

## ABSTRACT

MCDONALD, TERESA. *Voices of Warrior Women: A Narrative Analysis of Female Post-Deployment Veteran Perceptions of the Transition to Two Southeastern Community Colleges* (Under the Direction of Dr. Diane Chapman).

This narrative inquiry examined the perceptions of the transition experiences of female post-deployment veteran students at two community colleges through personal narratives. Additionally, this study analyzed female post-deployment veterans' perceptions of the community college responses to their transition needs. The research questions for this study were designed to explore the female post-deployment veteran transition as it relates to community colleges using the 4S System of Schlossberg's Transition Theory. The 4S System is comprised of situation, self, support, and strategies. The research questions that guided this study were: (1) What are the unique transition experiences of female post-deployment veterans in a community college educational environment from military service member to student? (2) How do personal, social, and environmental factors affect the soldier to student transition of female post-deployment veterans attending a community college? (3) How do female post-deployment veterans attending a community college negotiate the transition from service member to student?

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Schlossberg's Transition Theory. Eight female post-deployment veterans participated in this study with ages ranging from 25 to 34. Participants included three women who had served in the Army, two women who had served in the Air Force, two women who had served in the Navy, and one woman who had served in the Marine Corps. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews accompanied by journaling and field notes as secondary data collection methods.

The data analysis revealed that the participants did not view their transition as unique to gender but unique to their status as veterans with deployment experiences. This experience

included handling of combat weaponry, guarding military bases, and exposure to the sights and sounds of combat to include attacks from the enemy. Because this experience had left most participants with hidden and visible scars, participants sought resources and support from the military, community college, and community veteran organizations during the crucial transition from service member to community college student. Findings also showed that the support from other veterans, family, and friends was detrimental to the overall success of the post-deployment veteran transition.

Based on the study findings, implications for practice included those for the community college, the military, and community veteran organizations. These implications included recommendations for community college administrators, faculty, and staff for planning veteran student support services and program planning. Particularly, the creation of support services and orientation events designed specifically to meet the needs of veterans and optimally led by other veterans. The implications also reflect the need for the military to develop a transition assistance program better tailored to fit the needs of veterans as they transition to college and career. Additionally, this study provides practical implications for veterans' organizations in the community to partner with community colleges to provide outreach services to veterans.

Recommendations for future research include investigating the effectiveness of gender specific (female) and veteran-only community college orientations and support groups. This research would involve studying the effects of structured support on female veteran retention and persistence. Another recommendation for future research is to investigate how the public perception and self-perception of female veterans with deployment experiences affect their transition community college student. Additionally, a recommendation for future research is to investigate female veterans who have experienced trauma while serving on deployment duty and

how entities such as organizations, employers, education systems, etc. should prepare themselves to serve these veterans during their transition to civilian life by operating from trauma informed perspectives.

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Voices of Warrior Women: A Narrative Analysis of Female Post-Deployment Veteran  
Perceptions of the Transition to Two Southeastern Community Colleges

by  
Teresa McDonald

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

Adult and Community College Education

Raleigh, North Carolina  
2018

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the Warrior Women in my life both past and present. Lillie Judkins Merritt (Mama Lillie), you were the ultimate warrior. Continue to rest in Heaven. I know that your prayers have guided me and that your memory is ever present.

## BIOGRAPHY

Teresa McDonald was born and raised in Johnston County, North Carolina, in the Smithfield and Selma area to Mack and Patricia McDonald. Both of her parents are now retired: Mack from law enforcement and Patricia from the pharmaceutical industry. Prior to a career in law enforcement, her father Mack served in the United States Army and was stationed in Korea during the Vietnam War. Additionally, Teresa had two uncles that served in the military: one in the US Navy and the other, the US Army. All three of these men would return home with visible and invisible scars affecting generations to come, each impacting Teresa in different ways. What she learned most from these men in her life was the importance of determination and overcoming obstacles.

Teresa was educated in Johnston County Public Schools. After graduating, she attended The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she received her Bachelor of Science degree in 1992. After working in the human service field for over fifteen years, Teresa returned to school at North Carolina State University where she received her Master's in Training & Development in 2010. Upon receiving her Masters, Teresa enrolled in the Adult and Community College Education doctoral program at North Carolina State University to continue her studies.

While matriculating at North Carolina State University, Teresa continued her work in human services, working with mental health agencies, school systems, non-profit organizations, and would serve as adjunct faculty working with students within the North Carolina Community College System. With a passion for special populations and non-traditional students, Teresa began exploring veteran student transitions to colleges and universities. Teresa's own father used the GI Bill to attend community college and obtain the certifications that he needed to begin his

law enforcement career and often reminded the family how beneficial the military and GI Bill had been.

