ABSTRACT

EVERETT, MARLENA STEPHANIE. The Persistence of Military Veteran Students in a Southeastern Community College: A Narrative Study. (Under the direction of Dr. Tuere Bowles)

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to examine the experiences of veteran students in a southeastern community college in order to gain an understanding of the factors that contributed to their academic persistence from matriculation through to completion of their educational goals, in this case, a college course, certificate, degree, or diploma. The study sought to describe these experiences and to discover any impact these experiences might have on the student veterans’ academic persistence. Four research questions guided the study: (1) What are the experiences of veteran students in community college? (2) How do personal, social, and environmental factors shape the academic persistence of veteran students in community college? (3) What factors support the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college? (4) What factors hinder the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college?

This qualitative study was guided by a theoretical framework based on Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory and Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support. Sixteen veteran students, both male and female, ranging in age from 27 to 68, participated in the study. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews. Other data were gathered via document review and observation. Based on the interviews, narratives were developed, and these were analyzed along with other data. The results of the data analysis revealed that participants found that their interactions with faculty, staff, and other students affirmed and supported their academic persistence. Classroom experiences, with a few exceptions, fostered veteran students’ academic success; and
moreover, personal, social and environmental factors enhanced these students’ determination to succeed academically. Finally, findings revealed that participants were able to overcome various potential detractors to their persistence.

From the findings, three conclusions were drawn regarding the experiences of the veteran community college student participants. First, engagement of the student veteran’s family within the college environment establishes community and is important to the individual’s academic persistence. Second, clear and concise expectations set by faculty and staff increase the likelihood of persistence. Finally, veteran community college students, with a few exceptions, use remedial or developmental courses as motivation to persist; framing this persistence as mission completion, veterans carry over military training, discipline, and grit to persist through academic endeavors.

Based on the findings of this study, five recommendations for further research were developed. Future research should (a) explore different populations of veteran students both qualitatively and quantitatively, including female veterans and veteran students of color, as well as veteran students in other geographical locations; (b) investigate the military’s discipline, structure, and order and how these factors play a role in the persistence of veteran community college students; (c) explore the effectiveness of programs and initiatives designed to facilitate veteran success/persistence in community colleges from the perspective of directors, administrators, faculty and staff; (d) advising and its effect on the persistence of veteran community college students; and (e) explore the importance of familial influence on the academic success and persistence of veteran students and community college students generally.
The Persistence of Military Veteran Students in a Southeastern Community College: A Narrative Study

by
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DEDICATION

I am dedicating this research to the memory of my aunt Angelin Denice Everett and grandmother Ruth Mae Everett, who both instilled in me the importance of persevering through challenging times. Their constant encouragement, unconditional love, support, and belief in me gave me the strength I needed to persist through this endeavor. I believe they have remained with me at every step toward the completion of this journey.
BIOGRAPHY

Marlena Everett was born and raised in Raleigh, North Carolina, in a family who proudly served their country in different branches of the military. Her father, grandfather, uncles, and cousins are veterans having served in the Army, Marines, and Air Force. Being of service to others and receiving higher education was instilled in Marlena and her younger brothers growing up. During this time, they were taught the importance of grit and persistence in completing any goals they may have set for themselves.

Marlena was educated in the Wake County Public School System. After graduating, she attended East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, where she received her Bachelor of Science degree in 1999. She continued her education at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she received her Master of Arts degree in 2005. After graduation, she continued her passion for learning and serving others in the public sector by serving veteran students within the North Carolina Community College system, moving through the ranks as a recruiter, counselor, coordinator, and Director of Counseling. While working with her veteran students, she would often wonder why some of them seemed so determined to succeed, and then she would remember her father, a veteran himself, who had this same determination to persist towards his educational goals.

Mission completion was a motto that her father would repeat to her often as a young child. It was evident that he lived by this motto. When Marlena was just a toddler, there was once a time her father could not find a babysitter to watch her, when her mother could not take off from work. He brought her to two of his exams at North Carolina State University. His professors were accommodating and would watch Marlena for him while he took his
exams. Quitting or not completing his education, no matter the obstacle, was not an option. But he could not do it alone; her father’s positive experiences with professors who understood his dilemma and were accommodating allowed him to persist toward completing his educational goals. By his third year at NCSU, he had to move back home due to his father’s illness and complete his education through The State University of New York at Albany.

This experience had a profound effect, even at a young age, on Marlena’s determination to persist through her own educational journey. Her passion for education, serving others, and her familial history and work experience with veterans is what encouraged her to pursue this research study. Who would have guessed that thirty-eight years later, she would be back at North Carolina State University, where it all started for her father, receiving her doctorate degree. She hopes this dissertation is the beginning of years of study into the exploration of experiences of the academic persistence of veteran students within community colleges.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people who have been such an important part of my journey and without whom I would not have been able to achieve this monumental educational goal.

To all my family, and especially my mom, dad, my brothers Brad and Dwight, my aunt Coreena, and my uncle Craig, this has been a long journey, and I really love and appreciate having such a supportive family encouraging me at every step and with every challenge. I am glad to have had you all on this journey with me, but I am also glad that this journey has come to an end. As much as I love learning, Brad, it is safe to say this will be my last degree.

To my committee—Dr. Bowles, Dr. J. Bartlett, Dr. Gerler, and Dr. M. Bartlett—I can’t even begin to describe how my learning at NC State has impacted me as a community college professional. Thank you for your support in reviewing the research manuscript and your guidance and encouragement during this process. I am especially grateful to Dr. Bowles, who has continued to support me—sensing when I have had the fortitude and grit to persist, yet knowing when I needed a little push to get me moving forward once more when I was stumbling in the dark.

To my friend and colleague Brenda Mercer-Burgess, thank you for your unwavering support. I appreciate your willingness to assist me during my research study. Your listening ear, advice, and many vent sessions during lunch were invaluable and much appreciated.

And to Penny Lovett, my sister. We have shared so many of life’s challenges and triumphs through the years. I appreciate your relentless support and encouragement and will always cherish our friendship.
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

With the current convergence of over two million service men and women returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, many veterans will need to acquire new skills and knowledge to successfully transition to civilian life (American Council on Education, 2009; Cook & Kim, 2009; McBain, Kim, Cook, & Snead, 2012). Veterans taking advantage of the educational benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill look to postsecondary institutions, particularly community colleges, to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to move forward in their civilian lives. Community colleges are at the vanguard of initiatives such as competency-based education that could help veterans complete a certificate or degree, which in turn could help them to connect to the labor market (Karp, 2016). Many student veterans choose to attend community colleges because of their low cost and open door admissions policies. Approximately 40 percent of student veterans attend community colleges (Karp, 2016). Community colleges afford student veterans the opportunity to either supplement the skills they acquired while serving in the military or transition to another career field to gain employment.

Veterans without a college education face a higher unemployment rate than veterans with a college education (Lang & Powers, 2011). In 2015, the unemployment rate for veterans who served in the military was 5.8 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Half of post-9/11 service members experience at least some period of unemployment upon separation from the military (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015). As over two million service men and women return from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the need for college campuses to prepare for student veterans has been receiving widespread attention.
from higher education institutions, with many initiating programs and services to serve this student population (American Council on Education, 2009; McBain et al., 2012; O’Herrin, 2011; Smith-Osborne, 2009).

**History of Veterans and Higher Education**

U.S. military veterans have had an enormous impact on the development of adult and higher education in America (Anderson & Kime, 1996). Recognizing the need to provide returning veterans who served in World War II with programs and services to help them readjust to civilian life, President Franklin Roosevelt signed into effect the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act (GI Bill) in 1944. By the time the GI Bill ended in 1956, it had empowered more than 7.8 million veterans to further their training and education (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2013). This legislation helped expand the middle class in America. Those who sought an education between World War II and the Vietnam War enrolled in two-year institutions and vocational programs more than other undergraduate college programs (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013).

During 1966–1976, what is now known as the Vietnam-era GI Bill afforded veterans the opportunity to enroll in higher education institutions. According to Angrist (1993), the Vietnam-era GI Bill allowed veterans to obtain higher earning employment, on average, than veterans who did not return to school. Vietnam veterans tended to prefer occupational and vocational education and pursued those opportunities at community colleges (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013).

In 2008, the Post-9/11 GI Bill was signed into law, affording veterans support for educational expenses, tuition, fees, housing and book stipends (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013).
The government’s support of veterans seeking higher education has precipitated a significant increase in postsecondary education enrollments (Caspers & Ackerman, 2013). In 2008, more than 500,000 veterans applied for certificates of eligibility, and more than 300,000 veterans and their family members used the Post-9/11 GI Bill to attend classes (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010).

In April 2012, former President Barack Obama’s administration made veteran educational success a priority by signing Executive Order 13607, *Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members*. This executive order called for agencies to work together to ensure that educational institutions effectively serve those who have served the nation (Whitehouse, 2016). By 2015, three years after the passage of President Obama’s Executive Order, 790,507 veterans had utilized the Post-9/11 GI Bill to further their training and education (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015). That increase of 490,507 veterans represented a 164 percent increase over the years since the 2008 passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

With the federal government’s increased investment in veteran benefits, community colleges saw new opportunities to increase their involvement in serving the educational needs of veterans. As of 2016, of the more than 790,000 veterans using their GI Bill benefits for education, approximately 40 percent of them attended community colleges (Karp, 2016). Since the passage of the new GI Bill in 2008, the community colleges in North Carolina have grown by over 33,000 students, or roughly the size of one of the flagship state universities, North Carolina State University (Ralls, 2012). Among this growing student population are a large number of servicemen and women, who generally require additional training and
education to return to civilian life (Ralls, 2012). As enrollment increases for the veteran student population, more attention must be given to the issue of persistence at the community college level. Serving the veteran community lies within the overall community college mission of serving the needs of the community at large.

With the major military presence in the state of North Carolina, including military bases at Seymour Johnson, Cherry Point, Fort Bragg, and Camp Lejeune, community colleges within the state are tasked with providing the necessary instruction and training for veterans to succeed. North Carolina community colleges maintain close connections to the armed services and have formed partnerships with military bases to meet the educational needs of military veterans. Some community colleges have formed training and education centers on base near their campuses for military veterans and families. The training and education centers offer college courses in a variety of flexible formats (face-to-face, online, hybrid classes).

Some community colleges have established programs specifically aimed at increasing veterans’ academic persistence. For example, Central Carolina Community College’s (CCCC) Veterans’ Upward Bound Program assists veterans in the development of academic and other requisite skills necessary for acceptance and success in a program of postsecondary education. The program provides assessment and enhancement of basic skills through counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and academic instruction in the core subject areas to increase the rate at which participants enroll in and complete postsecondary education programs (North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges, 2015).
Many community colleges have also established procedures for veterans to transfer in military credits to their institutions, and have created certificate and degree programs geared toward veterans’ military experience, such as homeland security, disaster management, operations leadership, and terrorism studies. North Carolina’s Fayetteville Technical Community College (FTCC) has developed and implemented a process for review of military training that has resulted in the mapping of more than 100 military occupational specialties (MOS), as evaluated by the American Council on Education and FTCC faculty, to specific Associates degrees, or to an Associate in General Education (AGE). The amount of credit varies by MOS and military skill level (e.g., an infantryman at military skill level 10 will receive 16 credits towards the AGE, whereas an Infantryman at skill level 40 will receive 31 credits) (North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges, 2015).

Exploring North Carolina military veterans’ academic persistence is an important and useful undertaking, providing information that can be used in measuring and ensuring public accountability for programs and services within the community college system. The North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges monitors performance data to ensure public accountability for programs and services to ensure student completion and persistence toward a post-secondary credential. According to the North Carolina Community College System (2013),

Funding tied to the completion and persistence of community college students is allocated based on each community college’s institutional performance. Establishing performance measures provides additional recurring funds that are badly needed to increase student success at community colleges, while also ensuring accountability by
allocating the funds based on performance. This performance-based funding model reflects key principles: it recognizes student progress and completion, values progress and continuous improvement, and rewards programs for quality and impact on the State’s workforce.

Since the establishment of the performance measures in 2010, it has become increasingly important to community colleges within the State of North Carolina to develop ways to increase the completion and persistence of its students, including veterans who are students. This study aims to assist community colleges in identifying the factors that support and hinder academic persistence, and to inform their efforts to develop and implement policies and programs geared toward academic persistence among the veteran student population.

Statement of the Problem

The problem that this research study addressed was the gap in our understanding of veteran community college students’ academic persistence, and particularly our understanding of how they experience and describe academic persistence. Although some prior research documents the persistence of veterans at four-year colleges and universities, a significant gap in the literature exists regarding the experiences of veteran community college students and how those experiences relate to the students’ academic persistence. Much of the research on veterans in higher education is from veterans of previous generations and wars. For example, shortly after World War II, Toven (1945) researched career counseling for veteran students. In the Vietnam era, Sutton (1975) explored the effect of financial aid on withdrawal from a Florida community college and found that veterans receiving GI Bill benefits did not withdraw at a higher rate than non-veteran financial aid
recipients. More recently, research focusing on today’s veteran students has tended to focus on the needs of veterans with combat-related physical and psychological issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and drug/alcohol abuse (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011).

This research study took a different approach, seeking to explore the lived stories and experiences of academic persistence of veteran students. Research participants in this study described the personal, social, and environmental factors that shaped their academic persistence and the factors that supported or hindered their academic persistence. Gaining insight into the factors that contributed to their academic persistence from matriculation to completion of their educational goal will add to the collective understanding of persistence within veteran community college students.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of veteran students in a southeastern community college to gain an understanding of the factors that contributed to the students’ academic persistence from matriculation to completion of their educational goals, whether defined as a college course, certificate, degree, or diploma. According to Mikelson and Saunders (2013), it is important for institutions to assess their programs, policies, and practices to determine their impact on the experiences and persistence of veteran students. Using a narrative inquiry approach, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of veteran students in community college?
2. How do personal, social and environmental factors shape the persistence of veteran students in community college?

3. What factors support the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college?

4. What factors hinder the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college?

This study utilized a narrative inquiry approach to elucidate the students’ experiences of academic persistence within the community college. The framework for the research study is constructivist, meaning the study assumes a contextual epistemology, views knowledge as socially constructed, acknowledges multiple perspectives of both the participants and the researchers, and takes a reflective stance towards situations and participants (Charmaz, 2006).

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is provided by Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory (Brofenbrenner, 1993) and Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support (Vacchi, 2011, 2013). Together, these theories help to explain how students’ experiences during their college years are salient influences on a wide spectrum of student outcomes, including educational persistence (Reason, 2009). In this study, Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory (BST) was used to conceptualize how personal systems, social systems, and environment can influence academic persistence. BST is a developmental theory that incorporates the elements of person, process, context, and time (PPCT) to create an environment that shapes personal growth (or persistence) based on the
person’s experiences. The theory elucidates that human development (or in the case of this study, persistence) is the result of interactions between the individual and the environment. Five nested environments—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem—are accounted for within the theory. The nested layers within the environmental system can coexist and influence the development/persistence of an individual. The second component of this study’s theoretical framework, Vacchi’s (2011, 2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support, helps to elucidate the complexity of the college experience for veterans. Vacchi’s model allows the researcher to loosely accommodate the passage of time and conceptualize how different aspects of a student veteran’s collegiate experience and life can vary in prominence (Vacchi, 2011, 2013). Combining both models, this study situates the Conceptual Model for Student Veteran Support within the microsystem of the BST model for veterans.

This theoretical framework illuminates how the *microsystems* of people and organizations can interact with the student veteran within the *mesosystem*, allowing shared, lived experiences to take place between systems. The microsystem level refers to the interpersonal contexts involving the student, such as residential halls, classes, student organizations, employment settings, social events, living situations, church, family, and community (Renn & Arnold, 2003). According to Vacchi and Berger (2013), areas unique to student veterans may include medical conditions, life challenges, identity transitions, and issues involving dependents. Vacchi and Berger (2013) posit that veterans may also have numerous student involvement aspects within the microsystem, such as participation in student organizations or government, along with support relationships outside the campus.
The mesosystem level refers to the interactions, linkages, and processes among microsystems (Renn & Arnold, 2003); for example, the microsystem of a student’s employment interacts with the microsystem of the classes the student is taking, as well as the student’s friendships and social activities. The study participants expressed how developing friendships with fellow veteran students establishes a camaraderie that allows them to develop a connection to the educational institution and ultimately increases their likelihood of persisting. Having a sense of camaraderie with fellow veteran students within the college is an example of the linkages between microsystems. According to Vacchi and Berger (2013), the interdependence of microsystems may lead them to reinforce or counteract one another, thus affecting students’ persistence. An example of this interplay is a combat veteran experiencing a PTSD-related flashback and having to miss classes to see health professionals at the VA (Vacchi & Berger, 2013). In this case, the health microsystem is impacting the coursework microsystem.
Figure 1. Brofenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory.
Significance of the Study

The extant research on the persistence of veterans at four-year colleges and universities has been limited, and has focused primarily on student characteristics, retention efforts, and perceived barriers to persistence. Prior research has not considered the experiences of veteran community college student with academic persistence. The significance of this study, then, is that it provides insight into the stories and lived experiences of veteran community college students’ academic persistence, and these insights can inform theory, practice, and policy.

By adding to the existing knowledge on veteran students’ experiences with academic persistence within community colleges, this study may encourage community colleges to more closely examine and seek to understand their influence on the persistence of veteran students. From a practical perspective, the research findings will inform community college administrators to help them shape institutional policy and program decision-making in order to enhance persistence, programming, and completion rates of veteran students. For policymakers, this research will build awareness of the myriad of factors that contribute to the academic persistence of veteran community college students and the need for resources, programming, and legislation to support the academic persistence of veteran community college students.

This study will explore the academic persistence of veteran students at one southeastern community college. Learning from the narratives of these particular students will provide counter-stories of resilience and success; it will also support Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support framework of utilizing storytelling as a means
of affirming the participants' lived experiences. This study creates an avenue for the voices of veteran community college students to be heard.

**Definition of Key Terms**

Several terms are important to define in order to provide context for this study. The definitions provided by the author are informed by the literature unless otherwise noted.

1. **Academic integration.** Students’ ability to become a part of a scholastic college environment; may be influenced by a number of factors, including GPA, satisfaction with faculty, participation in study groups, and utilization of academic advising. Different studies may measure different factors (Arnold, 1999).

2. **Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).** Established as an independent agency under the President by Executive Order 5398 on July 21, 1930, the VA was elevated to Cabinet level on March 15, 1989 (Public Law No. 100-527). The VA’s mission is to “serve America’s veterans and their families with dignity and compassion and to be their principal advocate in ensuring that they receive medical care, benefits, social support, and lasting memorials, thereby promoting the health, welfare, and dignity of all veterans in recognition of their service to this Nation” (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.).

3. **GI Bill.** An educational entitlement for military service members, to include benefits under chapters 30, 32, 31, and 34/30 (Title 38 of the U.S. Veterans Code).
4. *Goal attainment.* In this study, the term refers to students achieving a particular educational objective, specifically a college course, certificate, degree, or diploma.

5. *Matriculate.* To enroll as a student at a school (Arnold, 1999).

6. *Non-traditional students.* Students ages 25 and older who return to school for any reason, whether for a GED, a degree, an advanced degree, a professional certificate, or any other reason (adulted.about.com, n.d.).

7. *Persistence.* As used in this study, persistence refers to students’ remaining continuously enrolled to their last semester of college, or to the completion of another desired educational goal.

8. *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).* A mental health condition triggered by experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event (Mayo Clinic, 2014).

9. *Social integration.* Students’ ability to develop relationships with other students and student groups outside an academic setting; includes a number of factors such as having lunch with other students, participating in school clubs, and attending football games (Arnold, 1999).

10. *Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).* An injury that results from an impact to the head that disrupts normal brain function. Traumatic brain injury may affect a person’s cognitive abilities, including learning and thinking skills (alz.org, 2016).
11. **Veteran.** A person who has engaged in active duty in the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, or Coast Guard, and was released under a condition other than dishonorable (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

12. **Veteran-friendly campus.** A campus of a higher education institution that identifies and removes barriers to the educational goals of veterans, creates a smooth transition from military life to college life, provides information to veterans about available benefits and services, creates campus awareness of the student veteran population, and creates proactive support programs for student veterans based on their needs (Vacchi, 2011).
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of veteran students in a southeastern community college, and gain an understanding of the factors that contributed to their academic persistence from matriculation to completion of their educational goal. Goal completion was self-defined as the achievement of a course, certificate, diploma, or degree. To date, very little research has been devoted to investigating the persistence of community college students, or to advancing a dedicated community college outcome model (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). This qualitative study sought to describe these student veterans’ experiences and discover any impact these experiences might have on the academic persistence of veteran community college students. This chapter reviews the relevant literature.

