campus.

Additional research should be conducted to examine the effectiveness/utility of establishing campus units/offices that provide comprehensive services to student veterans. This research made it quite clear that transfer student veterans liked the idea of having a veteran student office on campus but did not use the office outside of certification of their GI Bill
benefits. Given this, would both the institution and veterans be better served by having solely a competent certifying official who has both internal and external resources to assist veterans when they have questions or are experiencing difficulties? Given this research was specific to transfer student veterans who are familiar with the college environment, future research should be conducted with veterans who are enrolled in college for the first time or are of traditional age to see if their experiences are similar.

Last, future research should address factors that influence college attendance and persistence among transfer student veterans. What characteristics do veterans who attend multiple institutions share, such as military occupation, duty station, prior college experience, and family background? Also, given the college attendance patterns of degree-seeking veterans and the idea of student swirl, the VA, DOD, and educational institutions need to work collaboratively to explore ways to help veterans reach their educational goals in a more seamless process. The expansion of the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges Consortium might be one solution, but it also introduces the idea of a nationalized articulation agreement, which will be helpful not only for veterans but for any student engaging in the transfer process.
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Appendix A: Human Subjects Approval

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

October 28, 2011

To: Shaftone Dunklin
   Educational Leadership

Re: UHSRC # 111007
   Category: Approved Expedited Research Project
   Approval Date: October 28, 2011

Title: “The Veteran Experience: Gauging College Choice, Transition, and Collegiate Satisfaction of Veterans in Higher Education”

The Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee (UHSRC) has completed their review of your project. I am pleased to advise you that your expedited research has been approved in accordance with federal regulations.

Renewals: Expedited protocols need to be renewed annually. If the project is continuing, please submit the Human Subjects Continuation Form prior to the approval expiration. If the project is completed, please submit the Human Subjects Study Completion Form (both forms are found on the UHSRC website).

Revisions: Expedited protocols do require revisions. If changes are made to a protocol, please submit a Human Subjects Minor Modification Form or new Human Subjects Approval Request Form (if major changes) for review (see UHSRC website for forms).

Problems: If issues should arise during the conduct of the research, such as unanticipated problems, adverse events, or any problem that may increase the risk to human subjects and change the category of review, notify the UHSRC office within 24 hours. Any complaints from participants regarding the risk and benefits of the project must be reported to the UHSRC.

Follow-up: If your expedited research project is not completed and closed after three years, the UHSRC office will require a new Human Subjects Approval Request Form prior to approving a continuation beyond three years.

Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-0042 or via e-mail at human.subjects@emich.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Deb de Laski-Smith, Ph.D.
Interim Dean
Graduate School
Administrative Co-Chair
University Human Subjects Review Committee
Appendix B: Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear participant:

You are invited to participate in a study on veteran transfer student experiences in higher education. If you agree to participate in the research, you will be contacted to schedule the interview. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and a series of questions will be asked on this particular topic and you will be invited to comment. After the interview concludes you may be contacted for a follow-up interview. The interview will be audio taped and notes will be taken to accurately recall what you say. Afterwards, a written transcript of our conversation will be produced. All your information will be stored in a password protected digital file, which is accessible only by the principal investigator. Only individuals who have given informed consent to use their name/identity will be mentioned in reports. If you wish for your information to remain confidential, a pseudonym will be attached to your data.

Data from this study will be used for the purpose of a doctoral dissertation and may be presented at professional conferences and submitted for publications. If you are interested in more information about the conclusions of this study, please contact the principal investigator separately at the address provided below, and information regarding the findings will be forwarded to you.

There should be no risk to you in participating in this interview. However, should some questions cause you discomfort, you have the right to stop at any time and seek assistance. Additionally, if such distress is felt after the interview has been completed; you may contact the principal investigator to discuss your feelings, or alternatively receive a referral for someone who is qualified to do so. Counseling and Psychological Services, located in the Snow Health Center, has counselors available to assist you if the need arises. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw participation at any point, including after completing the interview without penalty. If you choose, your completed audio-taped interview will be destroyed.

Your participation in this study will hopefully help you gain a better understanding of your experience as a student veteran as well as help to inform future institutional practices as it relates to student veterans. If you have any questions regarding the procedures, please feel free to ask questions of the principal investigator. This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for use from 10/06/2011 to 10/5/2012. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Deb deLaski-Smith (734.487.0042, Interim Dean of the Graduate School and Administrative Co-chair of UHSRC, human.subjects@emich.edu).
If you are in agreement with the procedures of this study, please sign below indicating your agreement.

Name: ________________________________________  Date: _________________
Signature: ____________________________________________________________

I request a pseudonym be assigned to all data or information that references me in this study.
Signature: _________________________________

Thank you for your assistance, it is greatly appreciated.