While speaking with veterans at colleges and in the community, it became apparent to Teresa that women veterans did not seem to have a voice, particularly those who had served on combat duty while deployed. Teresa hopes that this dissertation will give voice to these female veterans studying at community colleges and those who are still transitioning to life after the military.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,

To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. Jude 24-25

Thank You Lord.

I would like to thank my family, friends, and colleagues whose unwavering and endless support has made it possible for me to complete this journey. I am forever grateful for you. There are a few of you that I must name but know that I am forever indebted to all of you for your encouragement in word or deed.

First, I would like to thank my mother, Patricia McDonald, who never allowed me to give up during this journey, even when I thought it made sense to. Thank you for always leading me to a scripture that got me back on track and just reminding me of the goodness of God. To my dad, Mack McDonald, thank you for your patience and support. You are our strength; you make it all possible. Thanks to my sister, Andrea McDonald Sanders, for her constant support and encouragement and always being proud of her little sister. Thanks to my sorority sister and dear friend Tanisha McClendon (soon to be Stevens) for her spiritual guidance and wisdom and for reminding me who was really in control. Thanks to fellow Wolfpack Doctors, Dr. Mabel Watson, my dear sorority sister and friend who is a shining example of excellence in all that she does, and Dr. Pamela Banks-Lee-for taking the time to teach and mentor me through a tough spot along my journey.

Thanks to my classmate and friend, Charlotte, for being with me from orientation to graduation, assuring me that we could accomplish this most awesome task; even when it seemed impossible. For my friend Elaine Ratliff, who encouraged me to go back to graduate school and even picked up the application for me when I could not make the graduate school fair. To Whitney McCoy, a brilliant and supportive friend and doctoral student who helped me sort things out when I needed it the most without hesitation. To my lifelong circle of friends who are too numerous to name for fear of leaving out someone- Thank You, Thank You, Thank You and I love you.

To my colleagues and classmates, past and present, thanks for the support and encouragement. To Roxanna McGraw, a constant supporter and encourager over the years with a special gift of listening. To Dr. Pam Earp who checked on my progress to help keep me motivated and for Dr. Evelyn Kelly for stepping in, motivating me, and giving me that final push that I needed. To Taylor Kirks for providing me with a valuable opportunity to work and grow while I finished up this journey. To Dr. Demetrius Richmond, who literally saved me from drowning (I'm convinced you were sent to NCSU just to help me) thanks for your wisdom and advice at a crucial time in my doctoral journey and for showing me how to laugh through the pain.

To my most awesome Committee Chair, Dr. Diane Chapman, who has been a Godsend from my Masters journey to the completion of my doctoral program. With gentle guidance and support, you eased my anxiety, restored my confidence, and righted my ship after a tough transition. I can never thank you enough. To Dr. Bradley Mehlenbacher, a constant presence throughout my graduate journey. I know you are happy to be back in your native Canada. To Dr. Marc Grimmett for your quiet support and wisdom as a committee member and for the work that

you do championing mental health and counseling. To Dr. Michelle Bartlett and Dr. Carroll Warren for your willingness to step in to complete my dissertation committee and for making it a smooth transition. And to the retired Dr. Tim Hatcher, thanks for believing in me and my abilities when the only thing you had was my graduate school application.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The influx of veterans to college campuses has prompted an increase in research on the transition from service member to student (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Rumann, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). Simultaneously, research has focused on colleges' and universities' response to this influx of veterans on their campuses (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Green, 2013; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann, Rivera, and Hernandez, 2011; Osborne, 2014). The transition of the post-deployment veteran to the college campus is of increasing interest. This increased interest is due in part to the overwhelming presence of debilitating PTSD symptoms in post-deployment veterans that further complicate the transition process and their existence on college campuses.

Studies have shown that post-deployment veterans increasingly choose community college campuses over the much larger colleges and universities because community colleges generally have a smaller campus size and student population and a better value of services and programs (Cook & Kim, 2009; Rumann, et al., 2011). The smaller campus size and student numbers result in smaller classrooms and more one-on-one interaction with faculty and staff. Overall, post-deployment veterans find that community colleges provide a slower paced transition that is better suited for veterans after years of structured military service and war zone deployments (Persky & Oliver, 2010).

Though an increased focus has been placed on the post-deployment veteran transition to community college campuses, there is little distinction in the male and female experiences. Improvements to the GI Bill in 2008 have resulted in a significant increase in female veterans' enrollment in colleges that is predicted to steadily increase through 2020 (Foster & Vince, 2009).