First, the chapter gives an overview of community college student persistence and the history of persistence theories, which were primarily developed to describe the persistence of traditional and non-traditional students at four-year institutions. The section explores seven persistence theories that form the foundation for community college persistence research. The theories of Tinto (1975) focused on traditional students, and Bean and Metzner’s (1985) focused on non-traditional students (Summers, 2003). Other theories, proposed by Chickering (1974), Pascarella (1980), Tierney (1992), Choy (2002), and Southerland (2006) are also discussed in connection to Tinto, Bean, and Metzner’s work. Second, this literature review addresses the research on social support and veteran needs, and its significance to persistence. These concepts are integrated into a discussion of the persistence of veteran students. The chapter then provides an overview of veteran community college students’ persistence studies. Finally, the chapter provides an overview of the literature on
Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory in combination with Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support that serve as the theoretical framework for the development of this study.

**Community College Student Persistence**

The dropout rates for community college students are significantly higher than those of students at four-year institutions (Johnson, 1991; Mohammadi, 1994, 1996; Nakajima et al., 2012; Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Sorey & Duggan, 2008; Tinto et al., 1994). Almost 50 percent of community college students who enter in the fall term drop out before the start of the next fall term (ACT, Inc., 2010; Schuetz, 2005); only 46 percent of students who enter community colleges with the intention of earning a degree or certificate have attained that goal, transferred to a four-year institution, or are enrolled six years later (Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, & Shepherd, 2010). Contributing to this high attrition rate is documentation that community college students are a high-risk population, three to four times more likely to exhibit “at risk” factors that threaten persistence, including being older, enrolled part-time, a member of a racial or ethnic minority, from lower family income (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Sorey & Duggan, 2008), and less academically prepared (Parsad & Lewis, 2003). The attendees of community colleges include a high percentage of students with the highest proportion of risk factors (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012; Mohammadi, 1994).

Today’s 1,132 community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014) enroll close to 50 percent of all the first-time degree/certificate-seeking students in degree-granting institutions (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013; Cohen et
al., 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011), as well as almost 35 percent of the total enrollments in degree-granting institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Over the period 2000–2012, community colleges experienced enrollment expansion of over 1.2 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), so that by fall 2012, more than 12.8 million students were enrolled annually in credit and noncredit courses offered by community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014). However, while community colleges have done an exceptional job of ensuring access, they have paid much less attention to the success—or persistence—of their students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012).

To provide context for this study, a review of persistence theories and models is presented. In general, although college student persistence has been studied in higher education four-year college literature, it has lacked a unifying and underlying theoretical approach (Hisada, 1988). The majority of persistence research is based on Tinto’s Student Departure theory (1975), which was based upon work by Durkheim (1951) that dealt with suicide and on Van Gannep’s (1960) theory on rites of passage. According to Durkheim, suicide was more likely to occur if the individual failed to appropriately integrate into society. Tinto likened the student’s decision to leave college to Durkheim’s theory of the various forms of suicide, with the student failing to socially integrate successfully within their campus community. In the late twentieth century, research on student persistence took on a sociological perspective, and came to focus on identifying group and individual attributes that would lead to persistence or dropout in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Today, current research on persistence is concerned not only with interactions, but also with
individual psychological assessments of the phenomenon (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Persistence research has evolved from its origins in student departure theory, with its emphasis on comparison between groups (traditional and nontraditional students), to its current focus on individual psychological assessments and relationships.

**Persistence Theories and Higher Education Research**

Tinto’s theory posits that academic and social integration promotes student retention. Since Tinto first published his Student Departure theory in 1973, persistence theories have been conceptualized in many different ways. Despite the characterization that student veterans are nontraditional students (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; McBain, 2012; Radford, 2011; Vacchi, 2012), Tinto’s Student Departure theory focuses on traditional student populations and may not be applicable for nontraditional students such as student veterans.

Even today, research on student persistence relies heavily on Tinto’s student departure theory. However, given the characterization of student veterans as nontraditional, Tinto’s student departure theory may not be appropriate for application to veteran students’ experiences. Tinto’s model also posits that student veterans must integrate and adapt socially to a campus environment in order to succeed, which nontraditional student research demonstrates is not accurate (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Traditional student models fail to account for the differences between student veterans and their traditional student peers, even among traditional-aged student veterans (Vacchi, 2013). Freire (1970) called this deficit modeling. In order to support the academic persistence of student veterans, it is crucial to understand their differences from other types of students, as well as the different subpopulations and subcultures within this group. Berger (2000) asserted that institutions
may need to adapt to unique subpopulations of students, rather than expecting these students, such as student veterans, to adapt to the campus. Tinto (1975) posited that students should socially adapt or integrate to the campus community through steps similar to rites of cultural passage. The steps of this passage include separation, transition, and incorporation.

Tierney (1992) argued that Tinto’s use of Van Gannep’s theory of cultural passage is flawed, and that Tinto misrepresented the cultural definition of ritual and relied too heavily on the integration framework. He suggested that the rites of passage rituals are not applicable across cultures and that Tinto adopts an anthropological term and disregards its cultural foundations. In 1993, Tinto made several revisions to his theory, including the following: emphasizing the need to attend to subcultures of students and the communities in colleges that support their persistence (students of color, nontraditional, and older students); and recognizing the different needs of students in commuter and two-year institutions and the role of the classroom in retention, in regards to different subcultures’ engagement with the campus community. This study argues that it is important for institutions to understand their unique cultures and subpopulations, such as student veterans, in order to better support their persistence toward their educational goals, whether completion of a college course, certificate, degree, or diploma.

Tinto (1993) made changes to his persistence model based on a review of literature examining selective private schools retaining students at a higher rate (57.6%) than open admissions institutions like community colleges (38.7%). The data comparing the National Longitudinal Survey of the High School Graduation Class of 1972 (NLS) to the High School and Beyond Studies of the High School Class of 1980 (HSB), revealed an increase in
attendance and attainment for community college students over an 8-year period. This indicated an increase in the enrollment and retention at community colleges. Tinto concluded his review of the literature by positing that more students are taking advantage of community colleges to determine their fit with higher education.

Tinto’s 1993 revision to his theory had further implications for nontraditional students. In his review of the literature, Tinto found that commuter students were more influenced by academic than social concerns, and more influenced by external events than internal campus issues; this led to his inclusion of the external environment in his model. One of the most important factors influencing persistence in Tinto’s original theory was that of academic integration. Academic integration in Tinto’s model was defined as the interplay between grade performance and intellectual development. Tinto defined intellectual development as the likelihood that students would value their college education as a process of gaining knowledge and of appreciating ideas rather than as a process of development for a career. Because nontraditional students often focus more on their careers, in Bean and Metzner’s model, academic variables in the form of integration include the more practical factors, such as study skills, academic advising, and course availability.

Three of the factors included in Bean and Metzner’s (1985) construct of academic variables relate to individual skills and abilities, which include study skills, absenteeism, and certainty with regard to major selection. Students who possess poor study skills and habits are less likely to persist in college (Astin, 1975). Likewise, those that spend less time studying are less likely to stay in college, especially for nontraditional students who may not have as much time or energy to devote to studying (Baumgart & Johnstone, 1977).
Absenteeism is another individual attribute which contributes to dropout. Absenteeism can be defined as the extent to which a student misses classes. According to Bean and Metzner, absenteeism serves as another indicator of a student’s reduced interaction in classes and with their professors and fellow classmates, which in turn leads to less integration. Finally, a student’s degree of certainty of their major in college is also an individual attribute that is negatively related to dropout from higher education, especially at two-year colleges (Staman, 1980).

In regards to social integration for nontraditional students, Tinto found that informal contact with faculty, staff, and students on campus is still important for persistence. Nontraditional student departure, like traditional student departure, “is affected by the availability of supportive faculty and student groups on campus” (Tinto, 1993). In comparison to traditional students, Tinto explored the issues that are more important for commuters and nontraditional students: prior intentions, commitments, academic performance, and external forces. This led him to include different constructs to his theory in 1993.

**External Environment and Persistence**

Tinto (1993) included the constructs of the external environment and student intentions to his model based on the work of Bean and Metzner. Bean and Metzner stated that nontraditional students could be defined by any of these three characteristics or a combination: number of credits enrolled, residence, and age. The researchers drew on work from Pascarella (1980) who found that attendance at college on a part-time basis reduced the amount of interaction with other students and faculty members, thereby reducing the social
influence of attending college as well.

Further, research on commuting or living on a college campus (Chickering, 1974) revealed that these living arrangements could be significant factors in the socialization of traditional students and were highlighted as the most important difference between traditional and nontraditional students. Age could also be a salient contributing factor to the different experiences of traditional and nontraditional students. Older students, typically older than 24, must balance more roles and tasks in their lives than traditional students, and therefore are more affected by the environment external to the campus rather than on-campus influences (Chickering, 1993; Stewart & Rue, 1983).

Bean and Metzner (1985) posited that the external environment is more important to nontraditional students’ persistence decisions than the social environment is for traditional students. Due to the likelihood of nontraditional students being part-time commuter students, Bean and Metzner stated that these students are less likely to spend time on campus interacting with faculty and students through extracurricular activities and campus services. These assumptions have led researchers to revise their understanding of the impact of social integration, which they now regard as having a lesser relationship to persistence decisions for nontraditional students.

Tinto (1975) stated that the impact of the external environment played a role in attrition, and he posited that the impact of the external environment would be “best observed through the person’s changing evaluations of his commitments to the goal of college completion and to the institution in which he is registered” (p. 97). Tinto originally excluded the external environment as an influence on persistence, but in later updates acknowledged
the importance of the external environment as an influence on dropout. Bean and Metzner (1985) identified environmental variables as those factors over which the educational institution has little control, but which still require considerable time and energy from the student; these requirements, such as work commitments, family responsibilities, and finances, may affect the student’s decision of whether to stay in college or leave.

Some environmental variables can be harnessed by educational institutions to help students navigate toward persistence in completion of their academic goals. The theoretical framework used in this research is Brofenbrenners’ Bioecological Systems Theory, which elucidates how human development (or in this study, persistence) is the result of interactions between the individual and the environment. Later in this chapter, the five nested environmental systems will be discussed in terms of the student veteran experience, according to Vacchi and Berger (2013).

**Persistence of Nontraditional Students vs Traditional Students**

In a compilation of governmental reports on post-secondary education, Choy (2002) discussed college persistence. The major themes of the report were the description of college students of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, identification of factors that influenced access to college, and discussion of the importance of continuous enrollment and degree completion. Choi noted that in 1998, over 9 million students were enrolled in institutions of higher education, which is an increase of 25 percent from the 1970s (p. 9).

Choy (2002) defined a traditional student as “one who enrolls full-time immediately after earning a regular high school diploma, relies on his or her parents to pay for college and related expenses, and either does not work or works part time” (p. 10). By the time of this
writing, this type of student had become the minority on college campuses; fully 60 percent
of students enrolled in institutions of higher education did not fit the description of
“traditional.” Although colleges still gear their programs and curricula toward traditional
students, Choy (2002) summarized the reality of college enrollment when she wrote, “the
young college student fresh out of high school concentrating full time on his or her studies is
not typical” (pg.10).

College students today cover a wide age range and come from diverse backgrounds.
Many lead complex lives, juggling school, work, and family responsibilities as they pursue
their degrees” (p. 10). Choy (2002) identified the key factors that influence access to college.
The primary factor is the educational attainment of the student’s parents. The
subcomponents of this factor are an educationally favorable home environment, curricular
influence, and knowledge of college costs and financial aid. According to Choy, the most
predictive curricular choice was taking high-level mathematics in secondary school.
Additionally, among low-income and middle-income students, those who applied for and
received financial aid were more likely to enroll in college. The next area examined by Choy
was continued enrollment in higher education; she clarified the difference between
institutional retention data and student persistence: “Looking only at institutional data, it is
difficult to track students’ success because they do not always follow a straight path to a
degree. A significant number of students transfer to other institutions for any number of
personal, financial, or education-related reasons” (p. 19). For comparison, Choy compared
the five-year retention rate of an institution that was 54 percent. During the same time span,
a snapshot of national graduation and enrollment, when transfer status and continued
enrollment were taken into consideration, the national average was 76 percent (p. 19).

When specifically examining nontraditional students, five-year graduation rates were significantly lower than those of traditional students. The cohort examined in this study had a four-year graduation rate of 31 percent (54 percent for traditional students); nontraditional students were also less likely to be enrolled after four years (p. 20). Choy (2002) noted that first-year retention of nontraditional students was very low and improved after every year the student was enrolled. It has already been established that the twenty-first century college campus is predominantly nontraditional. Southerland (2006) created a Model for College Choice and Persistence to assist institutions in retaining these students.

This model outlined several vectors that influence college choice and persistence. The term vector was used because each variable can have a positive or negative magnitude that will contribute to the overall decision whether or not a student will persist at his or her current institution of higher education. Southerland (2006) listed the vectors as follows: predisposition/personal background, personal goals, perceptions of self, compelling circumstances, means, enabling circumstances, institutional fit/institutional treatment of nontraditional students, and academic and social experiences (pp. 15-17). Southerland (2006) concluded that institutions of higher education must be prepared and able to accommodate the needs of nontraditional students, such as veteran students.

Despite the increasing significance of veterans on campus, research is just beginning to address the gaps in knowledge concerning the experiences and needs of this unique student population. Recent research (DiRamio 2008; Livingston 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) on student veterans demonstrates a growing interest by researchers in addressing this
knowledge gap. Recent studies, such as Cook and Kim’s (2009) study “Soldier to Student” and its sequel “Soldier to Student II” (McBain, 2012) added to the literature of veteran student characteristics and veteran-friendly services offered by campuses to increase student retention.

McBain’s (2012) research collaborated with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and the National Association of Veteran’s Program Administrators (NAVPA). This research presented the impact of the increasing numbers of returning veterans and how educational institutions responded. Only 238 of the 690 educational institutions that responded were two-year institutions (community colleges). The research concluded that veteran services and programs were more likely to be found at institutions with large veteran populations.

NASPA (2013), in collaboration with InsideTrack, conducted an online survey to elucidate what endeavors educational institutions were being taken to track veteran student progress. Thirty-three out of the 239 respondents were two-year community colleges. Of the services and programs that were provided at the responding two-year institutions, roughly 67 percent offered professional development to staff and faculty to address the needs of the veteran student population, and roughly 75 percent had dedicated space and or personnel for veteran students. Only 25 percent of the institutions surveyed stated they understood the causes of stop-out (temporary withdrawal) or dropout amongst veteran students. Although most of the educational institutions surveyed in this research stated that they had various initiatives in place to improve completion, only 5 percent had the data to substantiate it.
Little data currently exists to suggest how best to support the completion rates of veteran students (NASPA Research and Policy Institute & Inside Track, 2013). A collaboration between the Student Veterans of America (SVA), the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), and the Department of Veterans Affairs’ Veterans Benefits Administration (VA) conducted a national study to provide data on the completion rates of veteran students. The records of one million veterans, provided by the VA, were used during this study.

The study was conducted using secondary data analysis. During the study, the researchers focused on the veterans’ completion rate, time to completion, level of education, and field of study/degree pursued. The researchers found that veteran students displayed strong postsecondary academic outcomes, with 51.7 percent earning a postsecondary degree or certificate. Their findings are summarized as follows:

Three of the military branches had higher completion rates than the sample average of 51.7 percent: Navy (51.9 percent), Coast Guard (53.5 percent), and Air Force (66.9 percent); the Marine Corps had a completion rate of 44.9 percent and the Army had a completion rate of 47.0 percent. The average time to completion for an associate’s degree was 5.1 years, the median length of time was 4 years, and the mode was 2 years. The study found the following degree fields to be the most popular among those pursuing an associate’s degree: liberal arts and sciences (33.5 percent), business (17.8 percent), homeland security, law enforcement, firefighting (9.7 percent), health professions (9.3 percent), and engineering technologies (7.6 percent).
Student Veterans’ Needs for Academic and Social Support

Veterans who enroll at higher education institutions comprise a group of students with unique skills and perspectives, but also with special needs. A need is a psychological, physical, or physiological feature that causes an organism to move toward a goal (Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Maslow, 1943; Witkin & Altschuld, 1995; Young, 1994). In the case of veteran students, many needs can impede their persistence toward educational goals, including mental health factors (e.g., PTSD), physical and cognitive disabilities, academic needs (e.g., status as a non-traditional student), social needs (e.g., family expectations), and financial concerns. Understanding the other challenges veteran students may face is an important factor in learning how to best assist veteran students with their academic persistence in college. This section discusses the range of challenges faced by veteran students—including psychological, behavioral, physical, cognitive, academic, and social—as well as the specific types of support that some higher education institutions have offered to meet these needs. The section concludes with a brief description of the recent designation of some campuses as “veteran-friendly campuses.”

Mental Health Needs and Services

Pueschel (2012) reported that 60% of veteran students from Iraq and Afghanistan had direct exposure to combat and hostile situations, and posited that 46% of surveyed veteran students reported having significant symptoms of PTSD, with 8% of participants acknowledging having attempted suicide in the past. According to McDonald, Beckham, Morey, and Calhoun (2009), it is estimated that 35% of military veterans will seek assistance from mental health services in the first year after returning home from combat, and 5 to 20
percent will be classified as suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many community colleges are ill-equipped within their campuses to meet the demands of serving students seeking mental health services. The American Psychological Association reported:

While 68 percent of community colleges do offer some sort of personal counseling, the lack of psychiatric care is worrisome since many community college students are at an increased risk for depression, anxiety disorders and other mental health problems compared with their traditional university student counterparts. . . . Two year college students are more likely than university students to be employed or supporting family members while they attend school — stressors that can take their toll on these students’ mental health. (American Psychological Association, 2012)

Faced with student veterans’ array of needs, community college counselors are often not equipped with the specialized skills and resources to assist these students. College counselors wear many hats, from serving as academic advisors, career counselors, and personal counselors; ninety-seven percent of counselors surveyed by the American College Counseling Association in January 2012 stated they were responsible for serving on committees, academic advising and career counseling (American Psychological Association, 2012). As such, many counselors often simply lack the time to devote to individualized student mental health services. This may affect the quality of care and service that is given to support student veterans.

Turner and Berry (2000) posited that the post-secondary completion rates between students who received counseling and the traditional student population were equal, which is
significant considering that students in need of counseling are at risk of withdrawing from college. Turner and Berry’s (2000) finding helps illustrate the potential benefits of counseling on completion rates. Counseling and disability services can help mitigate some of the risks to post-secondary academic performance and completion that veteran students with mental health diagnoses and disabilities may encounter. While most of the studies to date have focused on the general student population, there is no evidence that student veterans would not also academically benefit from these services.

**Physical and Cognitive Disabilities**

Students with physical disabilities have had limited participation in higher education for over 100 years (Belch, 2004). Before the twentieth century, higher education in the United States was primarily for the education of clergy and social leaders (Malakpa, 1997). Over the years, higher education organizations have become more inclusive, and at several key points in time, such as after World War II and the Vietnam War, veterans have been targeted for inclusion in higher education institutions. Currently, institutions of higher education are serving millions of veterans who toured in Afghanistan and Iraq and are now utilizing generous educational packages provided by the post-9/11 GI Bill. Many of these soldiers returning to campus have combat-related physical and cognitive injuries that affect their ability to succeed in college. Thomas Church (2009), a human and organizational systems consultant who has provided over 20 years of rehabilitation services to clients, including student veterans, remarked that “soldiers are more likely to sustain injuries than to die in the Afghanistan and Iraqi wars as they did in past wars based on the ratio of injuries to deaths,” and the reason was that “medical advancements and improved equipment, especially
protective body armor, contribute to the improved survival rate” (p. 44). This means that many surviving soldiers will return from active duty with physical wounds. Unfortunately, these are not the only injuries sustained by returning soldiers. There are also invisible wounds that affect the psychological and cognitive abilities of veterans.

The Student Veterans with Disabilities RAND Center for Military Health Policy Research (2008) reported that about 18.5% of returned veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression, and 19.5% have experienced traumatic brain injury (TBI) during deployment. These high rates of disabilities mean that postsecondary institutions can expect to serve more students with disabilities. College students with disabilities are known to have lower graduation rates when compared to other students.

Whelley, Hart, and Zaft (2002, as cited in Getzel, 2008) reported that “completion of some college coursework by individuals with disabilities declined from 30% in 1986 to 26% in 2001.” The National Organization on Disability (2001, as cited in Getzel, 2008) stated that “postsecondary education completion for individuals with disabilities dropped during this same period” (p. 208). Student veterans who sustained injuries are part of the students with disabilities population. With postsecondary education graduation rates declining among students with disabilities, it is a signal for colleges and universities to pay attention to these students with disabilities, including new student veterans who are returning to campus with combat wounds.