Shaftone Dunklin
Department of Leadership and Counseling
304 Porter, Ypsilanti, MI 48197
Email: sdunklin@emich.edu
Phone (734) 487-0255  Fax: (734) 487-4608
Appendix C: Invitation to Participate in the Study

"Shaftone Dunklin" <sdunklin@emich.edu> wrote:

I hope all is well and that your semester is going great! Although I'm no longer working at [redacted], I'm still a graduate student in the Educational Leadership Department and I was wondering if you would be willing to assist me with my dissertation. In a nutshell, I'm studying the campus satisfaction of transfer student veterans (If I remember correctly you transferred to [redacted]). I have a series of questions that I would like to ask you, it will take approximately 45min and I can meet with you when/where ever it is convenient for you. I would really appreciate your help as this is the last component of my degree and hopefully the comments that you provide will help assist [redacted] continue to improve services for student veterans.

Shaftone Dunklin
Appendix D: Background Questionnaire

Veteran Background Questionnaire

* Name: 

* What is your gender? 

* What is your ethnicity? 

* What is your age? 

* Are you currently married, single or divorced?  
  □ Married  
  □ Single  
  □ Divorced  

* Do you have children? 

* What was your place of residence prior to entering the military (city and state)? 

* Are or have you been employed while in college? 

* What is your/family social class? 

* What branch of the military were/are you in? 

* How long were/have you been in the military? 

* What was your military occupation (actual name)?
* What college(s) did you previously attend?

* What is your major/minor?

* What is your current cumulative GPA?
  - 3.6 - 4.0
  - 3.1 - 3.5
  - 2.6 - 3.0
  - 2.0 - 2.5
  - 1.9 and below

* Do you live on campus?

* If you don’t live on campus, how many miles is your commute?
  - 0 - 5 miles
  - 6 - 15 miles
  - 16 - 25 miles
  - 26 miles or more

* Indicates Response Required
Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Research Question

Tell me a little bit about yourself?

Why did you decide to join the military?

Describe your military experience?

Tell me about your educational experience while you were in the military?

What factors guided your decision to attend your previous educational institution?

What was your experience and why did you decide to leave your previous institution?

Please describe your transfer experience?
   How was your academic transition?
   How was your social transition?
   How was your personal transition?

How do you rate the support services at EMU to your previous institution(s)?

What factors guided your decision to attend this educational institution?
   Based on your expectations, how does the university measure-up?

Please talk about your academic experience here at the university?
   Based on your expectations, how does the university measure-up?

Please talk about your social experience here at the university?
   Based on your expectations, how does the university measure-up?

Please talk about your experience interacting with students, staff and administrators?

Please describe the campus climate as it relates to being veteran-friendly?

In reference to the university, what areas are notable and what areas are in need improvement, please explain?

If you are using the GI Bill, what impact has it had on your academic experience?

Is there anything that I haven’t asked that you would like to add?
Appendix F: Sample of Nodes
Appendix G: Military Friendly Indicators GI Jobs

Academics
Credits
- School is VA Approved
- Accepts College Level Examination Program (CLEP)
- Part of SOC Degree Network System
- Part of the DANTES external
- Gives credit for CLEP and/or DSST exams
- Accepts the ACE recommendations for awarding credit for CLEP and/or DSST
- Gives ACE credit for military training and experience

Policy on the transfer of credits
Student must have at least 60 credit hours at a four-year school. At least 30 of these hours must be at EMU, but the others could be transferred from another accredited four-year school.

Maximum number of credits that this school accepts for CLEP and/or DSST exams
30

Financial Benefits
- Offers scholarships for military students and veterans
- Offers tuition discounts for military students and veterans
- Offers in-state tuition without residency requirements for active-duty military students
- Can military students called to active service return without penalty
- Military scholarships for dependents
- Military tuition discounts for dependents
- Offers in-state tuition without residency requirements for military dependents
- Participates in the Yellow Ribbon Program
- Participates in the MyCAA program

Support
- Service members Opportunity Colleges Consortium member (SOC)
- Offers ROTC program or participate in cross-town ROTC program
- Has full-time veteran counselors or advisors on staff
- Advisor on staff that assists veterans with career placement
- Veteran counselors liaise with local VET REPS to help with career placement
- Identifies military dependents on campus
- Has child care facilities on campus
- Child care facilities subsidized for military dependents
Social Outlets
- Has campus/social networking events planned specifically for veterans
- Has veteran clubs or associations on campus
- Has a chapter of the Student Veterans of America on campus
- Has virtual veteran clubs or associations
- Has veteran specific page on website
- Has spouse clubs/associations on campus
- Has a military spouse specific page on its Web site

Installation/Base Support
- Provides support to specific military installations

Student Veteran Associations
PAVE Program

Policy concerning students who are involuntarily activated for military service
Student must present a copy of their active duty orders. Students are then encouraged to make arrangements for in-completes with their professors if they are nearing the end of the semester. If they don't get in-completes; they then have the option of dropping the course from the beginning of the semester or withdrawing from the course.

Why this school is an excellent choice for military members
[Eastern Michigan University (EMU)] is dedicated to serving the educational needs of veterans, service members, survivors and dependents'. EMU is also committed to facilitating the successful transition from soldier to student through collaboration with campus and community agents to provide resources for veterans and their families. Our goal is to always create a veteran friendly environment by acknowledging, honoring and addressing veterans' unique needs while attaining theory educational goals. Also, honorably discharged veterans who have served more than 181 consecutive days of active duty will be admitted upon proof of high school graduation.