Research on the transition of female post-deployment veterans from service member to community college student is timely and relevant because more female veterans are returning from deployment and enrolling on community college campuses.

Despite the increase in enrollment numbers, conflicting demands and perceptions continue to create challenges for female post-deployment veterans to be successful in their pursuit of continuing education. Female post-deployment veterans may feel pressured to forgo their career goals and aspirations because of an overwhelming sense of responsibility and familial obligation (Wheeler, 2012) like being wives, mothers, breadwinners, and caregivers for aging parents or other family members. In addition, there may be a sense of guilt associated with long absences such as missing milestones and important celebrations that occurred during deployments (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Krajewski-Jaime, Whitehead, & Kellman-Fritz, 2013; Street, Vogt, & Dutra, 2009; Trautman, Alhusen, and Gross, 2015; Walsh, 2017).

The female post-deployment veteran may struggle with her sense of self-worth (or lack thereof) resulting from the disillusionment, disappointment, and disgrace that may be experienced while enlisted in the military (Conard & Scott-Tilley, 2015). This sense of self-worth (or lack thereof) is largely associated with post-traumatic stress brought on by the violence of war zones and by sexual trauma inflicted by their male military counterparts (Dichter, Wagoner, & True, 2015; DiRamio, Jarvis, Iverson, Seher, & Anderson, 2015).

Because female post-deployment veterans come with specific challenges, community colleges need to better prepare for their transition to college campuses, the community, and the workforce. Special programming and instructional design are necessary for the success and retention of female post-deployment veterans (Caffarella, 2002; Sork, 2010). Additionally, workforce development initiatives designed to address the specific skill set and experiences

obtained by female post-deployment veterans are a necessity because of women's impact on the workforce and the community. Studies show that female post-deployment veterans often return to civilian life as single parents and heads of households (Krajewski-Jaime et al., 2013; Street et al., 2009; Walsh, 2017) who are responsible for taking care of not only their children, but of other family members. Community college education combined with workforce development initiatives is necessary to propel female post-deployment veterans into the civilian workforce where they can earn wages to help them resume their role as caregivers and breadwinners (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Recent research has focused on veterans who are transitioning to higher educational environments (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Rumann, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). This research shows that veterans need help from a variety of educational, governmental, community, and personal resources to make this transition less turbulent (Wheeler, 2012). Among these veterans transitioning to a higher educational environment is a subset of veterans who have been deployed. Deployment distinguishes those veterans who have fought or served in combat zones and may have been exposed to the extreme violence from those who have not. (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Cook & Kim, 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). However, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan showed that the distinction between combat and non-combat roles became indistinctive due to the guerilla style tactics employed by our adversaries. In these wars, the concept of a clear front-line was virtually eliminated (Street et al., 2009).

Alongside their male counterparts, females have served in the military dating back to the American Revolution with increasing roles in each war ranging from non-combat to combat

(Street, et al., 2009). According to Krajewski-Jaime et.al, (2013), women make up to 15.3 % of the 1.4 million members of the armed forces. Many of these females fought and were injured in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result of this increased exposure to combat duty, female veterans have acquired long lasting physical and psychological effects often characterized as PTSD (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009).

Though research has explored post-deployment veteran needs as they return to higher education to include community college campuses (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Rumann, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012), little research has inquired about this transition for female post-deployment veterans. The existing research, however, suggests that college campus professionals would benefit from being more responsive to how issues resulting from deployment affect women differently, more specifically, issues associated with mental health, family separation, poor social support, sexual assault, gender identity; the latter two are not commonly experienced by their male counterparts (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009; Gunter-Hunt, Feldman, Gendron, Bonney, & Unger, 2013; Krajewski-Jaime et al., 2013; Street et al., 2009; Trautman, Alhusen, & Gross, 2015; Walsh, 2017).

Additionally, research is needed to help community college professionals understand the experiences of female post-deployment veterans and how they affect the transition experiences to community college educational environments. This research helps ensure an adequate response to the plight of the female post-deployment veteran in transition and result in more effective practice, programming, and policy. This study sought to inform community college leaders and other stakeholders about the transition experiences of female post-deployment veterans to prepare them to support these veterans in their transition from post-deployment service member to student.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This narrative inquiry, qualitative research study explored through personal narratives the perception of the transition experiences of female post-deployment veteran students at two community colleges. Additionally, this study explored female post-deployment veterans' perceptions of the community college response to their transition needs.