Veterans as Nontraditional Students: Academic Experiences

There may be a considerable time period between when student veterans graduated high school and when they enrolled in college. During this time, a loss of academic
knowledge and skills may occur, and a relearning of basic knowledge may be required for veterans when they enroll in a community college. This relearning may delay time to degree completion or discourage student veterans from continuing with their education at all (DiRamio et al., 2008). Developing these skills may take time and discourage many student veterans from moving forward with their education. Taking these required basic courses could also financially affect a veteran’s ability to move forward with his or her education. Enrolling in basic courses may require the student veteran to use their GI Bill or other veteran funding sources on courses that are not required to complete their educational program, but are required to move forward to college-level courses that are required for completion of their educational program. Veterans who sustained lasting wounds from battle may have unpredictable attendance in class due to pain and other symptoms associated with their injuries. In addition, the side effects from medicines used to treat physical pain or mental health diagnosis could affect a veteran’s ability to concentrate, take notes, and remain alert (Church, 2009). In short, many veterans face a variety of specific challenges in their academic experiences.

**Veteran as Nontraditional Students: Social Experiences**

Socialization with classmates and peers is another source of stress with unique features for student veterans. Student veterans’ age and veteran status may make developing social connections with other students difficult. Some veteran students feel a sense of disconnection from their fellow classmates due to the age difference and emotional maturity they experience after enrolling in college after their discharge from military service. Their age combined with their real world experiences often makes veterans more emotionally
mature compared to their classmates (Branker, 2009). Another social barrier to veteran student persistence is an “anti-military” or “anti-veteran” environment on some community college campuses and in classrooms. Student veterans have reported discomfort in classes where professors appear to be anti-military, and some student veterans have reported verbal confrontations with other students when they disclose their veteran status (DiRamio et al., 2008). Due to the threat of such confrontations, some veterans may even hide their veteran status or avoid socializing with their classmates.

**Veteran-Friendly Campus**

To better serve veteran students, many colleges are now creating veteran-friendly campuses. These campuses are most commonly found in colleges and universities that have strong ties to the military or are geographically located near a military service base (Summerlot, 2009). A veteran-friendly campus is one where administrators, staff, and faculty attempt to identify and remove barriers to the educational goals of veterans, create a smooth transition from military life to college life, provide information to veterans about available benefits and services, create campus awareness of the student veteran population, and create proactive support programs for student veterans based on their particular needs (Vacchi, 2011). These veteran-friendly campuses tend to attract veteran students who are hoping to find institutions and academic programs that will facilitate their completion of their educational goals (Persky and Oliver 2011, Summerlot, 2009).

**Veteran Community College Students’ Persistence Studies**

As stated earlier, recent studies have attempted to apply DiRamio’s (1981) Schlossberg’s 4S Model to student veterans’ experiences with retention and persistence. The
model was developed for counseling adults in mid-career transitions and included four strategies for managing a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. Livingston (2011) utilized Schlossberg’s Theory as a theoretical framework to understand student veterans in his study exploring veteran reenrollment experiences in colleges. From this study, researchers identified a gap within the literature. Schlossberg’s Theory tended to focus on the exploration of transitions out of the military, ignoring utilizing a more comprehensive approach in studying student veterans’ experiences.

Several studies have compared the educational attainment of veterans to nonveterans (Card, 1983; Cohen et al., 1995; Elder, 1987; MacLean, 2005; Teachman, 2005). Two studies (Anible, 2007; Riley, 2007) have found significant results pertaining to veteran persistence despite the fact that these studies did not explicitly examine veteran persistence. Anible’s (2007) study was a quantitative examination of the relationship of a meaningful work experience on the persistence of students in four-year institutions. The researcher found that military service made it ten times less likely that a student would persist to a degree.

The other study was a qualitative ethnographic case study that researched the educational experiences of African-American males in a California two-year college (Riley, 2007). Results from this study indicated that military service served as a barrier to educational persistence, and that academic and social integration variables are important for African American veterans in two-year colleges. Therefore, the few studies found on veterans’ educational persistence indicate that veteran status is negatively correlated with persistence, and point to factors that may help in this important educational arena.
The Anible (2007) study sought to determine a difference in persistence between students who had a meaningful work experience after their graduation from high school but prior to their entry into college, and those who enrolled directly in college (Anible, 2007). The researcher used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Data (NLSY79), sponsored by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor. This dataset was a nationally representative sample of 12,686 youth, born between the years 1957 and 1964, and first surveyed in 1979 (Anible). The respondents were resurveyed annually from 1980 to 1994, and biennially from 1996 to the present.

The primary independent variable in this study was a meaningful work experience occurring between high school and postsecondary education, which was defined as at least one but no longer than two years of work. Control variables that were included were income, number of dependents, years needed to attain the bachelor’s degree, age, gender, race, ACT and SAT scores, and whether or not the student served on active duty in the armed services before or during undergraduate study. These were all determined to have a probability of influencing the dependent variable and so were included as predictor variables (Anible, 2007). The dependent variable was the attainment of a bachelor’s degree. Logistic regression was used to determine the probability of attaining a bachelor’s degree in the presence of an intervening work experience.

Results indicated three significant predictor variables: no work experience, no military service, and time to complete a degree. Participants who did not have an intervening work experience were 12 times more likely to persist to the earning of a bachelor’s degree than those with this experience, which was contrary to the researcher’s hypothesis (Anible,
Students who had no active duty military experience preceding or coinciding with undergraduate study were 10 times more likely to persist and earn a bachelor’s degree. Further, for every one-year increase in the number of years it took participants to earn a bachelor’s degree, students were over two times more likely to persist to earn a bachelor’s degree.

For the benefit of this current study, the military results were most significant. The researcher offered two explanations for the military finding based on his own assumptions. The first was that students who decided to join the military may have remained on active duty and pursued higher military ranks that did not require a bachelor’s degree. Second, veterans may have acquired marketable skills while in the service and successfully transferred these skills into lucrative civilian careers, thus lessening the need for a bachelor’s degree to ensure career advancement (Anible, 2007). Either way, it appears from this research that veterans from this study were less likely to persist in college than their nonveteran counterparts.

The Riley study (2007) focused on the academic and social integration experiences of fourteen African American male two-year college students who persisted towards graduation or transferred from a Southern California two-year college. Riley used a qualitative ethnographic case study approach to examine the influence of life experiences on the integration of these males into a two-year college setting, as well as the perceptions of college employees on the institutional support for these men of color. Four of the participants had previous experience in the military and discussed their struggles with balancing the military and higher education. Thematic coding was used to group and analyze
qualitative data, and results indicated that faculty interaction and campus climate were the most significant persistence factors for the students interviewed in this study.

Riley’s (2007) study served to produce some meaningful qualitative data about the perceptions of the military for veterans pursuing education in two-year colleges. As Riley indicated, although several participants cited the military as a way to obtain employment, along with the opportunity to attend college on the G.I. Bill, the interruption of education by military enlistment was most evident in this case study. The African American men who enlisted in active duty military service were subjected to interruptions of their academic studies by the same military duties that also offered them the promised benefit of obtaining a college education through the G.I. Bill (Riley, 2007).

The value of an education during or after the military was not lost on these two-year college students, as one student stated: “When I got in the military I saw that promotions and things were contingent upon a person having a degree” (Riley). Students in this study realized the importance of education and the benefits provided by the military, but were also frustrated by the interruption of their academic pursuits by military service. During this current study, active duty military service members were not be utilized. Instead, veterans who have served in the active military, naval, or air service, and were discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable were be studied to elucidate their experiences of persistence.

There were several important results from this study that can be applied to Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition. Riley (2007) found that these students of color had limited academic and social integration, yet still persisted in
two-year colleges. She also found from a qualitative perspective that this integration with faculty, peers, and the larger campus community, no matter how limited, was vital to the persistence of these students, including some veterans.

Riley found several factors that related to persistence in this two-year college that parallels the Bean and Metzner model. Goal commitment, informal faculty and peer interactions, and environmental variables were all related to persistence for these students. Environmental variables in this study included family responsibilities and outside encouragement. Riley summarized her findings by stating that engagement with peers and faculty inside or outside the classroom setting, as well as campus climate and other integration factors, play prominent roles in the academic success of African American males. These results are important for the current research study in that they lend support to the hypothesis that academic and social integration factors may be significant in the persistence decisions for veterans in two-year colleges.

Padilla’s theory of the College as a Black box and his study of Chicana/o students in college takes the study of persistence a step further. Padilla posits that many studies conclude that successful college students are the ones who are academically talented and supported during their efforts to obtain their degree. He also states that successful college students possess a high level of motivation and commitment to their educational goals. Padilla questions how students who are not considered advantage achieve their level of academic success. Padilla’s research centered on the concept of college as a “black box” in which there are inputs and outputs that are clearly defined, but the actions that occur (such as
the experiences and needs of community college student veterans) within the box are not clearly understood.

Students arrive on campus with a myriad of interests, goals, and experiences. Padilla (1999) posits that experiences are determined by the institution, the student’s major and the social and academic culture. Veterans’ experiences are varied, as they have experienced higher levels of responsibility and leadership while serving in the military. As stated earlier, veterans are a group of students who return to higher education with unique skills and perspectives, but also with special needs. Padilla (1999) describes the box as being full of barriers or obstacles that a student must overcome and separates the barriers to educational attainment into four segments:

1. Discontinuity—The difference between where a person came from and where they are.
2. Lack of nurturing—The lack of family support, lack of role models, and the lack of expectation.
3. Lack of presence on campus—Being socially isolated and a lack of important issues in the curriculum.
4. Resources—The lack of money and financial aid.

As stated earlier, there can be many barriers veteran students may face in their quest to obtain their education. A study based on Padilla’s theory of the College as a Black box does not take into account the needs of veteran students along with their experiences, which constantly evolve and change. As discussed in the Theoretical Framework section of Chapter 1, and later in this chapter, the Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support allows the
researcher to loosely accommodate the passage of time and how different aspects of a student veteran’s collegiate experience, and life can vary in prominence (Vacchi, 2011). Being able to identify the ever-evolving needs of veteran students may help college administrators in planning programs geared toward assisting the educational persistence of veterans.

This study elucidates a comprehensive approach for studying student veteran community college students. While envisioning what this comprehensive approach might look like, I was able to identify another major shortcoming of the literature on student veterans, the lack of a salient conceptual model from which to consider the community college experiences of student veterans and their needs. In the theoretical framework section of this chapter, this study elucidates a viable model from which to study and understand student veteran experiences with persistence.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for the research study was provided by Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) Bioecological Systems Theory (BST) in combination with Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support (2011, 2013). This section describes the theories and their applicability to student veterans. Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory is a developmental theory that elucidates how human development results from interactions between the individual and the environment. The theory incorporates the elements of person, process, context, and time (PPCT) to explain how environments shape personal growth. As conceptualized in this theory, the individual exists within a system of five nested environments—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—that can coexist and influence the development of the individual. The section below
discusses the five nested environmental systems, and relates them to the student veteran experience as conceptualized by Vacchi and Berger (2013).

**Microsystem.** This level refers to the interpersonal contexts involving the student, such as residential halls, classes, student organizations, employment settings, social events, living situations, church, family, and community (Renn & Arnold, 2003). According to Vacchi and Berger (2013), areas unique to student veterans may include medical conditions, life challenges, identity transitions, and issues involving dependents. Vacchi and Berger (2013) posit that veterans may also have numerous student involvement aspects within the microsystem, such as participation in student organizations or government, along with support relationships outside the campus.

**Mesosystem.** This second level refers to the interactions, linkages, and processes among microsystems (Renn & Arnold, 2003), for example, the influence of employment on taking classes and the influence of friendships in social activities. According to Vacchi and Berger (2013), this interdependence of microsystems may reinforce or counteract one another, and so it might affect students’ integration. An example of this is a combat veteran experiencing a PTSD-related flashback and having to miss classes to see health professionals at the VA (Vacchi & Berger, 2013).

**Exosystem.** This third level refers to the contexts in which the student does not have an active role, but the context has a direct effect on the student. Examples include institutional policies (admissions, curriculum, housing requirements), financial aid, and students’ family labor and economic conditions (Renn & Arnold, 2003). According to Vacchi and Berger (2013), examples in the case of student veterans would be institutional policies
regarding class enrollment holds (where a student cannot register for classes) due to late GI Bill payments by the VA, and quality of service provided by the VA in benefits processing or health care visits.

**Macrosystem.** The fourth level in the environmental system encompasses the broader political, economic, social, and cultural context in which individuals live. Renn and Arnold (2003) provide examples of the macrosystem for college students in the United States: meritocratic values rooted in democratic and capitalist ideologies, as well as cultural notions of gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The macrosystem contextualizes the inner systems and depends on given cultures and historical moments in time (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). According to Vacchi and Berger (2013), for student veterans, examples of the macrosystem include values impressed upon the veteran during military service and cultural norms of the military, such as trusting and respecting authority and comfort within structured and rule-based environments. Vacchi and Berger (2013) explain how incongruence between a veteran and an institution may occur if the values of the military, impressed upon a veteran during service, do not align well with the values of a college or university.

**Chronosystem.** Finally, because this ecological environment evolves over time, it can be said to reside within a chronosystem. Here we see the influence of generations ( Boomers, Millennials), historical events (9/11, the Great Recession), and social movements (Civil Rights, Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street), as well as popular cultural trends. According to Vacchi and Berger (2013), this system also accounts for transitions over the life course of an individual, such as entering college, graduation, first full-time job, marriage, and
childrearing. In the case of many student veterans, the events of 9/11 represent a significant developmental influence shaping the background of their lives, precipitating the wars in which they served.

This study combines Brofenbrenners’ Bioecological Systems Theory with Vacchi’s (2011, 2013) Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support to better elucidate the complexity of the college experience for veterans. Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support focuses on the student veteran as an individual adult learner undergoing a transition of identity as much as a transition of educational experience. The Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support allows the researcher to loosely accommodate the passage of time and how different aspects of a student veteran’s collegiate experience, and life can vary in prominence (Vacchi, 2011). Combining both models allows me as the researcher to situate the Conceptual Model for Student Veteran Support within the microsystem of the Bioecological Systems Theory model for veterans. This elucidates that the microsystems of people and organizations can interact with the student veteran within the mesosystem allowing shared, lived experiences to take place between systems. Moreover, combining these theoretical models provides a way to depart from utilizing a deficit model in conceptualizing student veterans (which was discussed earlier in the college persistence theories section). This approach will allow the researcher to understand and address the unique needs stemming from the student veterans’ experiences. Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support is shown in Figure 2.
Both Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory and Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support take into account how veteran’s persistence can be influenced by their immediate environment (i.e., institutions, family, community, financial issues, etc.). Both Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory and Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support posit that personal, social, and environmental factors that shape
persistence can coincide. Both model a theoretical framework that encompasses the theory that veteran students have the capability of allowing their immediate environment to either enhance or constrain their academic persistence.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a literature review of the bodies of research that inform this study. First, the chapter explored the literature on college persistence theories, including studies on external environment and on persistence among nontraditional students. The second body of literature to be reviewed was the work on veteran students and their needs, and how these needs can influence their persistence toward educational goals. This chapter concluded with an overview of the literature on Brofenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory in combination with Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support that served as the theoretical framework for the development of this study. It is the goal of this chapter to support a comprehensive understanding of what is known in each of the content areas of this study.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of veteran students in a southeastern community college in order to gain an understanding of the factors that contributed to their academic persistence from matriculation to completion of their educational goal, whether completion of a course, program, or degree. The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. What are the experiences of veteran students in community college?
2. How do personal, social and environmental factors shape the persistence of veteran students in community college?
3. What factors support the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college?
4. What factors hinder the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college?

This chapter outlines the overall methodology of the study by describing the research design, sample selection (including site selection and participant selection), data collection, and data analysis. The chapter also describes the procedures for validity and reliability, the researcher’s role and reflexivity, and the ethical considerations associated with conducting the study.

**Design of the Study**

This study utilized qualitative research methods. It is based on constructivist theories, specifically the Bioecological Systems theory and the Conceptual Model for Student Veteran Support, through which it illuminates veteran community college students’
experiences of persistence toward educational goals. Qualitative methods and a
collectivist philosophy were appropriate because the researcher was interested in
uncovering depth, inferred meanings, and unspoken attitudes from the participants, rather
than merely collecting quantitative data on participants’ perceived feelings of support via a
survey, devoid of the context that can be provided by participants’ own explanation and
justification.

This study utilized qualitative research methods to explore veteran students’ lived
experiences of persistence within community colleges in North Carolina. Literature provides
numerous definitions of qualitative inquiry in terms that have changed with the historical
understandings over the last century. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) offer a comprehensive
definition:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It
consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. . . .
They turn the world into a series of representations. . . . This means that qualitative
researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or
interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the primary instrument of the study, who then
holistically interprets and understands that meaning (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln,
2005; Merriam, 2002; Santasier & Plack, 2007; Stake, 2010). Literature indicates that a
fundamental goal of qualitative research is to achieve depth in research, instead of breadth,
by placing emphasis on a sample of individuals from a population, rather than the population
as a whole (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995). A second goal is to seek discovery of
something new or perhaps a modification of something in a field of study, rather than verification of something that is already known. A final goal is to focus on learning about people from the perspective of the personal meaning that they make of what they do.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mertens, 2010; Stake, 1995). This qualitative study is based on a constructivist framework, meaning it assumes a contextual epistemology, views knowledge as socially constructed, and acknowledges multiple perspectives of both the participants and the researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln, 1990). The constructivist framework utilizing a narrative inquiry is an appropriate framework for this study because it allows the researcher to better understand how the participants’ experiences allowed them to persist through their educational journey. Utilizing a narrative inquiry method allows the researcher to best capture the participants’ own lived stories and experiences.

The qualitative data for this study consisted of oral and written information provided by North Carolina veteran community college students and the colleges themselves, as well as field notes generated by the researcher. The data obtained from the veteran students was used to gain an understanding of what motivated the students in regards to academic persistence and what academic and student services helped them to persist. Additionally, a profile of the participants obtained through a demographic questionnaire added to the narrative discussion.

The narrative inquiry methodology was selected as most appropriate for this study. Clandinen and Connelly (2000) defined narrative inquiry as a way of understanding
experience. Narrative inquiry acknowledges both the researchers and participants’ experiences, and allows the reliving and retelling of the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives. In this study, narrative inquiry was used to capture veteran students’ experiences through interviews (Creswell, 2007) and to develop personal stories of students’ academic persistence while attending community college. Interviewing, recording, and analyzing veteran students’ reflections concerning their experiences with persistence while attending community college provided insight into what factors play a role in North Carolina community college veteran students’ persistence towards their educational goal attainment.

Narrative inquiry exists on a spectrum: at one end of this spectrum “is the pure narrative, a story told without explicit references to theories or research findings; the other end becomes the pure academic essay,” which references theory but remains without the narrative themselves (Goodall, 2008). In this study, the use of narrative inquiry focused on taking the sharing of North Carolina community college veteran experiences that are recalled as highly motivational in their academic persistence and using those experiences as personal truths to tell their lived stories.

Sample Selection

Site Selection

The study is situated in North Carolina, in the southeastern United States. This site was selected because of its proximity to the researcher and its significant military and veteran population. The state is seeing an increase in the number of members leaving the service as wars are winding down. There are seven military installations in the state of North Carolina, and about 770,000 military veterans live within this state (Hampton Road, n.d.).
The rural community college selected for this study is located in Goldsboro, North Carolina, near one of the seven military installations within the state, Seymour Johnson Air Force base. The college prides itself on partnering with the local military community to meet the educational needs of veterans, and it is also considered a “veteran-friendly” campus. The community college selected for this study is a two-year educational institution serving more than 4,000 students. The college offers an array of associate degrees, diplomas, and certificates. The racial breakdown of the school for Fall 2013 semester was approximately 59% White, 27% African-American, 2% Asian, and 12% other races.

Initially, I planned to use another southeastern community college as a research site for this study. However, due to the low number of student veterans I was able to recruit at that site who matched the eligibility criteria for this study, a second research site was located. Appropriate steps were taken to modify the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the change in protocol concerning the new research site.

**Participant Selection**

The sample for this study was selected using criterion sampling to recruit, identify, and select participants (Mertens, 2010). Qualitative research requires a sample that can provide rich information to generate an understanding of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2002). Criterion sampling requires the determination of essential criteria to use in selecting participants. For this study, participants had to meet three essential criteria to be eligible for selection:

1. must identify as a veteran;

2. must be currently enrolled in community college; and
3. must be in their last semester (getting ready to graduate and/or complete their desired educational goal attainment).