Increasingly, the transition to higher educational environments has become part of the transition to civilian life for veterans. Extensive research has focused on veteran's initial enrollments and re-enrollments in community colleges after multiple deployments and the frustration that accompany them (DiRamio et al., 2008; Elliot, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, Flemming, 2011; Persky & Oliver, 2010; Rumann & Hamrick 2010; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013). There has not, however, been an adequate investigation of the female post-deployment veteran transition to the community college educational environment. The findings from this proposed study are meant to expose gaps in the literature on female post-deployment veterans who are transitioning to community colleges as a part of their transition to civilian life.

As veterans transition to civilian lives as students on community college campuses, they should be met with a "cohesive social support system" that will assist in this transition (Thompson, 2011, p.4). A cohesive social support system as it relates to community colleges involves peer, faculty, staff, and administrative support. This research uses personal narratives to explore if, in fact, female post-deployment veterans experience a cohesive social supportive system while enrolled at community colleges.

The research questions for this study were designed to explore the female post-deployment veteran transition as it relates to community colleges using the 4 Ss of Schlossberg's transition theory: situation, self, support, and strategies. The research questions were:

1. What are the unique transition experiences of female post-deployment veterans in a community college educational environment from military service member to student?
2. How do personal, social, and environmental factors affect the soldier to student transition of female post-deployment veterans attending a community college?
3. How do female post-deployment veterans attending a community college negotiate the transition from service member to student?

### **Methodology**

The research questions were designed in accordance with standards for qualitative research. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is conducted when there is an issue, group, or population that needs to be explored. Creswell (2009) suggests that qualitative research is also used to hear silenced voices. Additionally, the research questions were framed to explore the female post-deployment veteran transition to the community college environment using the voices of the female veterans themselves as heard through their personal narratives.

A narrative approach was appropriate to understand the rich experiences of female veterans who have been deployed while in the military. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative speaks to the structure of the experience being studied and describes how the inquiry will be conducted. Green (2013, p.64) refers to narrative inquiry as the process of "creating a story, its plot, theme, and its resolution". Narrative research as research methodology allows for the description of lived existence and communicates the stories of its subjects.

Therefore, it was appropriate in this study of female post-deployment veterans transitioning to the community college educational environment.

Participants were chosen from a sample of female post-deployment veterans enrolled in one rural and one urban southeastern community college. Females were chosen for the purposes of this research to highlight the female post-deployment veteran-to-student transition experience. Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews, journaling, and observations. All allowed opportunities for the participants' stories to be told. Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, themes were identified. Once themes were identified, first-cycle coding was conducted to group themes into single terms. Next, second-cycle coding was conducted to group themes into smaller categories.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Schlossberg's theory of adult transition served as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory presents the transition experience as a process of moving in, moving through, and moving out of a particular life-altering experience. During the moving in phase, individuals learn how to navigate their new situation and learn what is expected of them (Wheeler, 2012). During the moving through phase of transition, navigation of the new environment starts, and participants re-evaluate the decisions leading to it (Schlossberg & Waters, 1995). Last, the moving out phase of Schlossberg's transition framework can be used to analyze a transition that can serve as the ending and the beginning. During this phase, the particular transition ends, and the individual prepares for future transitions (Wheeler, 2012).

The four factors that frame a person's transition (situation, self, support, and strategies; referred to as the 4 Ss), are paramount in Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, Goodman, & Anderson, 2012). Schlossberg's 4S System is the set of factors that impact an

individual's ability to cope during periods of transition and can be classified as either assets or liabilities depending on the individual (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). Situation asks, "What is happening? Does the transition come at a time of multiple stressors (ex. new job while coping with death or divorce)?" Self asks, "To whom is it happening?" The emphasis is on the individual's personality and life issues. Support asks, "What assistance is available?" These will vary per individual. Strategies asks, "How does the person cope?" Individuals will navigate transitions differently (Anderson et al., 2012). The data that was collected for this study was analyzed through the lens of the 4 Ss of Schlossberg's theory.

### **Significance of the Study**

Theoretically, this study will further the research on Schlossberg's theory of adult transition as it relates to the transition of female military personnel into civilian life. Schlossberg's theory (Schlossberg, 1984) and Bridges' theory (Bridges, 1980) explore how adults move from one important phase of their lives into another with a focus on major life events. For military personnel, the transition from service member to civilian (including service member to college student) is important because of the psychological and social impacts (Hammond, 2016; Street et al., 2009). Because transitions are inevitable, continued study of transitions in different populations and aspects of society are useful and important. This study will add to the body of research on major adult life transitions by focusing on the intersectionality of military service member to civilian to student transition.