For this study, 16 participants were recruited from one community college located in the southeastern United States. The veterans who were selected were all currently in their last semester, preparing to graduate and/or complete their educational goal attainment. The participants were recruited through the email listserv of the community college where they attended and where the research was conducted, as well as through distribution of flyers around the campus, and through electronic correspondence with college administrators who were asked to help in identifying potential participants. The researcher also contacted the community college’s Veterans Affairs Certifying Official because she had direct contact with student veterans. This official agreed to forward an email from the researcher to all the veterans on her campus who had been certified to receive GI Bill benefits, asking them to contact the researcher if they thought they matched the selection criteria and might be willing to participate in the study. The email was sent out in summer 2016. In response, approximately 20 student veterans contacted the researcher about the study; however, only sixteen of the student veterans who responded actually met selection criteria and agreed to participate in the study.

Data Collection

To ensure the collection of rich, thick, complex data in the study, multiple methods were used. The use of multiple data collection methods enabled the researcher to establish triangulation, which is particularly important in narrative inquiry, as narrative stories are gathered through many different forms of data and provide opportunities for individuals to
share lived and told experiences (Creswell, 2013). Data for this study were collected via demographic questionnaires, in-depth interviews, field notes/journaling, and secondary documents. The primary data source was the round of in-depth interviews that the researcher conducted, as this data source was congruent with the problem being investigated. Specifically, because this study is a narrative inquiry designed to capture the sample population’s lived experiences, and the unit of analysis is the individual participants, the data collection centered around lengthy interviews in which participants were asked about their experiences and the meaning they made of those experiences.

Prior to conducting this study, the researcher gained IRB approval from the institution where she was a doctoral student, as well as from the community college where the study would be conducted. Specifically, in the absence of the college president, she obtained permission from the community college’s Vice President. The approval letter (from the IRB of North Carolina State University for study #7890) and the letter of collaboration from the participating community college are found in Appendices H and I. Throughout the duration of the research study, collected data were stored securely in digital and electronic formats on a password-protected computer storage drive. The ethical considerations, and the procedures taken to safeguard them, are detailed at the end of the chapter.

**Demographic Questionnaire**

The demographic questionnaire was used to establish a rapport with participants, while eliciting background information about them (Appendix D). The questionnaire asked close-ended questions that were not asked during the interviews. These questions asked for information pertaining to each participant’s age, family background, semester hours taken...
per semester, and educational goal status (i.e., pursuing a degree, diploma, certificate, or taking classes for professional and/or personal development). The questions on the demographic questionnaire were pertinent to the narrative inquiry method of understanding the lived experiences of research participants.

**In-depth Interviews**

In-depth interviewing is an appropriate data collection method for this study in that I seek to capture not just the words, but the deep understandings of my participants as they make meaning of their experiences in persisting through their educational journey. Marshall and Rossman (2011) refer to this approach as a “focus on the individual lived experience” (p. 93). The researcher planned for the interviews to include open-ended questions and to be conversational, yet she did conduct what is described by Patton (2002) as **guided interviews** based on pre-determined topics. After a criterion sampling was conducted, an informational letter querying interest in participation in the study was sent via email. Individual participants were scheduled during the summer 2016 to interview in a mutually agreed upon location on campus that was comfortable and convenient for the participants. An in-depth interview was conducted with each participant after informed consent was obtained.

Each participant was asked for permission to record the interview session prior to the beginning of the interview through the signing of a consent form. Also at the start of each interview, a written copy of the demographic questionnaire and interview questions were provided to each participant. Each interview was conducted face-to-face by the researcher and lasted one hour. Interviews were recorded using a digital device. Interview recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist shortly after each interview was
completed. At the end of the interview process, the researcher made arrangements for delivery of each interview transcript (either in person or via email) to the interviewee for the purpose of member checking. In this way, the researcher ensured the interview was transcribed properly and that participants’ stories and voices were captured appropriately.

Transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy by the primary researcher, who also compiled the questionnaire data. The transcriptions along with a $10 gas card in appreciation of their time and effort was distributed to each participant. Each participant was provided details on how to contact the researcher with comments or concerns about their interview data, or if they wanted to provide additional information.

To provide some structure to the interviews and ensure that each of the research questions would be addressed, several areas of exploration were defined. These were informed by the literature review and the conceptual framework of Bioecological Systems Theory and the Conceptual Model for Student Veteran Support. The areas of exploration were as follows:

- Participants’ background (military and educational experience, work experience, familial support);
- Participants’ detailed accounts of programs, services, and activities that helped foster their persistence as veteran community college students;
- Beliefs and expectations about the college’s role in helping veteran community college students persist towards their educational goals (in this case, a college course, certificate, degree, or diploma); and
• Participants’ personal, social and environmental factors that shaped their persistence as veteran community college students.

Delving in-depth into students’ experiences required using open-ended questions during the interview process. This approach is in line with the conceptual framework of the study, which accounts for multiple forces that operate in multiple settings to influence student learning and persistence (Reason, 2009). The interviews focused on eliciting information about the individual level of lived experiences, which is suited to the narrative inquiry method utilized in this study. The structure of the research interviews was intended to keep the focus on students’ own experiences in various areas of their academic and nonacademic lives (Terenzini & Reason, 2005).

Field Notes and Journal

In addition to descriptions of events and interviews, researchers often keep what are sometimes called reflective field notes or memos (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this study, a field guide was developed (Appendix E) to serve as a reflexive tool in detailing what transpired during the data collection process. According to Bodgan & Biklen (2007), “these notes are the thoughts, reactions, hunches and concerns about mistakes that come to the researcher as he or she gathers data, starts to analyze it, and works to find meaning in the data, avoiding any manipulation of what the study participants have said” (p. 78). During the interviews, the researcher took notes, and immediately following each interview, extensively journaled to document her thoughts while the experience was still fresh. The researcher recorded her observations into the field guide after each interview. Keeping a journal helped her to separate her preconceived ideas from the emerging data. This allowed her to let the
participants’ voices and stories guide the analysis. The field notes were used, in combination with audio-digital recordings, to induce themes from the data.

**Documents**

In addition to the demographic questionnaire, participant interviews, and field notes, a fourth data collection procedure was the review of institutional documents. The secondary documents that were reviewed included information available online for data related to college programs, services and college demographics. The purpose of reviewing these documents was to determine indications of institutional emphasis on veteran community college students as related to student persistence. The institutional documents also guided the development of participant interviews and institutional profiles.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher utilized qualitative data collection methods for the research study because she was interested in uncovering depth, inferred meanings, and unspoken attitudes from the participants. As such, data were analyzed through narrative analysis methods. Bernard and Ryan (2010) posited that analyzing text involves five complex tasks: (1) discovering themes and subthemes; (2) describing the core and peripheral elements of themes; (3) building hierarchies of themes or codebooks; (4) applying themes—that is, attaching them to chunks of actual text; and (5) linking themes into theoretical models. This section describes the procedures used for organizing the study’s data, as well as the procedures for developing themes, metaphors and coding schemes for the collected data.

The analysis of veteran interviews was conducted in two phases: concurrent initial analysis during data collection and formal descriptive analyses after all data were collected.
The concurrent analysis procedures involved the use of descriptive field notes and personal notes, and a review of completed audio interviews. Merriam (1998) highlighted the benefits of ongoing data analysis by stating, “Data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating” (p. 162). The focus of this level of analysis is to provide an ongoing examination of the focus of the study, the appropriateness of questions and instruments being used, and observations of topics or themes that may be important for later analyses.

After all data were collected, formal descriptive analyses were used. Bernard and Ryan (2010) stated that themes come from both data (an inductive approach) and from the researcher’s prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study (an a priori, or deductive approach). During the process of data analysis, the researcher became immersed in the data, beginning with the transcription process. The data analysis process provided the researcher with multiple opportunities to listen to the interviews to assure accuracy. Textual descriptions of the phenomenon were developed, and data management tools such as memos and codebooks were used throughout. Merriam (1998) defined coding as “assigning some sort of short-hand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (p.164). In this study, the researcher used the codes to begin the process of identifying themes.

The researcher also used the constant comparative method, which is the process of comparing each unit of information (codes) to the others in order to find recurrent ideas (Merriam, 1998). The researcher compared the codes and grouped like codes together to formulate themes. In order to ensure efficacy of themes, she followed Merriam’s (1998)
guideline that the researcher should make certain that the themes provide answers to the initial research questions, and that they are exhaustive and mutually exclusive.

Finally, schema analysis was used to understand the metaphors transcribed from the interviews. The researcher identified key words and phrases that appeared repeatedly, and used these to decipher the use of metaphors and the commonalities in the veteran students’ reasoning pertaining to their persistence in obtaining their educational goals. The theoretical constructs that were used in coding the interviews were Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory and Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support. These theories provided the concepts and language for the initial coding in particular. The positionality of the researcher is discussed later in this chapter.

**Validity and Reliability**

Qualitative research presupposes distinct ontological and epistemological worldviews, research questions, and methods for data collection and analysis; therefore, the standards for assessing this type of research must also be specific to the qualitative methodology. At present, there is some dispute as to the language that should be used to describe the assessment of qualitative research. Some researchers continue to use terms that are typically associated with quantitative research, such as *validity* and *reliability* (Creswell, 2011; Merrriam, 1998). Validity in research concerns whether the tools and mechanisms used measure what they say they will measure, and whether the claims made by the researchers are plausible (Long & Johnson, 2000). Reliability, in its most general definition, is the extent to which a measure produces the same results when used repeatedly to measure the same thing (Rossi et al., 2004). Although some qualitative researchers import these
quantitative concepts into their work, other researchers prefer to describe the assessment of qualitative research using the term *trustworthiness* (Morrow, 2005). Although there is not a consensus on what terms can be used, this study relies on the concepts of validity and reliability, and applies several techniques or strategies that qualitative researchers can use to enhance the reliability and validity of their research findings: triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation was achieved by collecting and comparing multiple sources of data to confirm findings. An interview protocol (see Appendix E), informed consent form (see Appendix C), and a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) were utilized to collect data during the research study. Stake (2010) posited that triangulation occurs throughout the course of the data collection and analysis phases and requires the researcher to be reviewing findings with skepticism to be sure the emerging picture is clear and meaningful. Further contributing to triangulation, descriptive field notes were also collected. These were written by the researcher using a standard form she developed (see Appendix G). This format is meant to be specific in focus. Personal notes/reflections were recorded using the digital audio recorder and/or written in a journal after each interview was collected. Field notes and personal notes were summarized using a word-processing computer program and saved in an electronic folder assigned to the participant using a coded label for confidentiality. Any written journals were securely stored in the researcher’s personal locked file cabinet. To protect the data, hard copy notes taken using the field notes form were secured in the researcher’s personal locked file cabinet. The general format of the narrative summary of
field notes were in paragraph form to allow for later coding. Each case summary of the field notes taken for a given participant were followed by the researcher’s writing of personal ideas, hunches, concerns, and/or general reflections about the interview/research study. The analysis of personal notes allowed for recording and/or observing of errors and biases.

**Member Checking**

The researcher also referred back to the participants of the study for member checking to ensure that she had captured their voices appropriately and that the interview was transcribed properly. In the subsequent findings section, the researcher wrote with rich, thick description to adequately describe the experiences of the participants and use their voice to illuminate the findings (Creswell, 2013). Reliability was incorporated in the study by ensuring high-quality recording equipment was utilized for the interviews and accurately transcribed for each interview (Creswell, 2013).

During this process, the researcher regularly checked in with colleagues and sought their feedback. She asked one of her colleagues, a veteran, for feedback to ensure she was not missing valuable evidence due to my limitations and potential biases. Additionally, the researcher developed role and reflexivity statements (included later in this chapter) as a way to highlight previous experiences, ideas, and prejudices regarding the subject of veteran community college students’ experiences with persistence.

**Audit Trail**

In order to ensure that findings were consistent with the evidence, the researcher also provided an audit trail (Merriam, 1998). An audit trail refers to a detailed description of the data collection and analysis procedures used throughout the study. Providing this
information demonstrates credibility and plausibility and allows for independent researchers to go back to understand the researcher’s procedures and how the findings were achieved and interpreted.

**Researcher Role and Reflexivity**

The researcher considered it important that she be aware of how her positioning with respect to the research could influence the various elements in the research design and execution. Throughout her professional career, she had been fortunate to serve veterans and their families within the community college educational setting. Having served in a broad range of capacities from student recruitment and retention, academic and career counselor and director, she was positioned as an insider in the community college setting. At the time of this study, the researcher was employed as Director of Counseling services at a community college, and this research was conducted with participants who were veteran students from the Military Resource Center at the community college where she worked. Although the participants were students at her campus location, she did not know the veteran students who participated in the study.

In addition to her professional work, the researcher also had a personal interest in the phenomenon of veteran experiences with persistence in community colleges and the challenges it presents to higher education. Beyond her everyday experience working as a professional in a community college, seeing first-hand the challenges veterans face in persisting within their educational journey, she also had a veteran as a father, and watched him successfully persist through his educational journey. This experience sparked a growing interest in and passion for finding meaningful ways to specifically support a continually
increasing segment of the student population within community colleges.

The researcher was conscious of her own personal interest in this topic of research, and was aware of the possibility of bias in the development and analysis of the research study. Throughout the data collection process and analysis, she kept a journal about her preconceived ideas in order to separate them from the emerging data. This practice helped her to let the participants’ voices and stories guide the analysis of this research topic. She also recognized that her bias could have a positive side. Her personal interest in this topic was what led her to choose it as a research focus. In conducting the research, she was able to use her understandings of the community college system and veteran resources and services to develop effective structures for deeper levels of data collection and analysis that may not otherwise have been possible. Despite her biases and career aspirations to continue conducting research and developing programs on this topic, she recognized her responsibility as a researcher to ensure that the research findings were applicable to veteran community college students in North Carolina. She also recognized that their experiences and voices deserve to be heard and accounted for.

**Ethical Considerations**

Marshall and Rossman (2011) argued that accounting for ethical considerations in research is fundamental to the trustworthiness of a study. Two primary principles that guided the researcher’s actions in this study include the respect that she showed to each of the participants and her unwavering adherence to the moral imperative to “do no harm” in the process. Every means was taken to protect research participants. The researcher was aware of the need to maintain sensitivity to the potential vulnerability of the participants through
characterizing their status and protecting the confidentiality of the participants.

In Marshall and Rossman’s (2006) guide to research, they explained that “Institutional Review Boards or Internal Review Boards (IRBs) in universities and agencies receiving federal funds must review all research proposals to ensure that the research will proceed with appropriate protections against risk to humans” (p. 88). To comply with research guidelines at North Carolina State University, an Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Submission for New Studies application was submitted and approved, accompanied by an Informed Consent form (Appendix C), the Interview Protocol (Appendix E), and informational letter (Appendices A) that were used in participant correspondence. The researcher was also required to complete a local International Review Board application process at the community college site used in the data collection. As noted above, the approval from the community college where the study was conducted came from the community college’s Vice President in the absence of the President. The approval letter (from the IRB of North Carolina State University for study #7890) and the letter of collaboration from the participating community college are found in Appendices H and I.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the experiences of veteran students in a southeastern community college to gain an understanding of the factors that contributed to their academic persistence from matriculation to completion of their educational goals. The study was guided by the following research questions: (a) What are the experiences of veteran students in community college? (b) How do personal, social and environmental factors shape the persistence of veteran students in community college? (c) What factors support the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college? (d) What factors hinder the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college? The research site and design, data collection and analysis methods were described in detail in the previous chapter. Chapter Four introduces the results and findings that emerged after the interviews were transcribed by the transcriptionist and then coded and analyzed by the researcher. The results presented in this chapter are organized by the themes that emerged from each of the research questions presented in this study.

Participant Demographic Overview

The demographic questionnaire that was conducted during the individual interviews obtained a descriptive analysis of the socio-demographic variables, employment, and educational levels of the veteran students at the southeastern community college in North Carolina. Participants were asked to provide the number of years they served in the military, which military branch they served in, did they retire from the military, gender, their age, marital status, number of children, if they work outside of the home, level of education, what level of education they are currently obtaining, and the number of semester hours (on
average) they take each semester. A detailed description of the socio-demographic information provided by participants is presented in Table 1. The age of those who participated in the study ranged from 27 to 68, with an average age of 43 years. Participants included thirteen men and three women. The range of years participants had served in the military ranged from 2 to 24 years, with an average of 10 years. Ten participants served in the Air Force, while 2 served in the Navy, 1 in the Marines, and 3 participants served in the Army. Four of the participants had retired from the military branch in which they had served.

Years of schooling among the participants varied significantly. For ten of the participants, it was their first time attempting to complete their degree, diploma, or certificate; for five of the participants, it was not their first time attempting to complete their degree, diploma, or certificate; one participant chose not to answer the question. Participants in the study took between 3 to 15 semester hours per semester, with an average of 14 semester hours towards completion of their educational goals.

A little more than half of the study participants were employed outside of the home during the completion of their educational goal, although not necessarily working full-time. During their educational journey, participants worked in law enforcement and maintenance, and as work-study students at the community college. Fourteen of the 16 participants were married. Eleven of the 16 participants had children.
Table 1. Demographics of Participant Veteran Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Military Branch</th>
<th>Years of Service/Retired</th>
<th>Married/Children</th>
<th>Work Outside of Home</th>
<th>First attempt to complete</th>
<th>Average Semester Hours Per Semester</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Marines</td>
<td>Did not answer/No</td>
<td>Yes/Did not answer</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>5.5/No</td>
<td>Yes/3</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bridgette</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>4/No</td>
<td>Yes/3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bryan</td>
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<td>Army</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes/2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Yes/0</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>JJ</td>
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<td>Yes/0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>20/Yes</td>
<td>Yes/3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
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<td>Yes/2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Did not answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose</td>
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<td>Air Force</td>
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<td>Yes/0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kenny</td>
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<td>Navy</td>
<td>3/No</td>
<td>Yes/3</td>
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<td>Lee</td>
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<tr>
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<td>36</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nathanial</td>
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<td>Yes/1</td>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
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<td>Air Force</td>
<td>5/No</td>
<td>No/0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Average:</strong></td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
<td><strong>n/a</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>n/a</strong></td>
<td><strong>n/a</strong></td>
<td><strong>n/a</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Profiles

Each participant in the study provided his or her experiences of academic persistence towards completion of their educational goal(s). This section provides brief narratives to introduce each of the research participants. The description will focus on a verbal summary of each participant’s experiences with academic persistence. All 16 individuals in the study participated in semi-structured interviews and demographic questionnaires. Table 2 displays the individual contact hours conducted during the interviews and demographic questionnaires.

Table 2. Participants’ Interviews and Demographic Questionnaires.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Individual Interview Contact Hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgette</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryan</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JJ</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenny</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathanial</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bill

Bill had served three years in the Marines. He had served time in Cuba at Guantanamo Bay and decided to go into the Marines so that he could receive the financial benefits to further his education once he left the military. Bill wanted to further his education and receive credentials in the automotive program. His local community college provided a diploma and certificate program that would allow him to pursue his dream. Bill believed that being a veteran student at a community college was like being in a different world:

The things they do in school now are a whole lot different than when I went to school. When I was in high school, we had the blackboard. We didn’t have any computers. It is different because you have to have a computer. They don’t call you, they email you. I don’t check my emails every day. I should but I don’t because I’m not used to it. I can’t type much; I use one finger. My spelling sometimes is bad, and it takes me longer to explain what I’ve got to say and sometimes I don’t get it across.

Bill believed that services such as tutoring and help outside of class during an instructor’s office hours are important to an older student’s persistence, especially those who may not be familiar or comfortable with using technology. His family supported him through his educational journey by providing positive thoughts and support.

Bob

Bob joined the Army and served five years right after high school. “It’s pretty much a cliché, but people talk about ending up dead or going to jail. That’s pretty much the road I was going down. I didn’t have any money at the time and didn’t have a job, so I joined the Army.” After leaving the military and working odd jobs, Joe decided to go back to school.
Joe was motivated by his perception that attending a community college would be easier than attending a university:

   It makes it pretty easy versus going to an actual university. One, it’s a lot easier to get into community college. If you’re going to a four-year school, it’s a lot more stringent process as far as having to submit essays and all that kind of stuff just to try and get in. It makes it a lot easier going to a community college.

During his tenure as a community college, Bob felt that the military’s structure and discipline helped prepare him to be successful as a college student:

   It kind of helps out having a military background because you’re always around a really wide age group [age difference between classmates] in classes. It kind of makes it a little bit easier because you can pick up on people’s attitudes and personalities a little bit easier. That’s not to say a lot of high school students going to college for the first time don’t understand it or have a grasp of it, because a lot of them do, but I think it makes it a lot easier though. You kind of know the sense of responsibility that you’ve got to have [to be successful in college], self-discipline and motivation to keep up [in your classes].