This study also has practical significance to the following stakeholders: community college administrators and practitioners, The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, and female veteran advocacy groups. Community college administrators and practitioners should find this research useful because it will define the needs of female post-deployment veterans on

their campuses as expressed by students themselves. These needs include specific instructional design and program planning and female-only designations for support groups and counseling.

The community college can mediate the transition process and assist female post-deployment veterans in their academic endeavors if there is a recognition of their needs and if these needs are adequately addressed (Baechtoldt & DeSawal, 2009). In addition, this information will inform The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs how effective their transition procedures are for veterans as expressed through the narratives of the veterans in the study. Female veteran advocacy groups should find this study useful because it should further highlight the needs and interests in female veterans as they navigate life after the military.

Finally, this study will be beneficial to policy makers in the military and the field of higher education because it will highlight the plight of the female service member as it relates to military and educational policies that negatively affect female veterans and their post-military success. Some of these policies affect how females are treated by their male counterparts while enlisted and the bureaucracy that seemingly exists to impede their successes once they attempt to further their education when discharged from the military.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

**Veteran:** A person who has served in the active military, naval, or air service and was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015).

**GI Bill:** An educational entitlement for military service to include benefits under chapters 30, 32, 31, and 34/30 (Title 38 of the U.S. Veterans Code).

**Veteran Friendly Campus:** A veteran-friendly campus 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).

**Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)** - U.S. military operations that began in October 2001 and took place primarily in Afghanistan (Doubler & Listman, 2007).

**Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)** - U.S. military operations that began in March 2003 (Kapp, 2005).

**Post-deployment Student Veteran-** Refers to any college student who has served as an active duty service member in a war zone as a result of a military deployment.

**Transition** “Any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson., 2006, p.33). These events can be anticipated, unanticipated, or a non-event and can have both a positive and negative effect on a person's life (Schlossberg & Lynch, 1989).

### **Summary**

Student veterans have increasingly chosen community colleges to either begin or complete their studies after their military duty is over. Among student veterans, there is a subset of veterans with deployment experience. Of this group are female veterans who may share different experiences and perceptions than their peers on campus. This qualitative research study explored the perception of the transition experiences of female post-deployment veteran students at a community college, through their narratives. Additionally, this study explored the perceptions of these veterans concerning the community college response to their transition needs.

The next chapter provides a review of the related literature to include the history of the military and education and military experiences of the female veteran. It also reviews transition theories with an emphasis on Schlossberg's Transition Theory, which serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Finally, the next chapter reviews the community college's response to the female post-deployment veteran transition.

## **CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This review of literature is used to explore how female post deployment veterans transition from war zones to community college educational environments. Because there is limited research on the transition of female veterans to community colleges and institutions of higher learning in general, there is a substantive need to review the associated literature. In addition, this chapter will review the historical perspective of veterans in higher education, transition theory (with a primary focus on Schlossberg's Transition Theory), the community college response to veterans, and relationships and social supports for transitioning veterans. For the purposes of this research study, the literature review will focus on the need for a greater understanding of the female post-deployment veteran and the experiences of her transition from deployment to the community college to help facilitate her success.

### **History of the Military and Higher Education**

Throughout most of the wartime eras of the United States, there has been a symbiotic relation between the military and institutions of higher education. This relationship was precipitated by the Morrill Act of 1862, which provided grants of public land to states to establish institutions of higher learning to be operated in conjunction with state and federal governments (Renne, 1960). One focus of land grant institutions was the teaching of military tactics. Considered an "afterthought stipulation" to the Morrill Act Legislation (Abrams, 1989, p. 16), this stipulation that required land grant institutions to offer military training as part of the curriculum would be pivotal in building the foundation for a relationship between the military and institutes of higher education.

The military training provision of the Morrill Act was undergirded by the nation's commitment to the notion of the citizen-soldier versus the need for a standing

army. Congressman Justin Morrill, the author of the legislation, thought it best to give young men the experience of being soldiers in colleges run by civilians versus the United States possibly creating a large professional military establishment (Abrams, 1989). In addition to citizen-soldiers, the Morrill Act aimed to educate the children of the working class and farmers (Renne, 1960).