Bob’s wife and advisor supported him through to completing his welding diploma at the community college. His advisor was available to meet with him to provide academic guidance and support. At the time of the study, Bob’s wife was attending the nursing program at a community college, so she understood the commitment it takes to persist, and she provided words of encouragement and motivation.
Bridgette came from a military family. Her dad had served for 22 years of active duty in the Air Force. At the time that she joined the Air Force, she was going through a divorce and was unsure of what to do next. She joined the Air Force hoping that it would provide some structure, training, and guidance in her life. Bridgette served four years in the Air Force. Bridgette always wanted to pursue a bachelor’s degree and knew the local community college could provide the basic general education core classes that she needed to transfer to a four-year university. Bridgette felt that being a veteran student at a community college was like being an adult in kindergarten:

I was probably one of the oldest students, and then it wasn’t that it was bad; it was just they were all brand new. They were very young, 17 to 18 years old, but there were some other veterans there. I did the majority of mine online after I went to some of the classes and realized that I was probably the oldest, older than the instructor maybe even.

Family support was important to Bridgette’s persistence in completing her degree. Her mother, sister, and husband provided words of encouragement, especially during the difficult times in her educational journey. Her sister was going through college at the same time, so she they both were providing support for each other while going through the educational process. Financial aid geared toward veteran students also played a pivotal role in Bridgette being able to pursue and persist towards completion of her educational goal.
Bryan

Bryan went into the military straight out of high school. He served 24 years in the Army and retired from the military. Once Bryan retired from the military, he was interested in going back to school at the local community college because it gave him an opportunity to work and attend school at the same time. While attending the community college, Bryan felt like being a veteran student was very different than what he was used to coming from a leadership position within the Army:

For me it was different. What I thought I knew I found out I didn’t because of age. Proper English, then math; I had to start all over again and when I tested [placement test] I guess I didn’t test high enough to avoid those classes [pre-curriculum/developmental classes], and so I started them and they were like a joke and the teacher was too.

Bryan believed that classmate support was important to his academic persistence. Most of his classmates had served in the military, and he felt that camaraderie helped to provide a support system that was helpful in him obtaining his Industrial Maintenance degree. His family and supervisor were also instrumental in his ability to complete his educational goals. His family and supervisor would provide words of encouragement, and his supervisor would allow him to work a flexible schedule to attend classes.

Carl

Carl joined the Air Force shortly after high school. There were many different reasons why Carl decided to serve his country. Patriotism, being willing to give back to his
country, and opportunities to travel and further his education were all reasons why Carl decided to join the military. Carl spent over thirteen years in the Air Force.

Carl wanted to further his education in the computer-machining field, and the local community college was the only educational institution that offered the program that he was looking for. Carl felt like, as a veteran student at a community college, it was at times odd to be older than the average student. However, he believed that the skills that were learned in the military were applicable to the classroom.

Our program has two work-study positions, and both of them are occupied by veterans who served about 13 years in the military and are in their mid-30s and are used to managing processes and people and training and that type of thing. With the skills that you learn in the military, you kind of fall into the leader of the class with your seniority and age and experience.

Carl’s wife and neighborhood provided him with the support he needed to persist through to complete his educational goal.

My wife and I support each other obviously. We were both in the military, and she is in the dental hygiene program, and it’s very demanding, and so my program comes easily to me and it’s not nearly as demanding and the standards aren’t so stringent. It allows our time management, I guess, to help each other out. Then, the neighborhood that we have is very close-knit. The 20 or so houses in the subdivision are all very close, and there are social gatherings. The kids play, and if someone’s kid is sick, someone else can watch them, and that’s a big help because we don’t have any family in the immediate area.
Carl believed that support services and programs on campus, such as the military resource center and veterans benefits, help support student veterans in their persistence toward meeting their educational objectives.

**Jenny**

Jenny saw what the military had done for her parents, so she decided to join the Air Force shortly after graduating from high school. She served 4 ½ years in the Air Force. The GI Bill was pivotal in helping Jenny to persist towards completion of her Medical Office Administration degree. Jenny believed that the military structure gave her the necessary discipline to persist in obtaining her education goal. “I think it’s definitely given me more discipline as far as me experiencing being under such a strict structure and then being here and seeing that I have to do a lot for myself and my having respect for my teachers.”

Jenny’s main motivation in attending a community college was seeing her husband starting school. “Seeing my husband go back to school and being successful motivated me, and also working low-paying jobs and wanting something better for myself.” Jenny also had family and friends who supported her decision to return to school:

I have two friends going to school right now, as well as my husband, and my mom and dad went back to school and got their degrees, so it’s kind of like a huge support system of people who just want better for you and for themselves. Sometimes I get frustrated with workloads and sometimes you can’t see; you can only look at the bigger picture and sometimes people who have been there can kind of help you out and tell you just focus on doing this little bit today and then this little bit tomorrow. Having advice from somebody who’s been there really does help a lot.
Having the support of the Military Resource Center and the Financial Aid Office also helped in Jenny’s matriculation through her educational journey.

**Jimmy**

Jimmy had always wanted to join the military. He felt it could help his community, and he served ten years in the U.S. Navy: “I felt that could be a way that I could help my community if I went out there and allowed myself to learn and see what the military had to offer me and then I could take it and apply that to help out the community.”

Jimmy was motivated to attend the local community college to pursue his passion of becoming a law enforcement officer. He started taking classes in the Basic Law Enforcement Training (BLET) so that he would be qualified to pursue a career as a law enforcement officer. During his tenure, he felt being a veteran student at a community college was somewhat different when people know that you are a veteran:

“I’ll say it’s somewhat different, especially when people know you’re a veteran. They offer different resources and different things to try to help you and stuff like that maybe the regular students don’t have. To me, being a veteran, it offered a little bit more aid.

The structure that Jimmy received from serving in the military helped him to persist through the BLET program. He said, “It helped with…the classes I took allowed you to be aggressive because most civilians didn’t know the structure we had that we got from the military.” His friends and family also supported his persistence while in the BLET program. He explained, “A lot of family and friends supported me, and I didn’t want to let them down.” Jimmy continued:
They were very interested in what I was doing as far as my classes and stuff like that. They wanted to know what was going on if I did anything. A lot of things I did in my class courses was physical and they would help me with different things I was doing and overcome any hurdles and things of that nature. They gave me advice and moral support.

Support from his fellow classmates with in the BLET program was also vital to his persistence as well. A sense of community and camaraderie was established amongst students who had served in the military.

**JJ**

JJ joined the Air Force right after high school and served a little over seven years. He started attending his local community college because he wanted to pursue a certificate in welding and because his family persuaded him to do so. JJ felt that being a community college student was like just being a student. He did not believe there was any difference between a veteran student and a non-veteran student, except for the GI or Post-9/11 Bill. His family and friends supported his educational journey by encouraging him and helping him to pay for his tuition.

**Joe**

Joe’s grandfather had served in the Army during World War II. For Joe, joining the military was a family tradition that he wanted to pursue. Joe joined the Air Force originally wanting to be a police officer. He had served 20 years in the Air Force before retiring from the military. Once he retired, Joe wanted to continue with his lifelong pursuit of becoming a
police officer, so he looked into the BLET program at his local community college. Joe felt that being a veteran student at a community college was much like being a normal student:

It was 270 some curriculum hours. Typical day, get up in the morning 6 o’clock, be here by 8. We have classes throughout the day and just about every other day or actually most days we did some form of physical training after classes so I would be here from 7:30 in the morning to 7:30 or 8 o’clock at night.

Joe’s biggest support system came from his wife whom he has been married to for 21 years. Joe stated that his wife supported every decision he has ever made in the military. She has been through numerous deployments, taking care of the children, and was there for Joe when he went through the BLET program giving words of encouragement:

Mainly taking care of the family and she would also have encouragement because there would be days I would come home and be like I can’t do this, I’m done with this. And she would pick me back up and put me back on the horse and send me back out the door the next morning.

**John**

John came from a long line of family who had served in the military. His father and father-in-law had each served 21 years in the military. John decided to follow in their footsteps and served 13 years in the Air Force. John was motivated to attend a community college to improve his skills to make him more marketable for the workforce, saying, “The biggest reason why I went to college the last time was I was promised a machinist job. In order to become a machinist, I had to go to machinist school.”
While he attended college, John felt like being a veteran student in a community college was like being a mentor:

Being a mentor because there’s a lot of discipline in the military that they didn’t have on the outside. I think that was probably a plus. Other than that it (military) also made me more mature coming to school because I went to school before I went to the military and then I joined the military shortly after.

His wife and his advisor were his biggest supporters as he pursued his machinist degree:

My wife is my biggest support. Me, I wanted to be an example to my kids. I want them to know there’s nothing they could accomplish as much if they didn’t go to school. So, I wanted to be that example… She [wife] took care of the kids because she knew I was getting very little sleep working 10 to 14 hours a day.

John’s advisor also provided support in his persistence in obtaining his educational goal:

He would modify things for me so that I was able to get that class. Some of the classes for instance would start at 5, which was easy, but some would start before then which I couldn’t make, so he would try to work it out for me at a self-pace [classes].

Jose

Jose joined the Air Force so that he could get out of a childhood neighborhood that was known for gangs and violence and because he wanted to travel and see the world. He served a little over seven years in the Air Force. Jose was motivated to attend a community college based on the Post-9/11 GI benefits to receive an associate degree in accounting. Jose felt that being a veteran student at a community college was like dessert before dinner:
I feel like the teachers once they found out you’re a veteran you get treated a little bit better and they’re a lot nicer and more understanding. You’re in class with a lot of young people, and they understand this person has been out of school for a while serving, so they’re more likely to break stuff down for you.

Jose also stressed the importance of the military resource center in providing stability and comfort to him as he matriculated towards his educational goal:

In the military resource center, you have people that can help out veterans who don’t know how to use the computer or send emails or fax or stuff like that. Then sometime you have, I can’t think of what they’re called, but basically help you out with finding a job.

Jose’s family, especially his mother and wife, were his biggest supporters in regards to going back to school. Both his mother and his wife gave him words of encouragement, to push him forward towards completing his degree:

My mother is like the biggest part of my life, family-wise, and she definitely supported. She did schooling for a little bit to be a nurse’s aide and now that I’m going to school it kind of motivates her to get back in school. Her motivation for me is just great. She pushes me to keep doing it. My wife is my backbone, my motivation. I do the same for her. If I get frustrated with something, she says calm down, take a break, and get back to it. So, yes she is definitely there to help me out.

**Kenny**

When he was 21, Kenny joined the Navy. When asked why he decided to serve his country, he stated:
At the time, partly to serve my country, but also to serve myself. I was coming from a poor family in the ghetto in Ohio and didn’t have much opportunity at that time in 1980. Most of my friends were basically getting killed by the time they were 30 or in jail for life or they got a scholarship to go somewhere. So I had two roads...so I said I’m not going to be like that. I am either going to the service, or I’m going to win a sports scholarship. So I came into the Navy.

Kenny served in the Navy for three years. He was motivated to attend a community college because he felt it would be an easier transition to start at a community college instead of a four-year university. His ultimate goal was to get a job and continue his education at a four-year university to obtain his bachelor’s in counseling or a drug abuse program.

Kenny felt like being a veteran student at a community college was like going over a lot of stuff that you somewhat know, but in a different form. Since he at times was older than other students in his class, he felt almost like a father figure to some of his younger classmates. He felt that his age and experience in the military helped him to provide a more mature level of discussion in his classes. His positive academic experiences with his instructors helped him to feel comfortable and respected and allowed him to persist through his studies.

Kenny’s instructors helped remind him of assignments and deadlines and called on his lived experiences to provide perspective during class discussions. Kenny felt that this in turn helped to build a sense of community within his classes when instructors respect everyone’s lived experiences. Kenny’s family provided him with support to persist through to complete his educational goal of obtaining an Associates degree in Human Services.
Technology. His sisters, adult children, and grandchildren provided words of encouragement and support.

I’ve got a grandson, 3, and a granddaughter, 7. When I keep them from time to time, they’ll ask me about school. The 7-year-old will say, “If you need some help with your work, let me know.” She’ll call me and say, “Did you do your homework?” and I’ll say, “Did you do yours?”

Lee

Lee was drafted into the Navy, but instead volunteered to join the Air Force. He had previously taken the exam for the Air Force and passed it. He served four years in the Air Force and 9½ years in the US Army National Guard. He was motivated to attend community college to fulfill his life long dream of becoming a law enforcement officer. He was hired at a law enforcement agency after he left the Air Force and needed to pursue the Basic Law Enforcement Training (BLET) to maintain his career.

BLET was offered at his local community college, so he decided to attend. Lee’s family provided moral support while he attended BLET and he believed that this helped him to persist through to ultimately receive his certification in law enforcement. Lee believed that more services and opportunities should be provided to veteran students to help them continue their education.

Maggie

Maggie came from a military background. Her dad, sister, aunts and uncles all served in the military. Maggie served 11½ years in the Air Force. Maggie wanted to slowly indoctrinate herself to taking classes, so she decided to start at the community college:
I was like, I don’t know if I’m going to have time because I worked sometimes seven days a week. I came to the community college and once I get my associate’s degree then I’ll consider going for the Bachelor’s and going full-time. I said I just want to take it slow and see what it’s like, so I did that route [attending a community college].

Maggie felt that being a veteran student at a community college was like being a regular student. Her husband supported her dream of completing her educational goals:

My husband supports me. He is the one pushing me because there have been many times when I’ve gotten stressed out because I’m not grasping this, I don’t understand. I had to get a tutor and I was like I’m done. I have the option to go get a job. And he was like no, finish, hang in there and finish and after that you can go get that job if that’s what you want to do. So he’s the one that’s keeping me going here.

The Military Resource Center on campus was another resource that was vital in the persistence of Maggie completing her associate’s degree:

If we need to know about deciding to get a job, they have information on different programs available to us while we’re here at the college. One good thing is there are a whole bunch of veterans there, and if you talk to them you learn stuff you didn’t know. They have computers where we can do our class work and printers and a microwave where you can warm up your food.

The Military Resource Center and the Financial Aid Office are the two resources that were the most instrumental in helping Maggie to succeed in completing her educational goal of obtaining her associate’s degree.
Nathanial

Nathanial is a fourth-generation Air Defender in the Army. He served 2 ½ years in the Army. Nathanial believed that the military’s structure helped to provide him the discipline necessary to be successful in college. He felt that being a veteran student at a community college was like being Billy Madison going back to third grade. “Just the mentality of all the other students around; it’s like being put back in an elementary class.” Nathanial was motivated to return to college to better himself for his family. “I want to be able to give my future wife and my son the best opportunities that they can have. And I just love computers and technology.” Family support was important to Nathanial’s success in persisting towards obtaining his degree in gaming and simulation design:

My fiancée is a huge support. Actually, my very first English paper, I would have quit school it wasn’t for her. I had to write that paper five times because every time I wrote it something went wrong and I had to start over from scratch. She actually took photo copies of the computer screen as I was writing and the last time it crashed, she went back through her photo copies and put back what I had already had up there and told me to finish it.

Thomas

Thomas had been unsure of what he wanted to do after high school, so he decided to join the military. He served 5½ years in the Air Force. He was motivated to attend community college to help prepare and make himself more marketable for a job. His local community college offered a Business Administration degree that he hoped would serve the purpose of helping him towards his goal of entrepreneurship.
Family support was vital for Thomas in his pursuit of obtaining his educational goal. His mom, sister, and niece provided him with the motivation and encouragement to persist academically. His classmates who were veterans also provided a system of support by meeting after class to discuss resources to help each other continue in their educational pursuits. Once such resource was the Military Resource Center. The Military Resource Center provides a place for active duty, veterans, spouses, and their dependents to study and meet in a supportive environment. Having an environment that veterans feel comfortable and safe to pursue their educational goals was important for Thomas and his persistence.

**Overview of Findings**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of veteran students in a southeastern community college to gain an understanding of the factors that contributed to their academic persistence, from matriculation to completion of their educational goals. After analyzing the demographic information provided by participants and the semi-structured interviews, clear themes emerged from the student interviews. Themes, subthemes, and supporting data are presented from the veteran community college students. Themes and subthemes are organized as they relate to the four research questions, as shown in Table 3.
Table 3. Student Themes

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Experiences of Veteran Community College Students in Community College

By the time veterans enter as students in community college, they have accumulated a myriad of experiences and understandings of what it means to persist. The stories shared by the participants revealed the richness of experiences from their personal and educational lives. They reflected on how support inside and outside the classroom was instrumental in achieving their academic endeavors, in some cases helping them forge new directions in their lives. Additionally, study participants revealed how their experiences with faculty, staff, and students contributed to their academic persistence. There were two themes related to the experiences of veteran community college students that emerged from the data: (1) the participants’ interactions with staff and faculty affirmed and supported their academic endeavors; and (2) most of the participants’ classroom experiences fostered academic success, with a few exceptions.

**Theme 1. The participants’ interactions with staff and faculty affirmed and supported their academic endeavors.** The participants shared stories pertaining to how staff and faculty affirmed and supported their academic endeavors. This support occurred through institutional support services and through faculty academic assistance, which encouraged participants in their academic persistence. Participants identified two major subthemes: (a) financial aid personnel, counseling, and academic skills center provided direction and encouragement; and (b) faculty was accessible outside the classroom for academic assistance.

*Financial aid personnel, counseling, and academic skills center provided direction and encouragement.* According to study participants, financial aid personnel, counseling, and academic skills center directly influenced their experiences outside the classroom. The
majority of the participants described positive interactions with these institutional support services on campus. Beginning with student support services, the financial aid office, counseling office, and academic skills center guided veterans through the murky and often anxiety-filled process of filing financial aid paperwork and required documents, navigating at times the stressful transition of becoming a student, and giving veterans students the tutoring needed to remain a successful student. All of the participants spoke of receiving support from at least one of these institutional support services. JJ spoke of the guidance he received from his counselor and the academic skills center:

I was having a hard time adjusting to being a student. Having served two tours in Iraq, I suffered injuries from an IED blast, which makes it hard for me to concentrate or comprehend stuff. I was having a hard time in my classes keeping up with assignments and on tests. I also suffered from depression and anxiety and was having issues at home with my wife. The counseling department helped me process my thoughts and feelings and gave me tools to be able to cope with my depression and anxiety. The academic skills center was great and gave me extra assistance with my class work.

Participants spoke highly of the assistance received from their financial aid officer. Typically, at community colleges, there is a least one financial aid officer who serves as the certifying veterans official. The professional knowledge of this staff member allows them to be able to provide support and guidance to veterans in regards to their veterans benefits as they navigate the financial aid process. Maggie, a student at the southeastern community college, recalled,
I was very nervous about going back to school and didn’t really know how I should get started in receiving my GI benefits to pay for school. My financial aid officer was very patient with me and made sure I turned in the proper documents that I needed to complete and receive my GI benefit. Without her help, I don’t think I would have been able to attend school.

For some participants, a specific counselor stands out as a significant contributor in providing direction and encouragement. Kenny shared a story about an experience with such a counselor.

Mrs. Johnson was awesome. From the moment I started seeing her, she was always there to listen to me vent. Something I needed, because I really don’t have anyone else to talk to share my thoughts and feelings. At times I felt as if I was in over my head and didn’t think I could do this school thing. She encouraged me and kept me motivated. Giving me tips on how to manage my stress level and resources that could help me on campus and off campus.

Jose shared his direct experiences working with a tutor from the academic skills center and how the tutor showing interest and concern for his academic success, has provided him the motivation and encouragement he has needed to successfully matriculate through his classes.

I hadn’t taken a math class since high school. I struggled on my math placement test, and I was struggling in my math class. My instructor told me about the academic skills center and that I could get extra help there. Little did I know that I would not only get help with some of the formulas I was struggling to understand, but I would
also gain a support system…sort of like a cheering squad that helped boost my confidence. My tutor always had small motivational quotes every time we met, that helped push me to not only pass the course, but to feel confident that I would be successful in my next math class.

**Faculty was accessible outside the classroom for academic assistance.** Eight of the sixteen participants acknowledged connecting with faculty members outside of class for academic assistance, which created a sense of community and belonging and fostered academic persistence. Bridgette spoke of her English instructor being willing to meet with her outside of her office hours:

I would meet with my English instructor during her office hours, but needed extra help outside of those hours. I was nervous, but my instructor sensed that I was nervous and offered to meet with me in the cafeteria during times that I didn’t have class and she didn’t have class. When we met, she would not only help me with my assignments, we would also talk about our families and where I see myself in the future. It was nice connecting with her on a personal level like that. It made me realize that I was not alone in this and I felt like I finally belonged here on campus.

Another participant, Carl, also acknowledge that his instructors’ willingness to meet with him outside of class fostered his academic persistence:

You have some instructors who teach class, and that is it; they are really not interested in helping you outside of class. But I have been fortunate to have instructors who are willing to meet with me outside of class. I tell my classmates that all you have to do is ask, most instructors are here to help. Any time I have needed
help, my instructors have been there for me. My psychology instructor has met me in multiple places on campus, from the library to the computer lab. She gives me extra help on subjects I may be struggling with and she gives me pep talks that help motivate me.