World War II would begin to solidify the connection between universities and the military because, during this time, university scientists and engineers were mandated by President Roosevelt (1941) to focus on priorities of national security. These priorities included research that produced missile technology, gun and bomb sights, radar, and the atomic bomb (Abrams, 1989). This research gave the United States an edge over its opponents, and as research conducted at universities became an essential part of wartime, more funding became available for scientific research. This solidified the relationship between the military and institutions of higher education.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 became known as the GI Bill. Motivated in part by the fear of a nation of unemployed veterans (Olson, 1974), the G.I. Bill positively influenced the public's perception of education and increased access to education to a new class of people (Clark, 1998). The major tenet of the G.I. Bill was that World War II veterans who received an honorable discharge were eligible to receive up to four years of higher education or vocational training paid for by the federal government (Rose, 2012). In addition, Title II of the Bill afforded veterans the opportunity to attend an accredited college or university after meeting the entrance requirements. Many veterans would use the G.I. Bill toward vocational aspirations (Rose, 2012).

In 2008, Congress passed H.R. 2462, officially known as the Military Construction and Veterans and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, which included as one of its provisions the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Shankar, 2009). A significant change in the 2008 legislation was the increase in time that veterans have to use the bill from the ten years provided for under the original (Montgomery) G.I. Bill to a fifteen-year time span (Shankar, 2009). This increase was a public recognition from the government that veterans needed additional time to transition into their new role(s).

Female veterans, like their male counterparts, have taken advantage of the G.I. Bill to acquire and/or further their education and enhance the lives of their families. According to Belfaire (2006) (as cited in Hamrick, Rumann, & Associates, 2013):

Overall, the educational level of women in the U.S. declined during these years, making the women veterans who chose to go to college under the G.I. Bill a very privileged group. The G.I. Bill had a positive impact on the lives of thousands of women veterans; and they, just like men, used their educational benefits to pursue professional careers that would otherwise have been unavailable to them given their family finances. Regardless of whether or not these women eventually opted to get married and have families, their G.I. Bill educations expanded their horizons, and often those of their families as well.

(p.22)

### **Military Experience of the Female Post-Deployment Veteran**

Because military training is designed to produce the masculine version of a warrior and to reward self-control and aggression (Demers, 2013), most female members of the military experience a metamorphosis upon their entry into military service. In fact, they find that who they are is contradictory to who they must become to survive and thrive in the military. Because

of the historical male domination of the military, females find themselves morphing into their male counterparts physically and mentally. Additionally, because most military uniforms are androgynous by design (but with more of a masculine influence), female service members appear the same as their male counterparts, at least superficially and while on duty. As a result of their militaristic socialization and experiences, female service members often transition from the military with acute identity crisis.

In 2003, PFC Jessica Lynch became the poster child for women as defenseless, misplaced units of the military that needed to be protected and rescued when she was captured by Iraqi forces. During this nine-day ordeal in 2003, it became evident that the nation and the world viewed military women as having no place on the front lines. Lynch was a petite, 19-year-old blonde, Caucasian female who spent nine days as a prisoner of war (POW). The world waited for her rescue with thoughts of the unimaginable happening to her while in the hands of the enemy. Among the unimaginable was the preeminent thought of her being raped, a fear not often voiced when male service members are captured and become POWs.

Though there is a concerted effort by the military to present the military as gender neutral, in addition to being at-risk for sexual assault if captured by enemy forces, women overwhelmingly experience military sexual trauma and/or gender harassment at the hands of their male counterparts (Dichter et al., 2015).

### **Military Sexual Trauma**

Military Sexual Trauma (MST) is used to describe sexual assault or harassment that takes place while enlisted in the military (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). The Baechtold and De Sawal study (2009) showed that 23% of enlisted women reported sexual assault, while 55% reported

some form of sexual harassment. The study also reported that 78% of women experienced sexual harassment while on active duty with 6% experiencing rape.

Street et al. (2009) refer to sexual assault as “unwanted physical sexual contact that involve some form of coercion, ranging from unwanted touching to attempted or completed rape” (p. 688) and contend that it is the most severe form of sexual stress. Sexual harassment, as defined in the Street et al. (2009) study, involves sexual involvement that is coerced and becomes a condition of employment or decisions concerning employment such as promotions and job assignments. The study reports that sexual harassment can also include sexual behaviors that “create an intimidating, offensive or hostile work environment (p. 688). These behaviors can include making offensive comments or unwanted sexual advances. According to the study, over 52% of females in the military have reported being the victim of unwanted sexual advances or exposure to conversations or exchanges that were sexual in nature (Street et al., 2009).

As a result of sexual trauma, females in the military may have lingering feeling of loneliness and isolation that can lead to anger, anxiety, depression, or substance abuse (Baechtold & De Sawal, 2009). In the transition to civilian life, these issues can become crippling and render these veterans unable to work, socialize, function within a family unit, or attend school without support and intervention.