Theme 2. Most of the participants’ classroom experiences fostered academic success, with a few exceptions. Participants shared their military experiences and what being a veteran community college student is like. Participants identified two major subthemes: (a) connections with other veteran students in class created a sense of community and fostered academic persistence; and (b) some participants experienced instances of differential treatment in the classroom.

Connections with other veteran students in class created a sense of community and fostered academic persistence. Participants in the study shared how the connections they made with other veteran student in their classes created a sense of community and fostered their academic persistence. Kenny shared a story about the camaraderie between veteran students in one of his classes and how it helped him to complete the course when he was going through a difficult time in his life:

Community and kind of security…Sometimes you feel like what am I doing here. I was in class a year ago. I was out a year because a piece of metal went through my leg and I could not walk for a while and it knocked out some of my teeth. When I came back, I was talking really slowly because I was kind of embarrassed and my fellow veteran classmates were like, you will be okay, your mouth won’t be like that
always. That was reassuring to me and made me feel as I could get through the class, which I did.

Bob expressed that connecting with other veteran students in class provided him with a sense of belonging, which in turn gave him the motivation to persist in his academic journey:

Coming into a new experience like this, I didn’t know anybody. Forging friendships and connections with other veteran students gave me a sense of belonging, like I was meant to be here, that I belonged. It was similar to the feeling I had when I was in the military. I felt like I was a part of something…a part of something special. Having other veterans in my classes gave me a built in support system. We studied together outside of class, we held each other accountable for completing our assignments, and were there for each other if we needed someone to talk to. It was nice to know someone in my class others in my class shared some of the same experiences I did in the military.

Bridgette’s shared experience was similar to Bob’s. Being a female veteran, she was grateful to find another female veteran within one of her classes whom she could relate to and rely on. Since they both served in the same branch of the military and had similar experiences while serving, Bridgette felt a sense of kinship with her fellow veteran classmate, and they were able to develop a bond which helped them both persist toward their academic goals:

We would ride together to campus. I enjoyed our rides to campus, because we would talk about any issues we were going through and we would suggest resources on campus to each other. It was nice to know that she was there. We babysat each
other’s kids when we each had to study or work on an assignment. We both challenged each other that no matter what we were both going to finish our degrees and we did.

Some participants experienced instances of differential treatment in the classroom. The majority of the participants expressed instances of differential treatment in the classroom during their educational journey. Joe shared his experience with his instructor’s treatment of him in the classroom once he found out Joe was a veteran:

My instructors and classmates knew I was a veteran simply because we had to do introductions in the Basic Law Enforcement Training (BLET) program. We had to get a basic background of where everybody came from and stuff like that. Probably about two weeks in each BLET class has a class leader and a co-class leader. About two or two and a half weeks in, the class leader at the time was failing at his job. My instructors came to me since I had military experience, and pulled me aside and asked me to step up and I became the class leader and walked away with the leadership award.

Lee expressed similar experiences in the classroom once his classmates and instructors learned that he was a veteran:

Once people found out that I am a veteran, I had classmates ask me questions about serving in the military. Some were curious about my experience in the military. Some wanted to know if I had ever killed someone or seen a dead body. Some wanted to know what it is like serving in the military and possible how they could go
about joining. I understood their curiosity; however, I felt at times some of their questions were a very invasive.

Maggie shared her experiences within the classroom. She shared a particular experience with one instructor who questioned her military experience:

It was the beginning of the semester and we were all introducing ourselves and telling a little bit about ourselves. I mentioned that I had served in the Air Force and he proceeded to question whether or not I had actually served. At first, it really upset me, but after I had time to calm down and think I realized he probably had not been in the presence of too many women who have actually served in the military.

**Personal, Social, and Environmental Factors Affecting Persistence, Including Enhancers of Semester-to-Semester Persistence**

The stories shared by the participants revealed the richness of their experiences concerning personal, social, and environmental factors that affected their community college experiences and their persistence from semester to semester. They talked about their families, upbringing, work, and military experience. Participants shared their military experiences and their perceptions of environmental influences within the college as well as exterior factors to the college. Analysis of the interviews shared by the participants revealed that personal, social and environmental factors enhanced the participants’ determination to succeed academically. The third and fourth themes of the study were related to the personal, social, and environmental factors affecting persistence including enhancers of semester-to-semester persistence: (3) mentorships by faculty, staff, and students fostered academic success and persistence; and (4) personal, social, and environmental factors enhanced the
participant’s determination to succeed academically.

**Theme 3. Mentorships by faculty, staff, and students fostered academic success and persistence.** The participants shared stories, beginning with their transition from the military to civilian life, including their transition to higher education and the academic support they received from staff, faculty, and their peer veteran students. This support occurred both inside and outside the classroom in the form of formal and informal mentorships, which encouraged participants in their academic persistence. Two major subthemes were identified by participants: (a) faculty and staff provided direction and encouragement; and (b) connections with other veteran students outside of class (i.e., in clubs, organizations) created a sense of community and fostered academic persistence.

**Faculty and staff provided direction and encouragement.** According to study participants, faculty and staff involvement directly influenced their experiences inside and outside the classroom. The majority of the participants described positive interactions with faculty and staff on campus. Beginning with Student Services (admissions, financial aid, etc.), to advisors and faculty, college staff and faculty guided veterans through the murky and often anxiety filled process of being a successful community college student. Eighty percent of the participants spoke of receiving support from both faculty and staff. Maggie spoke of the guidance she received from her advisor:

> The people that help you choose what classes you need to take, the advisors…help a lot. When I first started, I had no earthly idea what to do…I met with my advisor and he put me at ease. I didn’t know what degree to sign up for. They broke everything
down for me and told me this is what you need to do next and they have helped me to 

stay on track with everything.

Participants spoke highly of the assistance received from their advisors. Typically, at 

community colleges, faculty members serve as advisors to students. The professional 

knowledge of faculty allows them to be able to provide support and guidance. John, a 

student at the southeastern community college, recalled, “My advisor this entire time really 

worked closely with me as far as my circumstances being military and being out. He was a 

really fantastic fellow as far as making things work for me. He was very knowledgeable 

since he taught in the program and that made me feel confident in his advisement.”

For some participants, a specific instructor stood out as a significant contributor in 

providing direction and encouragement. Bryan shared a story about an experience with such 

an instructor. “We interacted pretty well. My favorite one was Mr. Simmons, an English 

instructor, and he kept me straight. He set deadlines and expectations for me, which give me 

the guidance I needed to continue. He encouraged me and kept me motivated. Since he 

retired, I see him still come out here part-time teaching.”

JJ shared his direct experiences working with an instructor and how the instructor 

showing interest and concern for his academic success, has provided him the motivation and 

encouragement he has needed to successfully matriculate through this classes.

I got into the automotive program because I liked it and it was something I am 

interested in. But after a while, it became harder trying to juggle work, family, and 

classes at the same time. My instructor met with me throughout the semester, giving 

me words of encouragement…saying that I was capable of finishing the program. He
helped me stay organized and kept in touch with me making sure I completed my assignments and did what I needed to do so that I could graduate. He took the time out of his busy schedule to stay on me. I appreciated that.

For one participant, Carl, his instructor’s encouragement was the primary reason he completed his life-long dream of obtaining his business degree.

I did not want to do the same job I had done in the military as a civilian. Growing up, I always wanted to own my own business. Coming out of the military, I was confused on how to go about doing so (going to school) and what exactly I should major in. Once I came on campus and got started, I got discouraged because I had not been in school for a while and felt like I was not able to keep up in my classes. One of my instructors would meet with me every time they had their office hours and would meet with me sometimes during his lunch break. We are around the same age, and I felt like he could relate to me. He was persistent in making sure that I stayed the course and completed my degree. He never wallowed in self-pity or excuses and lit a fire in my you-know-what when I needed pushing. I still keep in touch with him to this day. He has been not only a great instructor, but a great friend who listens and motivates, while at the same time is not preachy or judgmental.

**Connections with other veteran students outside of class (i.e., in clubs, organizations) created a sense of community and fostered academic persistence.** Ten of the sixteen participants acknowledged connecting with other veteran students outside of class, which created a sense of community and belonging and fostered academic persistence.
Maggie spoke of the Military Resource Center on campus that served as a place to network with other veterans:

If we need to know about deciding to get a job they have information on different programs available to us while we are here at the college. And then stuff outside of college; they have a whole bunch of fliers. One good thing is there are a whole bunch of veterans there and if you talk to them you learn stuff you didn’t know. They have computers where we can do our class work and printers and a microwave where you can warm up your food.

Another participant, Jose, also acknowledge that the Military Resource Center on campus created an atmosphere that fostered academic persistence:

You have people that can help out veterans who don’t know how to use the computer or send emails or fax or stuff like that. Then sometimes you have, I can’t think of what they are called, but basically help you out with finding a job. The come because they are part of the military resources too, so they come to the college. The Military Resource Center is a place where veterans can feel comfortable around each other and just be themselves.

Besides the Military Resource Center, the majority of the participant mentioned he benefits of participating in the veteran’s club on campus. Jose shared a story about his experience with the veterans’ club that provided him with opportunities to build a professional network, which helped him to land a job:

When I first started school at the community college, I didn’t know anyone. I had just got out of the military and was looking for a fresh start. I heard about the
veterans club and decided it would be a good way to meet other veterans like myself. I knew they would be able to understand my trials and tribulations and would have a similar background as me. Getting a chance to talk with other veterans in an atmosphere where I didn’t feel judged, felt good. We were able to share stories of being in the military and life outside of the military. There, I was able to get advice about my resume and interview skills from outside professionals who came in periodically to our club meetings. We were able to swap stories about what its like to try and get a job outside of the military. I found it comforting to know that I was not alone with some of the issues I was facing in seeking employment. Coming out of the military my self-esteem took a slight dip. In the military, you are always told what to do and when to do it. Out of the military, I had to start making decisions for myself that normally someone else in the military would make for me. I had to accept responsibility for myself and learn that there are many opportunities for jobs out there; I just have to be open to the possibilities. The veterans club helped me to restore my belief in myself and in making decisions for myself. Networking with other veterans and with outside professionals about job opportunities, I was able to land a job that I had been interested in for a while. Little did I expect in joining the veterans club, I would find a job as well.

**Theme 4. Personal, social, and environmental factors enhanced the participants’ determination to succeed academically.** The participants shared stories, beginning with how the military developed their discipline to succeed, to the academic support they received from family, friends, and their community in their educational journey. This support
occurred both inside and outside the classroom, which encouraged participants in their academic persistence. Three major subthemes were identified by participants: (a) campus initiatives and support structures boosted participants’ academic success; (b) family and friends support and community involvement influenced academic success; and (c) discipline, structure, order, and goal orientation contributed to participants’ academic success.

Campus initiatives and support structures boosted participants’ academic success.

Many participants shared their experiences with campus initiatives and support structures and how they supported veteran students in their academic pursuits. One of the participants in the study, Carl, shared how the financial aid office was instrumental in his academic persistence:

For me, it’s been very helpful that they have the Veteran Affairs (VA) representatives here to help you. If you are using the GI bill they process all of that paperwork. Pretty much you just go in and say this is what I’ve got and they input it for you and give you your receipt and you are enrolled and you are set. The financial aid office was instrumental in helping me to seek the resources I needed to pursue my education. Without this financial assistance, I would not be able to continue to take classes and work towards my degree.

Jimmy expressed that the Counseling Office helped him to process a turbulent time in his life that was hindering him from being successful while attending college:

Having access to the Counseling Office provided me with an outlet to express my feelings without being judged. I appreciated the college for providing to us students access to a clinical counselor. It was difficult for me to take advantage of this service,
as there is a stigma in seeking counseling. However, I knew that I needed to talk to someone about the issues I faced while serving in the Navy and after I left the military. The Counseling Office provided a safe space to express my feelings. This in turn allowed me the opportunity to continue my education being able to focus on my studies.

Nathanial shared his experiences with the tutoring center. The tutoring center provided Nathanial with a space to learn material he did not know:

I was struggling in my English class and needed help. I had been out of school for a while and felt like I was slower than the other, younger students in my class. My instructor suggested I use the tutoring center. I did, and I am so glad I did. The center not only helped me with my assignments, the center also gave me a boost in my self-esteem. They made me feel that I am capable of doing college level work.

*Family and friends support and community involvement influenced academic success.* Participants expressed their experiences of familial and community support and how important this support was to their academic persistence. For Jenny, her husband and friends provided the motivation she needed to complete her degree in Medical Office Administration:

I think my number one motivation was my husband starting school and me seeing that I was freaking out about nothing. If he can get in there and do it and getting involved and helping him with homework before I got in it kind of gets you in that mold that I want to learn now. I have two friends going to school right now as well as my husband who went back to school and got his degree, so it’s kind of like a huge
support system of people who just want better for you and for themselves.

Sometimes I get frustrated with workloads and sometimes you can’t see; you can only
look at the bigger picture and sometimes people who have been there can kind of help
you out and tell you just to focus on doing this little bit today and then this little bit
tomorrow and it will help kind of keep you ahead and then you won’t have to stress
out and worry about deadlines and stuff.

Thomas shared a story of his mom and sister supporting him through his educational journey
of obtaining his Business Administration degree:

After leaving the military, I was a little lost with what to do next with my life. My
mom and sister both encouraged me to continue with my education at the local
community college. They knew that I have always wanted to own my own business
and knew that the community college offered a degree in business. From applying to
being successful in my coursework, my mom and sister have been there for me,
giving me words of encouragement and pushing me forward. There are times when I
feel like giving up and my mom and sister give me pep talks and basically kick me in
the rear telling me that I should not and cannot give up. My mom meets me for lunch
on campus, so that I can decompress from my classes and she came with me on
campus to help me out while I was going through the admissions/financial aid
process. Having a familiar face (my mom) on campus has helped me to feel more
connected to the campus. With them in my corner, I feel like I have an obligation to
complete my degree not only for myself, but for them as well.
Carl also shared his experiences with familial and community support within his neighborhood, where a large number of veterans were living:

My wife and I support each other. Then the neighborhood that we have is very close knit, unusually so. The twenty or so houses in the subdivision area all very close and there are social gatherings. The kids play and if someone’s kid is sick someone else can watch them and that is a big help because we do not have any family in the immediate area. We have family’s support of our decision but they are not physically here to help.

Kenny shared his experiences with support from his family as well. Kenny shared that he had started his higher educational experience at a later age in life, and having the support of his family was imperative to his academic success:

They [his adult kids and grandkids] support me heavily because going back at fifty or whatever is kind of ooohh. My kids are excited. When I keep my grandkids from time to time they will ask me about school. The seven-year-old will say if you need some help with your work let me know. She will call me and say did you do your homework and I will say did you do yours. All of them are like that. My kids and grandkids give me advice and words of encouragement to keep going. I enjoy brining my grandkids on campus to activities like Spring Fling, which is like a carnival. My grandkids enjoy it and I enjoy spending time with my grandkids and having my grandkids experience being on campus. They get a chance to see what college is really like. Maybe I can motivate them to continue school, like they motivate me.
One of the study participants, John, expressed that his wife and kids were his biggest support and motivation for continuing with his education:

Me, I wanted to be an example to my kids. I want them to know there is nothing they could accomplish as much if they did not go to school, so I wanted to be that example and I think when they had some tough times, I said I went through this and I worked full time. My wife took care of the kids because she knew I was getting very little sleep working ten to fourteen hours a day. I came to night school and I would go to work early, study for my tests or whatever it might and then get off in the morning and start all over. So my wife was a big support.

Joe echoed John’s experience with familial support and the importance of this support in his educational pursuit of his Criminal Justice degree: “My wife takes care of the family and should would give me encouragement, because there would be days I would come home and be like I cannot do this, I’m done with this. And she would pick me back up and put me back on the horse and send me back out the door the next morning.”

*Discipline, structure, order, and goal orientation contributed to participants’ academic success.* The majority of the participants expressed how their military experience developed their discipline, which they utilized during their educational journey. John expressed how the discipline he learned in the military helped him to succeed academically in college:

The discipline I learned in the military has made me more mature coming to school because I went to school before I went to the military and then I joined the military shortly after. The first time I went to college, I was not as mature and focused on
being successful. Joining the military, having someone tell you what to do and when to do it helps a young person to develop a sense of structure and order, which I used in my classes to stay on top of completing my projects and assignments.

Carl expressed how his military experience helped him gain a leadership position within his work-study course:

With the skills that you learn in the military you kind of fall into the leader of the class with your seniority and age and experience in leading things. For example, our program has two work-study positions and both of them are occupied by veterans who served about thirteen years in the military and are in their mid-30’s and are used to managing processes and people and training and that type of thing. The structure, order, and discipline we learned serving in the military has served us outside of the military by giving us the necessary skills to take on leadership positions within the classroom and outside the classroom.

Another study participant, Bob expressed, “Most people who come out of the military have that maturity because they have that structured discipline background. The military offers structure and order. This structure and order has helped me in develop time management skills and the focus I need which has been helpful in me passing my classes.

Factors that Might Hinder Persistence Semester-to-Semester

While all participants shared stories of campus initiatives and support structures that enhanced their semester-to-semester persistence, a few also shared some of the factors that hindered their persistence as a community college student. These factors may be lack of institutional resources to support their academic success, lack of technological skills due to
age and educational background or lack of structure within the institutional organizations that negatively impact participant persistence. Environmental external factors also hindered the persistence of veteran community college students (i.e., accidents, financial difficulties, loss of job). There were seven participants who indicated they had enrolled previously and due to life circumstances had to withdraw and re-enroll another semester to complete their educational goals. This study sought to discover what factors participants may have encountered while matriculating through their academic studies. Analysis of the interviews revealed that veteran community college students exhibited the ability to overcome obstacles to their persistence.

**Theme 5. Veterans exhibited the ability to overcome obstacles to their persistence.** The participants shared stories of how they were able to overcome obstacles to their academic persistence. Three major subthemes were identified by participants: (a) lack of institutional resource negatively impacted participant persistence; (b) lack of structure within institutional organizations negatively impacted participant persistence; and (c) lack of technological skills due to age and educational background negatively impacted participant persistence.

**Lack of institutional resources negatively impacted participant persistence.** The majority of the participants mentioned a lack of institutional resources and how this negatively impacted their academic persistence. Kenny expressed how the lack of resources for those who made need help before taking the placement test is important, especially for students who have been out of school for awhile:
I’ve got only two left (Developmental Math Courses – DMA) I’m up to DMA 040. Out of the four DMA classes I have taken, I have taken three of them over twice. The problem to me is you have to have an 80 or higher to pass the course. I have attended tutoring for math that the school provides, but the tutoring sessions are not conducive to my other classes and to my work schedule. It would have been nice to have been provided help (not just study guides) before I took the placement test so that I could have been placed in a college level math class instead of these developmental classes.

Many participants expressed difficulty in receiving the necessary remediation they needed to successfully pass the placement tests that are given to students when they first enter college. These placement tests allow counselors and advisors to know what level of English, Math, and computer skills a student is at when they first enter college.

Another study participant, Bob, shared his frustrations trying to transfer credits from the military to the community college. The Admissions Office he believes lacked institutional policies that would permit veterans to smoothly transfer over military credits:

When we join the military, we are assigned jobs. My job was an aviation mechanic. I have always loved planes and wanted to work in some capacity with them. I learned a lot from my job in the military and wanted to continue my education in aviation once I left the military. Unfortunately, my military experience did not count towards credit for my aviation degree at the college I transferred to. It was disappointing, it was like I was starting all over again and my experience in the field didn’t matter.

Many participants expressed feelings of frustration in not being able to utilize their experience from the military. Nathanial shared that one of the reasons he decided to attend a
community college was because of the “open door” policy and because he thought it would be easier to transfer credits to a community college instead of a four-year college or university. He mentioned that because his military experience did not transfer, it caused him to start and stop multiple times before he was able to successfully complete his academic goal of obtaining his accounting degree.

Lack of structure within institutional organizations negatively impacted participant persistence. Participants shared their frustrations with the lack of structure within the classroom and how this negatively impacted their academic persistence. Kenny shared his experience of the lack of structure in a classroom setting can be detrimental in the persistence of a veteran student:

My psychology class never started on time. It was supposed to start at 11:00 a.m., but the instructor would show up to class five to ten minutes late. Coming from a military background I am used to structure and order, so the instructor coming in late would not only frustrate me it would throw me off. I couldn’t help but to think, how are you going to ask us to be on time for class when you can’t do the same. Being in the military I was used to being on time and on task. With the instructor coming in late, I never felt I was getting my full money’s worth of my education.

Another study participant, Maggie, expressed similar frustrations:

Sometimes I was in classes with students who were 18 or in their early twenties and I would be the oldest student in the class. The instructor would have a hard time keeping the other students in order. It was like I was in the thirteenth grade with how some of the younger students were acting. They were very immature and it was hard
to concentrate when the instructor could not keep order in the class. I had to switch to an online class just so I could finish the course.

*Lack of technological skills due to age and educational background negatively impacted participant persistence.* Some of the participants shared experiences related to their difficulties in using technology while a student. Bill expressed his frustrations with utilizing technology while he was a student in the automotive program:

> The things they do in school now are a whole lot different than when I went to school. When I was in high school we had the blackboard (chalkboard). We didn’t have any computers. It is difficult because you have to have a computer. They (the instructors) do not call you they email you…I don’t check my emails every day. I should but I don’t because I’m not used to it. I can’t type much I use one finger (due to an injury suffered while serving in the military).

Bob shared his experience in attempting to take an online course. He shared that he signed up for the online course because it was conducive to his work schedule:

> It was a horrible experience. I barely knew how to turn on a computer, much less how to log onto Moodle [the software used to log into class]. No one asked me if I felt comfortable or had the knowledge to be successful in an online class. I basically was pressured into signing up for the class when I told my advisor that I worked and he saw that I was not able to sign up for a class on campus. I wish they had a test or something that could show how proficient you are on computers before you are allowed to take a class online.
Kenny expressed his concerns with never having used a computer before he started taking classes at the community college. Like Bill, he was used to using a chalkboard, pen and paper the last time he attended school:

I came up in the 60s, where we did not have access to computers. We did not even know what computers were. I never used a computer when I served in the military, and so for me this technology thing is new for me. I have to get help from my younger classmates and from my grandkids to show me how to log on and complete my assignments online. If I am not able to get their help, I struggle and sometimes am not able to complete my class work.

Summary

This chapter presented the results and findings from the 16 interviews conducted with the veteran community college students. The purpose of the interviews was to learn about the experiences of veteran students in a southeastern community college to gain an understanding of the factors that contributed to their academic persistence from matriculation to completion of their educational goal. After collecting the data and coding the interviews, findings were discussed in terms of the research questions presented in this study. Chapter Five discusses the limitations of the study, implications for practice and research, and final conclusions.
CHAPTER 5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of veteran students in a southeastern community college to gain an understanding of the factors that contributed to their academic persistence, from matriculation to completion of their educational goal, whether completion of a course, certificate, degree, or diploma. This study also described the participants’ experiences and the impact these experiences might have had on their persistence in completing their educational goals. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the experiences of veteran students in community college?
2. How do personal, social and environmental factors shape the persistence of veteran students in community college?
3. What factors support the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college?
4. What factors hinder the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college?

In this chapter, I present key findings and key conclusions, drawing on the theoretical framework of Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory and Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support in order to provide critical insight for future researchers and practitioners. This chapter contains four sections. The first section summarizes how the study was designed and conducted. The second section presents the key conclusions derived from the findings, based on analysis of the transcripts and related literature. The third section
discusses implications for theory and practice. The fourth section provides recommendations for future research.

**Summary of the Study**

This qualitative narrative study was conducted with veteran community college students and explored their persistence in matriculating toward their educational goals. Sixteen students participated in the study. Criterion sampling was used for selection of the study participants. To be selected, participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) must identify as a veteran, (b) must be currently enrolled in community college, and (c) must be in their last semester (getting ready to graduate and/or complete their desired educational goal attainment). The age range of those who participated in the study was 27 to 68, with an average age of 43 years. Participants included thirteen men and three women.

For ten of the participants, it was their first time attempting to complete their degree, diploma, or certificate; for five of the participants, it was not their first time attempting to complete their degree, diploma, or certificate; and one participant chose not to answer the question. Participants took between 3 to 15 credit hours per semester towards completion of their educational goal, with an average of 14 credit hours. The study was conducted in North Carolina, a southeastern state in the United States that has a significant military and veteran presence. This site was selected because of its proximity to the researcher and for its significant military and veteran population.

Data were collected primarily using in-depth semi-structured interviews. All interviews were held on the college campus where the participants were enrolled. Interviews lasted for at least one hour, and were digitally recorded and transcribed in adherence with
confidentiality requirements. After transcription, I made arrangements for delivery of the interview transcript to participants, either in person or via email, for the purpose of member checking. This practice ensured that the interviews were transcribed properly and that participants’ stories and voices were captured appropriately. Other methods of data collection included demographic questionnaires, journaling, and field notes.

The conceptual framework for this study was constructed from Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory (Brofenbrenner, 1993) and Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support (Vacchi, 2011, 2013). Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory (BST) is a developmental theory that incorporates the elements of person, process, context, and time (PPCT) to create an environment that shapes personal growth based on the person’s experiences. This theory stresses that a college student’s experience is not static, but rather is fluid, given environmental factors that may influence one’s persistence over time. Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support stresses that individuals should remain alert to how the passage of time and different aspects of a student veteran’s collegiate experience and life can play an essential role in the academic persistence of a student veteran.

This conceptual framework of Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory and Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support bounded the study. Use of inductive analysis then allowed for descriptors to emerge from the data. Immersion in the data took place through the use of the constant comparative method, which is the process of comparing each unit of information (codes) to the others in order to find recurrent ideas (Merriam, 1998). Research questions guided and illuminated the factors that influenced the veteran
students’ persistence in completing their educational goals (defined as a college course, certificate, degree, or diploma).

Five themes, with subthemes, emerged from the data analysis to address the research questions. The themes and subthemes were outlined in Table 3, in chapter four. Two themes related to the first research question, which concerned the experiences of veteran students in community college: the participants’ interactions with staff and faculty affirmed and supported their academic endeavors; and most of the participants’ classroom experiences fostered academic success, with a few exceptions. Two themes related to the second and third research questions. The second research question concerned personal, social and environmental factors affecting persistence, and the third research question centered on factors that enhanced persistence. Significant overlap emerged during the data analysis between the environmental factors of the second research question and the noted enhancers of the third research question. The two themes that emerged to address research questions two and three were as follows: mentorships and peer connections between participants with staff, faculty, and students affirmed and supported their academic persistence; and personal, social, and environmental factors affecting persistence including enhancers of semester-to-semester persistence. Finally, the fifth theme addressed the fourth research question, which dealt with factors that hindered the persistence of veteran community college students. The fifth theme was factors that might hinder the veteran student’s persistence semester to semester. Two key conclusions arose from the findings in this study and are discussed in the next section.
Key Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of veteran students in a southeastern community college to gain an understanding of the factors that contributed to their academic persistence from matriculation to completion of their educational goal. Three key conclusions arose from the findings of this study: (a) engagement of veterans’ families within the college environment establishes community and is important to the academic persistence of veteran community college students; (b) clear, concise expectations set by faculty and staff increase the likelihood of persistence; and (c) veteran community college students, with a few exceptions, use remedial or developmental courses as motivation to persist. The latter can be understood as mission completion: veterans carry over their military training, discipline, and grit to persist through academic endeavors.

Conclusion 1

Veteran Community College Students Use Remedial or Developmental Courses as Motivation to Persist, With a Few Exceptions (Conceptualized as “Mission Completion”: Veterans Carry Over Military Training, Discipline, and Grit to Persist Through Academic Endeavors)

The third major conclusion of this study is that veteran community college students utilize the structure, discipline, and training they received while serving in the military to help them persist, in many cases through remedial courses they were placed into during their initial college placement assessment. In the general population of community college students, a majority are unprepared for college-level work; as a result, nearly 60 percent of all community college students, including many recent high school graduates, are required to
take at least one remedial or developmental course (Bailey & Cho, 2010). Attewell, Lavin, Domina and Levy (2006) found that 58 percent of students who attended community college required at least one remedial course, 44 percent took more than one remedial course, and 14 percent required more than three remedial courses. Thus, it is unsurprising that fourteen out of the sixteen study participants had to enroll in at least one remedial or developmental course.

For many of the study participants, the experience of successfully persisting through their remedial courses generated a sense of personal validation. The success of the study’s participants, defined here as academic persistence, can be attributed to these students doing what veterans do: they worked through their fears and shortcomings, and they abided by the military rule that one must always complete the mission—in this case, completing their remedial courses. Fears gave way to confidence as the study participants successfully persisted not only through their remedial course, but also through other college-level coursework.

For many of the study participants there seemed to be a generational gap on whom persisted through remedial or developmental courses. Those who served before the Iraq and Afghanistan wars had a stronger resolve to persist through their remedial or developmental courses understanding that successfully passing those courses, would allow them to complete their educational goals. Many who had served before the Iraq and Afghanistan wars expressed that their love of learning was the driving force with their need to persist, unlike some veteran students who had served during or after the Iraq and Afghanistan wars who had expressed that their need to find employment or to further their careers was the catalyst for
their persistence. The resolve to persist of those who served before the Iraq and Afghanistan wars through their courses stemmed from not only their experiences as leaders within the military, but also from life experiences, and a maturity to not only acknowledge, but also to seek help when assistance was needed. Both the older generation and the younger generation of student veterans shared that the military culture had instilled in them the “mission to completion,” which they carried into their persistence toward attaining their educational goals.

The study’s findings indicated that the veteran community college students benefitted from enrollment in remedial courses because here they received strong academic advising, and they were taught by faculty who had specialized training to work with remedial students. These faculty used a variety of instructional techniques, provided supplemental services and resources, and increased program accountability. These resources provided veteran study participants with the services and motivation they needed to persist successfully through their courses. Many veterans within the study shared that the structured order of the support services provided (academic advising, tutoring, etc.) mimicked the structured order of the military. For example, many of the support services started and ended at the same time every day, and faculty and staff were particular about starting their services on time. This structure left veterans with a sense of familiarity to what they were used to while serving in the military, which in turn gave them the confidence and grit to persist successfully academically.
Conclusion 2

*Engagement of Veterans’ Families Within the College Environment Establishes Community and is Important to the Academic Persistence of Veteran Community College Students*

In this study, participating veteran community college students recalled family and organizational support that occurred along their educational journey. Some familial and organizational relationships were positive in nature, while others were negative. These incidents of family and organizational support appeared to coalesce around the areas of education, finances, work, interpersonal, and health. It should be noted that incidents of support often cut across more than one area.

Family support, as well as the support provided by the organizational structure of the institutions, promoted the persistence of the veteran student participants. There is a dearth of literature regarding family support as a factor influencing veteran community college students’ persistence. The research that is available speaks mostly of the negative impact of family responsibility on the persistence of the nontraditional four-year and two-year commuter-college students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993; Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). These studies tended to focus on the tension or interplay between family responsibilities and academic responsibilities. On the contrary, the participants in this study elucidated the fact that they would like their families to become more engaged with the campus community. For example, Jose expressed how he and his wife are both students at the college. He shared that being a student at the same time as his wife was like having a built-in support system. Jose shared that since his wife was a student also, she understood...
the stress of being a student, and they were able to ride to campus together, study together, and help motivate each other to persist through their individual programs.

In this study, academic and social integration were found to matter in the academic persistence of veteran community college students. Veteran students who were involved in student organizations, involved with dialogue in the classroom setting, and had established relationships with other students, staff, and or faculty were likely to persist toward their educational goal attainment. This conclusion is in line with Tinto’s Student Departure Theory, which posits that informal contact with faculty, staff and students on campus is important for persistence.

Family and social support was generally predicted to be of importance for veterans and their families (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio, 2011; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Grimes et al., 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009, 2010). Most of these studies were qualitative in nature and stressed the need for relationship connections to facilitate the transition from military culture to the culture of higher education.

While the present study was also qualitative in nature, it focused on the experiences of persistence with veteran community college students instead of the transition from military to civilian life. According to Smith-Osborne (2009) who studied Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), veterans in higher education observed that those with social supports from their families (along with their financial benefits) reflected a higher level of academic achievement and subsequently persisted. Other researchers have seen the need for mentoring (Crisp, 2010) and social encouragement in the community college setting (Barnett, 2011). Family encouragement was also seen as important across various university contexts.
(Hossler, 2008). In a decade-long program survey aimed at making recommendations for the community college setting, Karp (2011) noted four areas of support that increased persistence: creating relationships, clarifying aspirations/increasing commitment, developing “know-how” about the college, and providing a community safety net.

Many veteran participants of the study shared their experiences of their families building connections with their college campus. Kenny shared how having his son participate in “Camp Kilowatt,” a summer camp program designed to engage youth in the field of engineering, was not only empowering for his son, but also beneficial to Kenny. Kenny explained that having the college engage with and establish a connection with his son at such an early age encouraged Kenny to be academically successful, not only for himself, but also so that he could serve as a role model for his son to continue his education.

In line with the theoretical framework (Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory) that was utilized during this study—which stresses that students’ experiences during their college years are fluid, not static, in response to environmental factors that may influence one’s persistence—it is reasonable to conclude that for a student veteran, the passage of time and different aspects of the collegiate experience and life can play an essential role in his or her academic persistence. As research has shown, one of the many factors that can play a role in the academic persistence of a student veteran is the environment of the college campus. Livingston (2009) defined environment as the overall culture of the campus. Some of the components of the overall campus culture identified in Livingston’s (2009) study were the institution’s military heritage and the veteran’s perceptions of the attitudes of students, faculty, and the administration. Based on
Livingston’s (2009) findings, when a veteran enrolled at a higher education institution perceives the campus culture to be receptive to the needs of student veterans in general, that veteran is more likely to continue to be enrolled at that institution of higher education.

Campus climate plays a vital role in the persistence of veteran community college students.

In general, as discussed in the literature review for this study, the research indicates that for students to succeed, they must feel a sense of belonging at their institution (Ackerman, et al., 2009; Cook and Kim, 2009; Livingston, 2009; Summerlot, et al., 2009). The attitude of the members of the campus community toward a particular group of students will directly contribute to the overall campus climate. In line with this previous research, the student veterans who participated in this study made multiple comments in response to the open-ended questions during the interviews. These comments were both positive and negative. For example, Kenny expressed how a sense of community that developed within his classes when instructors respected everyone’s lived experiences helped provide the support he needed to persist through to obtain his educational goals. On the other hand, Bob shared a negative experience that occurred during within one of his classes, when a few classmates bombarded him with intrusive questions about his time spent serving in the military. While there were a few instances of negative campus climate experiences, overall, the study found that most veterans experienced a positive campus climate, which in turn helped them to persist academically toward achieving their educational goals.

**Conclusion 3**

*Clear, Concise Expectations Set by Faculty and Staff Increase the Likelihood of Persistence*
Clear, concise expectations set by faculty and staff increase the likelihood of persistence for veteran community college students. Although community college faculty cannot control the characteristics of their students, they can control how they interact with students (Tinto, 1994). The most important strategies instructors can use to help students succeed is to set high expectations for student success, provide good academic and career advising, support and encourage students, and promote their active involvement in learning. If an instructor tells students that a class is really hard, and that they probably will not survive, then the instructor may be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. If, on the other hand, an instructor creates an environment in which students believe that they can succeed, then students are more likely to persist and do well. Often, what appears to be lack of student motivation is really the stress of students’ family and work obligations, lack of self-confidence, or not knowing how to study. Faculty must be supportive and flexible if they expect to help students persist through their educational endeavors.

At the beginning of any student–faculty/staff relationship, clear and mutual expectations must be set out. When such expectations are not in place, misunderstandings can arise, and the establishment of an ideal learning environment can be nearly impossible. In general, expectations influence behavior, thereby affecting the persistence of students (Tinto, 1994). When instructors set explicit learning goals, students have a clear picture of course expectations, helping them to concentrate their efforts efficiently toward the attainment of those goals. Instructors can also outline objectives to guide students to accomplish learning goals (i.e., what behaviors students are expected to demonstrate). Moreover, when students have clear objectives, they are more likely to seek feedback to
close the gap between their current understanding or skill and the desired goal (Hattie & Timperly, 2007). Many of the veteran participants in this study indicated that faculty/staff members who set clear, concise expectations for students’ performance both in and outside of class were important to the students’ overall educational journey.

An example of how teacher expectations can contribute to student persistence is seen in how students approach writing for class assignments. Poor writers are often preoccupied with correcting mechanical miscues and making minor word substitutions when revising. Although they want to improve their writing, they do not know which concrete steps to focus on to achieve that goal. Studies have shown that these preoccupations can be mediated by assigning students goals that direct their attention to more substantive concerns (PageVorth & Graham, 1999). For example, Matsuhashi and Gordon (1985) found that college students who were poor writers made more substantive revisions when assigned a specific goal to add five new ideas to their compositions, versus a more general goal to improve their papers. In essence, clear goals increase one’s likelihood of achieving these goals, which furthers the likelihood of academic persistence. Many veterans within the study shared that clear concise orders mimicked the structured order of the military that they often saw within their superiors. This structure left veterans with a sense of familiarity to what they were used to while serving in the military, which in turn gave them the confidence and grit to persist successfully academically. This study concludes that the merger of academic and military culture, namely clear, concise expectations set by faculty and staff increases the likelihood of persistence among veteran community college students.
Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings and conclusions of this narrative study contribute to a clearer understanding of the myriad of factors that influence the persistence of veteran community college students in their pursuit of their educational goals, whether a college course, certificate, degree, or diploma. This study is relevant and important due to the dearth of research addressing the persistence of veteran students within community college institutions. The findings from this study offer several implications for theory and practice from the veteran community college student perspective. From a theoretical perspective, this study has implications for the literature on community college students and veteran persistence. From a practical perspective, there are implications for community college administrators, faculty, and staff regarding the needs of veteran students.

Implications for Theory and Research

Initially, research on student persistence framed the issue in terms of student departure theory and focused on comparisons among groups (e.g., traditional and nontraditional students). Currently, research on student persistence tends to focus on individual psychological assessments and relationships, particularly for the four-year college/university student. To date, little research has been conducted on the persistence of community college student veterans. To the author’s knowledge, this study is one of the first to explore the experiences of academic persistence of community college student veterans, and one of the first to do so by drawing on the tenets of both Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support and Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory. From the use of this theoretical framework in this research effort, several important implications for theory
emerged. These implications can inform future research on veteran students and persistence.

First, the findings of this study imply that, in terms of factors affecting veteran student persistence, what goes on externally, outside of the classroom, is equally as important as what goes on inside the classroom. The sixteen student veteran participants of this study reflected that when advisors were knowledgeable of academic requirements and how they might affect their financial aid benefits (example: having to take seated classes instead of online classes to receive their benefits or certain classes not being eligible for veteran benefits), they were more apt to persist through their academic endeavors. This finding goes beyond Vacchi’s (2012) theory on the success of adult learners such as student veterans, which focused on the importance of what goes on inside the classroom. Our findings suggest that institutional commitment to an improved educational environment is necessary to increase academic success for student veterans. This means that active/collaborative learning concepts should be tested and, if proved to be effective, may be used to increase the academic success of students.

A second theoretical implication of this study is that veteran community college students’ academic concerns, social concerns, and external and internal events all play important roles in these students’ experiences, and at times can be fluid and intertwined with each other in shaping the persistence of these students. This implication relates to Tinto’s (1993) Student Departure Theory, which posited that commuter students were more influenced by academic than social concerns and more by external events than internal campus issues. This implication is also in line with Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory, which stresses that students’ experiences during their college years are not stagnant,
but fluid, shaped by personal, social, and environmental factors that may influence one’s persistence.

A third implication of this study for theory and research is that it further supports the importance of family as an influence on student persistence. The literature has indicated the importance of family influence on student adjustment and persistence for traditional-aged students in four-year colleges and universities; however, to my knowledge, research has not yet explored the positive familial influence on community college students, and particularly on veteran community college students. This study supports the view that positive family influence is significant to the persistence of veteran community college students. Thus, the study offers new insight that can serve as a foundation and framework for further study, more thoughtful college support services, and refined policy. Future research is needed to explore a new theoretical model for veteran community college persistence.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study can inform the practices of college administrators, staff, and faculty. In particular, they can inform the creation and management of on-campus services and programs that work with student veterans, especially those that focus on the academic persistence and success of students. In addition, the findings suggest the importance of going beyond on-campus programming to engage student veterans’ families.

**On-campus programming, personnel, and support services.** First, on-campus services and programs need to center around a dedicated office that concentrates on programming for student veterans. This office can conduct outreach specifically targeted to develop student support services, such as admissions, tutoring, counseling financial aid, and
VA services. The selected study site established a student veteran resource center (Military Resource Center) that proved to be invaluable in creating a safe, comfortable space for student veterans, helping them to persist in their studies. The creation of a student veteran resource center that focuses on helping student veterans organize social gatherings such as welcome functions for new student veterans on campus and providing a central place where student veterans can connect with VA representatives to discuss veteran benefits and VA services may be beneficial for institutions to establish.