### **Sense of Responsibility**

While in the military, female veterans categorize responsibility as “having a deep-rooted sense of responsibility to their units, specifically, and to uphold the reputation of women service members” (DiRamio et al., 2015, p. 56). These veterans also feel a responsibility to increase efforts to gain equality and advancement in a male dominated military (DiRamio et. al, 2015). This sense of responsibility may become burdensome in and out of the military and is doubled

when coupled with dueling responsibilities of being a civilian again (motherhood, caregiver, student, employee, etc.). Carrying the weight of representing all women of the armed forces and vying for respect and equity often prove too much to bear physically and mentally.

### **Self-Perceptions**

In a study on female veterans and help-seeking, DiRamio et.al (2015) found that female veterans often base their worth on the extent of their deployment experiences or the lack thereof. The extent of deployment experience is based upon direct combat action and/or whether or not a veteran was wounded during combat. In the DiRamio study, female veterans who were attending college were interviewed about their help-seeking attitudes. Some of the women reported not feeling worthy of services designed to help veterans on campus if they were deployed but did not actually see combat and, in turn, were not wounded. Participant responses revealed a sense of hierarchy among veterans based on these criteria (DiRamio, et. al, 2015).

This sense of respect for combat versus non-combat duty can be a hindrance in the transition to community college for female veterans. Because of perceived unworthiness, female veterans feel that it is disrespectful on some level to request and accept services on campus that are designed for veterans if their military experience did not include some sort of traumatic event. In addition, the DiRamio et al. study (2015) revealed that women who have experienced sexual trauma or harassment in the military view themselves as overlooked and unworthy. This view of self also hinders the transition process for female student veterans because they carry this feeling into the workplace, family interactions, and onto college campuses (DiRamio et.al, 2015).

## **Transition Theories**

For a myriad of reasons, there has been an influx of post-deployment veterans who have decided to transition from the military to institutions of higher learning, specifically community colleges. As post-deployment veterans are discharged from the military, they simultaneously make decisions on how to proceed with their lives as civilians. Departure from the military under any circumstance is a major transition for its service members. As military service members, veterans have lived a highly structured existence where their lives and those of their families have been planned and managed by the military to include finances, training, and education. During the transition from service member to student, these veterans have to, in fact, reorient themselves to different facets of their lives.

Identity issues and certain insecurities come with a transition to student life, which is a new existence that does not account for the skill sets and accolades possessed by service members in the military (Schiafone & Gentry, 2014). Once on a college campus, post-deployment veterans are forced to establish themselves based on what and how they learn and how they manage their social interaction with others.

Transition theories developed by both Schlossberg (1984; 1989; 1995) and Bridges (1980; 1991; 2009) are relevant to post-deployment veterans' transition to community college because they highlight and make sense of the process of transition that takes place for veterans during this time. This process includes the mental, physical, and emotional transitions that veterans often experience simultaneously.

Transition is an inevitable part of human development, and it is a natural part of humans' growth as we move from one phase of our lives to another. Nancy K. Schlossberg and William Bridges, two prominent transition theorists, have examined how adults transition from one life

event to the next. Bridges (1980) defined transition as a “natural process of disorientation and reorientation that marks the turning point of the path of growth” (p. 5). Both theorists agree that transitions can be mental, physical, occurring in nature, or in the realm of humanity and that all are predictable as is the nature of transitions.

According to Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn (2010), Schlossberg’s transition theory was developed in response to a need for a framework that facilitated an understanding of adults in transition and that would assist them in getting the help they needed to cope with both the “ordinary and extraordinary” processes of living (p. 213). Bridges’ transition theory is based on the notion that transition is the inner psychological process a person experiences to come to terms with a new situation as they let go of the way things were and reorient themselves to the way things are in the present (So, 2010).

### **Relevance**

Both Schlossberg and Bridge’s transition theories have models that represent the different phases of transition and are based on where an individual is in the transition process. Both espouse the fact that transitions involve change in roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions, which is a central argument for using a transition framework to research and analyze post-deployment veterans’ transition to community college (Schlossberg & Lynch, 1989).

Schlossberg refers to these transition phases as Moving in, Moving through, and Moving out (Anderson et al., 2012). Bridges (1980) refers to the phases that he uses to describe where an individual is in the transition process as Endings, The Neutral Zone, and New Beginning.