A second practical suggestion for post-secondary institutions, based on this study, is that they should support student veterans by conducting lead trainings for key administrators, faculty, and staff on student veterans’ college experiences and on military culture in general. A model might be used where selected student veterans have a position in on-campus services and provide support for fellow student veterans while simultaneously training administrators, staff, and faculty in student veteran academic issues and affairs. This training should include discussions of the differences between military culture and academia, the unique experiences student veterans have to offer, dispelling myths about student veterans, and the positive and negative effects military experiences may have on academic performance. This training may help expand the knowledge of key constituents and the vital role they play in the persistence of student veterans.

Another service that this study’s findings suggest might go a very long way to helping student veterans better succeed academically is the development of on-campus mentoring programs. In these programs, student veterans can interact face-to-face with other student veterans or student veteran alumni who have already proven to be academically successful.
The focus of these programs would incorporate the basic essentials of tutorial instruction depending on the areas the individual student veterans are struggling with.

Beyond targeting new and existing student veterans, on-campus services would also benefit from having a committed staff person with knowledge of and experience with military culture or veterans’ issues in their programs. For example, someone in career services with knowledge of turning military training into marketable items on a resume would benefit student veterans as they near graduation and begin searching for employment. An on-campus counselor with knowledge and training in military culture and veterans’ issues would be better equipped to help student veterans in crisis than counselors whose training only included civilian populations.

**Family engagement.** Beyond on-campus student support services, findings from the study point to the importance of family engagement as a form of support for student veterans. Engaging the family of student veterans is important to the success of community college student veterans. To address this need, administrators and faculty may develop a cohort program geared for student veterans and their spouses and/or family members to complete their degree, diploma, and or certificate at the same time. This cohort will provide the order, structure, and support many student veterans were used to receiving while serving in the military.

**Action items for veteran friendly community college campuses.** Administrators, faculty, and staff can initiate efforts to provide the support and structure veterans need, thereby creating a veteran-friendly campus. To do so, they can incorporate the following suggestions:
• Establish programs for supporting spouses/families of veterans. Family support and inclusion is essential to ensure connectedness to the educational process. This may help the veteran and their families create a connection to the campus and learn how to obtain campus and outside resources. For example, a Veterans’ Exposition/Fair can be established to provide partnerships with local bases and veteran hospitals and veteran organizations in the community where veterans can learn about services and resources.

• Train staff, faculty, and administrators in veterans’ issues, such as TBI, PTSD, and persistence strategies. For example, training sessions can be offered during faculty orientation, personnel meetings, and/or departmental meetings.

• Employ trained/licensed counselors on-campus to support the needs of veteran students.

• Develop an alumni veteran mentoring program, creating connections between graduates with first-semester and/or first-generation veteran students to guide them through the academic process.

• Create a college success course modified for student veterans. Example: ACA 122 or ACA 111 College Student Success Course or Freshman Seminar Course geared just toward the success of veteran students. Hence, creating a network of veteran students.

• Apply military norms to complement faculty teaching (i.e., start on time, clear structured outline of course and expectations).
• Provide priority registration to student veterans, automatically permitting them first selection of prime classes.

• Develop a veteran-specific student orientation so that the campus community may interact with veterans and their families before the semester begins to help integrate them into the community.

• Train advisors not only on academic requirements, but also on the ways in which those academic requirements may affect a veteran’s financial aid benefits.

These implications for practice are based on the findings from the in-depth interviews conducted with the veteran participants of this study. Administrators, staff, and faculty at community colleges may consider implementing these strategies to support their veteran students’ academic persistence.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Prior research on student veterans, though limited, has gone some way toward documenting the persistence of veterans at four-year colleges and universities. However, a significant gap in the literature exists with regard to the experiences of veteran community college students and how those experiences relate to these students’ persistence through their educational journey. While this study contributes to a clearer understanding of the factors that influence the academic persistence of veteran community college students, it has limitations, which leave room for further work to be done in this area. Based upon the results of this research study, four specific recommendations for further research emerge.
First, although the sample was large enough to provide valuable insights, it may not be large enough to be representative, and participants self-selected to join the study based on several criteria (identification as a veteran, currently enrolled in community college, and currently in their last semester before desired educational goal attainment). Therefore, future research is needed with a more diverse pool of participants. The first recommendation is that qualitative and quantitative studies should be conducted on different populations of veteran students, including female veterans, veteran students of color, and veterans in other geographic areas. This information would be valuable to investigate because the experiences of other groups of may differ from those in this study. Also, studies with a greater number of participants and/or a more randomized selection process need to be initiated to gather more information about how this topic can inform the field of student persistence at two-year/community college institutions.

The second recommendation for future research is to investigate the military’s discipline, structure, and order and how these factors play a role in the persistence of veteran community college students. This research might also involve the examination of how community colleges may be able to replicate the military’s structure and order in some of their initiatives and programs geared toward veteran student success.

The third recommendation for future research is to explore the effectiveness of program initiatives designed to facilitate veteran student academic success/persistence in community colleges. Research of this nature would involve the examination of these program initiatives through the eyes of program directors, senior administrators, faculty, and
This research might also involve the examination of the impact of these initiatives on the persistence of participants in the form of time-to-completion and graduation rates.

The fourth recommendation for future research is to investigate the effect of advising or the lack thereof on the persistence of veteran community college students. This research might involve the examination of how a lack of advising of military veteran students may detract from the persistence of veteran students in the completion of their educational goals. This research may also involve the examination of how a lack of advising may affect the GI benefits received and expense of veteran students attending community college.

The fifth and final recommendation for future research is to explore the importance of familial influence on the academic success and persistence of veteran students and community college students generally. Research in this area might expand our knowledge and understanding of the experiences of veteran community college students and of how community colleges might increase the academic success and persistence of this group of students.

Chapter Summary

This study was undertaken to explore the experiences of veteran students in a southeastern community college to gain an understanding of the factors that contributed to their academic persistence from matriculation to completion of their educational goals. This study was grounded in Brofenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory (Brofenbrenner, 1993) and Vacchi’s Conceptual Model of Student Veteran Support (Vacchi, 2011). The study sample was purposefully chosen from veteran students within a southeastern community college in North Carolina. This chapter provided a summary of the qualitative narrative
study, explored the three major conclusions that emerged, and offered implications for theory and practice as well as recommendations for further research.

The three conclusions in this study all aligned with previous research. The first conclusion noted the importance of family and institutional support to the persistence of veteran community college students. The second conclusion noted that clear, concise expectations set by faculty and staff increase the likelihood of persistence. The final conclusion noted that the study participants used their skills learned in the military to overcome adversity to persist in completing their academic goals, including remedial courses.

In addition to drawing these conclusions from the findings, this study outlined and discussed implications for theory and practice as well as recommendations for further research. Implications for theory included new insight that can serve as a foundation and framework for further study, more thoughtful college support services, and refined policy. Implications for practice concerned on-campus support services, learning cohorts, and training for administrators, faculty, students, and staff. Finally, recommendations for further research focused on the experiences of different populations of veteran community college students, differences in experiences based upon geographical location, and the effectiveness of program initiatives designed to facilitate veteran student academic success/persistence in community colleges. The chapter also suggested further research to investigate the military’s discipline, structure, and order and how these factors play a role in the persistence of veteran community college students.
In conclusion, the participants of this study are to be commended for their commitment and service not only to our country, but also to their academic perseverance as well. Pursuing your educational goals along with facing obstacles and life responsibilities is no easy task. Participants of this study have shown that with the proper support, they have the discipline, tenacity, and fortitude to persist successfully towards completing their educational goals.
REFERENCES


American Psychological Association 2012. Mental health services remain scarce at community colleges. *American Psychological Association, 43*(4)


North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges. (2015). *A Plan to Implement a Uniform System of Granting Course Credits for Military Training to Students Enrolled in Constituent Institutions of the North Carolina Community College System and the University of North Carolina.* Retrieved from http://mobile.ncleg.net/documentsites/committees/JLEOC/Reports%20Received/2015%20Reports%20Received/Plan%20to%20Implement%20Uniform%20System%20of%20Course%20Credits%20for%20Military%20Training.pdf


APPENDICES
Appendix A. Informational Letter

Subject: Veteran Community College Students Needed

Greetings:
Do you know of or are you a current veteran community college student? If so, I would like to interview you (face-to-face).
Participants must meet the following criteria:
- Participants must identify as a veteran.
- Participants must be currently enrolled in community college.
- Participants must be in their last semester (getting ready to graduate and/or complete their desired educational goal attainment)

This research is significant because we need to know about veteran experiences with persistence within North Carolina community colleges. Veteran students can be critical stakeholders in providing guidance and developing policy for veteran educational issues. The time commitment will consist of the following: an in-depth interview for approximately one and a half hours. Please be assured that your responses during the interview will be held in the strictest of confidence.

If you are interested in participating in this research effort, please let me know by return email and I will contact you to review the consent form, and identify a date, time and place that best fits your schedule.

If you have any questions about this study or are interested in participating, please contact Marlena Everett at msevere2@ncsu.edu.

Thank you for your time, and I hope you will decide to be a part of the study.
Appendix B. Recruitment Flyer

Have you served in the U.S. military?
Are you a U.S. military veteran attending community college?

If so, your help is needed!

• You could be part of a research project on the experiences of persistence of military veteran community college students.

• There would be an interview of approximately one hour.

• You will receive a $10 gas card for participating.

If you are interested, please contact Marlena Everett at msevere2@ncsu.edu

North Carolina State University

Thank you!
Appendix C. Informed Consent Form

I, ________________________________ agree to participate in the research study titled "The Persistence of Students in Community College" conducted by the primary investigator Marlena Everett, Doctoral student within the Department of Leadership, Policy, Adult and Higher Education at North Carolina State University (msevere2@ncsu.edu). I understand that participation is voluntary. I can stop participating without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have all of the information that can be identified as mine returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The reason for this study is to explore veteran community college students’ experiences with persistence. The experiences of veteran community college students, as key stakeholders, are essential in developing a holistic perspective.

I understand that if I choose to participate in this project, I will be in an interview conducted by Marlena Everett one time for approximately 90 minutes. The interview will be audio-digitally recorded and transcribed at a later date.

I will benefit directly from this research, by receiving a $10 gas gift card. I also understand that my participation will give me an opportunity to tell my story (reflective practice); will benefit educators, administrators, and policymakers in preparing successful veteran students and, will contribute to the formal knowledge and literature base on this topic.

I understand that any discomfort or stress that I may experience while being interviewed will not exceed that which one experiences in everyday life. Marlena Everett has assured me that there will be minimal discomfort or stress due to participation.

No risks are expected due to participation in this project. I understand that I am free to skip any question that makes me uncomfortable.

Marlena Everett has informed me that any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Audio-digital files of the interview will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with my permission or as required by law. Audio-digital files of the interview will be kept in a secure limited access location until Ms. Everett destroys them immediately following transcription.

To ensure confidentiality of my responses, I will provide a pseudonym or one will be assigned to me.

Marlena Everett will answer any further questions that I may have now or at a later time. Ms. Everett can be reached at (msevere2@ncsu.edu). Additional questions or problems regarding rights as a research participant should be addressed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Research Subjects, North Carolina State University, at 919-515-3086.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.
Appendix D. Demographic Questionnaire

Pseudonym: ______________________
Age: ________
Marital status: _______________

Do you have any children? YES_____ or NO _____(if so, how many): ____________

Do you work outside of the home?
    If yes, how many hours do you work per week? ________________
    What kind of work do you do? ________________________________

Military branch you served in. ___________________________________________

When did your service end? ____________________________________________

How many years did you serve in the military? ____________________________

Did you retire from the military? YES______ or NO ________

What degree are you obtaining, if any? ___________________________________

What diploma are you obtaining, if any? _________________________________

What certificate are you obtaining, if any? _________________________________

If none, what are your educational goals? _________________________________

What degree(s), diploma(s), certificate(s) do you currently have?
_______________________________________________________________________

When did you start taking classes and have you been taking classes semester to semester?
_______________________________________________________________________

How many semester hours (on average) do you take each semester: ____________

Is this your first time attempting to complete your degree, diploma, and or certificate?
YES______ or NO ________ If you are returning to complete, please explain.
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________
Appendix E. Interview Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Opening Questions**

1. Why are you interested in participating in this study?
2. Tell me a little about yourself.
   a. Why did you decide to serve your country?
   b. What was your transition like from the military to civilian life?
   c. What is your secondary educational history and experiences (i.e., first generation student, etc.)

**Questions about experiences of persistence as a Veteran student**

Research Question Number 1: What are the experiences of veteran students in community college?

1. Finish this statement. Being a veteran student at a community college is like?
2. Walk me through what a typical (day, week or month) is like for you as a veteran student (on campus and off campus).
3. What have your academic experiences on campus been like as a veteran student?
4. What have your experiences as a veteran been like in class? Any Positive, Negative, or Neutral experiences?
5. Do any of your instructors know that you are a veteran? If so, how has being a veteran shaped your interaction with your instructors?
6. What clubs and or organizations are you involved in (inside and outside of campus)?

Research Question Number 2: How do personal, social and environmental factors shape the persistence of veteran students in community college?

1. What motivated you to return to community college?
2. How does family and or friends support you and do you feel this makes a difference in whether or not you persist toward your educational goals?
3. How does working affect your ability to persist with your education?
4. If classmates know that you are a veteran, how do you feel this knowledge has had any direct impact on your interaction and or relationship with them?
5. How has being designated as a veteran on campus either helped or harmed your educational experience on campus?

6. What does it mean for you as a student for your college to be designated as a “veteran friendly” institution?

7. What is your institution doing to be portrayed as a “veteran friendly” institution? Has this helped your persistence?

Research Question Number 3: What supports the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college?

1. In your observation, what are the most effective veteran student programs and services provided by your college (and provided outside of campus)? Why?

2. What one program or service in particular facilitated your persistence in your educational journey that should be replicated at all community colleges in NC? Why?

3. What other programs or activities contributed to the support of your semester-to-semester persistence? Why?

Research Question Number 4: What hinders from the semester-to-semester persistence of veteran students in community college?

1. What programs or activities hindered your semester-to-semester persistence? Why?

2. In your opinion, what are the least effective veteran student programs and services? Why?

20. If you had a magic wand and could change any policy related to veteran students, what would you do?

21. Is there anything else that you need or would like to add that has not been covered?
Appendix F. Observation Guide

Date: _____________ Time: _________
Location:___________________________________________

**Group Description (race/ethnicity, age, gender):** Brief description of persons interacting with the research study participant. Are there persons of different races/ethnicities gender and/or age? Are students and faculty/staff present?

**Verbal Behavior and Interactions:** Who speaks to whom and for how long; who initiates interaction; tone of voice (condescending, supportive, etc.) of those interacting? What are the dynamics of the interaction?

**Physical Behavior and Gestures:** What people do, who interacts directly with research study participant? Any noticeable body language and if so what does it appear to indicate in terms of attitude?

**Surrounding Context:** Do others enter vicinity and join group? Any reaction to research study participant as a part of group? Do they stay or leave after a short time? Who are they (race/ethnicity, gender, age)?

The above areas will guide field note documentation during participant observation. Field notes will be taken in a field notebook. In addition to the above areas researcher response comments to what is observed will be recorded in field notebook.
Appendix G. Field Notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants present (pseudonyms):</th>
<th>College:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observer:</td>
<td>Purpose of Observation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>Start:_________ End: ____________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. What were my impressions during the interview?

2. What were the key events or incidents that occurred during the interview?

3. What were my reactions to the events and or setting?

4. What did I learn from this observation regarding my research questions?
Appendix H. IRB Approval Letter (Email)

North Carolina State University Mail - Bowles - 7890 - IRB Protocol approved

https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0?ui=2&rl=1&sk=1&oi¼&prcr¼&min¼&prev¼&pt¼&q¼

Marlena Everett <msevere2@ncsu.edu>

Bowles - 7890 - IRB Protocol approved

Mon, Jun 27, 2016 at 8:17 AM

IRB Administrative Office <pims_notifications@ncsu.edu>

Reply-To: debra_paxton@ncsu.edu

To: msevere2@ncsu.edu

Dear Marlena Everett:

IRB Protocol 7890 has been approved

Title: The Persistence of Military Veteran Students in a Southeastern Community College: A Narrative Study

PI: Bowles, Tuere

The project listed above has been reviewed by the NC State Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research, and is approved for one year. This protocol will expire on and will need continuing review before that date.

NOTE:

1. You must use the approved consent forms (available in the IRB system with the documents for your protocol) which have the approval and expiration dates of your study.
2. This board complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU the Assurance Number is: PWA000034Z0.
3. Any changes to the protocol and supporting documents must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
4. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days by completing and submitting the unanticipated problem form on the IRB website.
5. Your approval for this study lasts for one year from the review date. If your study extends beyond that time, including data analysis, you must obtain continuing review from the IRB.

If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to call us.

Thank you,

The IRB Team
Appendix I. Letter of Permission

Permission to Conduct Research Study at Wayne Community College

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dr. Gene Smith (in the absence of Dr. Kay Albertson):

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at your institution. I am currently enrolled in the Leadership, Policy, and Adult and Higher Education program at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC, and I am in the process of writing my dissertation. I have permission from North Carolina State University's Institutional Review Board to conduct this study. The study is entitled "The Persistence of Military Veteran Students in a Southeastern Community College: A Narrative Study."

I hope that the school administration will allow me to recruit (16 military veteran students; 8 males and 8 females) from the college to participate in the research study. Participants must meet the following criteria:

- Participants must identify as a veteran.
- Participants must be currently enrolled in community college.
- Participants must be in their last semester (getting ready to graduate and/or complete their desired educational goal attainment).

This research is significant because we need to know about veteran experiences with persistence within North Carolina community colleges. Veteran students can be critical stakeholders in providing guidance and developing policy for veteran educational issues. The time commitment will consist of the following: an in-depth interview and demographic questionnaire for approximately one and a half hours. Please be assured that the participant's responses during the interview and questionnaire will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used in published reports.

Interested students, who volunteer to participate, will be given a consent form to be signed by them and returned to the primary researcher at the beginning of the interview process. If approval is granted, student participants will complete the interview and demographic questionnaire in a safe and comfortable setting on the college campus. No costs will be incurred by either your college or the individual participants. Participants who complete the study will receive a $10 gift card for their completion of the interview/demographic questionnaire. No compensation will be disbursed if the participant withdraws from the research study prior to the completion of the interview/demographic questionnaire.
Appendix I: Letter of Permission cont’d

Your approval to conduct this study on your campus will be greatly appreciated. I will follow up with you next week and would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have at that time. You may contact me at my email address: msever2@ncsu.edu.

If you agree, kindly respond to this email acknowledging your consent and permission for me to conduct this study at your institution. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Marlena Everett
Doctoral Candidate, NCSU
Appendix I: Letter of Permission cont’d

North Carolina State University Mail - Permission to Conduct Resear... https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ui=2&ik=b76de8f1c8&view=pt&q...

NC STATE

Permission to Conduct Research Study at Wayne Community College

Gene Smith <gsmith@waynecc.edu>  Thu, Jun 9, 2016 at 6:38 PM
To: Marlena Everett <msevere2@ncsu.edu>

Marlena,
I approve your request to conduct research at Wayne CC. I would like to review the proposal and receive a summary of your results and recommendations upon completion.
Respectfully,
Gene Smith
[Quote text hidden]

--
Gene Smith, EdD
Vice President of Academic and Student Services
Wayne Community College
3000 Wayne Memorial Drive
Goldsboro, NC 27534
919-739-6825

E-Mail correspondence to and from this address may be subject to the North Carolina Public Records Law and shall be disclosed to third parties when required by the statutes. (NCG.S.CH.130)
### Appendix J: Coding Excerpt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excerpts of Participants’ Words and Phrases</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...willing to meet with me outside of office hours…</td>
<td>Positive experiences</td>
<td>Interacting with staff and faculty</td>
<td>Interacting with college employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor and Academic Skills Center staff developed a way…</td>
<td>Teamwork and collaboration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt comfortable sharing my concerns…</td>
<td>Open lines of communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing camaraderie with fellow veteran students…</td>
<td>Support mechanisms</td>
<td>Peer connections with veteran students</td>
<td>Interacting with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...we challenged each other and studied together…</td>
<td>Students as resources</td>
<td>Establishing connections</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...she gave me words of encouragement…</td>
<td>Family as resources</td>
<td>Familial support</td>
<td>Personal, Social, and environmental factors enhanced success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Resource Center gave me a place to feel at home…</td>
<td>Institutional resources</td>
<td>Institution support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...instructors gave clear directions…</td>
<td>Mirrored military experience</td>
<td>Clear, concise directions gave support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
...at times I felt like I was in a kindergarten class...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of structure within classes</th>
<th>Generational differences</th>
<th>Factors that might hinder persistence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I had never used a computer to take classes until now...</td>
<td>Negative experiences</td>
<td>Lack of technological skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...there was no veteran student organization...</td>
<td>Lack of social support</td>
<td>Lack of institutional resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>