### **Comparison and Contrast**

Bridges's (1980; 2009) concepts are based largely on French folklorist A. Van Genhep’s notion of separation from the old and familiar in a social context (ending)

followed by a symbolic death/rebirth sequence and then an isolation sequence where inner changes take place (neutral zone) followed by a period where a person or a group is reintegrated into society on a new basis (new beginning). Bridges also draws from the similarities that transitions share with the African tradition of rites of passage, particularly the African male rituals. These rituals call for young African males to be separated from their families and tribes for a period of time, isolated to go through certain transformations and reintroduced to society as completely new young men (Bridges, 1980). These ritualistic processes can be likened to post-war veterans' experience of going off to the military and subsequently to war zones, experiencing the atrocities of war, and returning to civilian lives as transformed persons. The symbolism in the foundation of Bridges's theory is highly effective and gives scholars and practitioners relevant references to understand the transitions that military service members experience.

Though Bridges's theory is closely linked to African rituals, Schlossberg's transition theory is aligned closely with theories of adult development in that transition is seen as occurring over time between phases or stages of adult development (Anderson et al., 2012). In addition to the three phases, Schlossberg separates transitions into three types: *Anticipated Transitions* or normally occurring in the course of a life cycle, *Unanticipated Transitions* or unscheduled or unpredictable events, and *Non-Event Transitions* or expected events that did not occur (Anderson et al., 2012). Though transition is inevitable for all, it is interpreted differently for each individual. For the purposes of this research, the focus was on how female post-deployment veterans perceive their transition out of the military into the community college educational environment. For some veterans, discharge is an anticipated event, perhaps due to retirement, family obligations, or new interests or pursuits. For others, discharge may be unanticipated

because of sudden illness or deployment-related injury or conduct unbecoming a service member. Enrolling in a community college may be an anticipated event as part of a career plan that a service member has prior to joining the military or one that was conceived while on active duty. This transition event can also be considered unanticipated due to an unanticipated discharge, change of duty status, or failure to find employment as planned once discharged from the military. The findings from this research showed that each individual participant views their discharge/transition from the military and their transition to their new role as a student-veteran differently.

Both Schlossberg and Bridges specify the different phases of transitions. Like Bridges' endings, the neutral zone, and new beginnings, Schlossberg's phases signify a flow of movement, foretelling that the person or group involved will be moving from one stage to another. Schlossberg's phases are aptly named moving in, moving through, and moving out and appear more definitive at face value because they invoke a visual of physical movement. In addition to relating actual physical movement to participants' transitions, as expected, this research also uncovered the emotional and psychological "movements" of the participants.

Like Bridges, Schlossberg sees transitional periods as turning points that provide opportunities for growth and decline. Schlossberg's theory provides a perspective on the individual, their environment, and pivotal points in the transition experience that determine the degree of impact that a transition will have (Evans et al., 2010). This theory provides a beneficial perspective that can be used in the research of student veterans because it provides a framework that helps to understand their transition processes (DiRamio et al., 2008). Both Bridges and Schlossberg's theories can be viewed as complex yet simplistic depending on the individual or

group, the transition, and the phase of the transition. Additionally, both theories share the basic concepts of transition as a phenomenon but vary in their dissection of them.

The transition theories of Schlossberg and Bridges both contain another layer to their frameworks. Schlossberg's theory of transition is undergirded by the 4S System (The 4 Ss): Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies, which describe the factors that affect an individual's ability to cope with transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg & Lynch, 1989). Bridges's theory is undergirded by the 4 Ds: disengagement, disidentification, disenchantment, and disorientation. These terms are essential to his Ending phase and help to further analyze how a person arrives at and manages what Bridges sees as the beginning of a transition. Utilizing the phases of Schlossberg's and Bridges's transition frameworks can be a complex task. Depending on the transition, the end may be seen as the beginning or the beginning as the end.

I chose to use Schlossberg's transition theory to analyze the data for this research with a focus on the 4S System. As a conceptual framework, Schlossberg's theory enables the organization of individual parts of a transition in a way that is easy to analyze (Schiaivone & Gentry, 2014). The delineation of the phases (moving in, moving through, moving out) along with the 4S System provide a guide so that one can see the transition taking place and determine what factors impact the transition the most. According to Schiaivone and Gentry (2014), this theory "provides an insight into the phenomenon of veteran-students' transitions from deployment to campus life by shedding light on what impacts veteran-students' progressions into, through, and out of higher education settings (p.30).

## Schlossberg's Transition Theory

### Moving In vs. Endings

In Schlossberg's transition framework, the Moving In phase is seen as the beginning phase of the transition. During this phase, individuals start to learn how to navigate their new situation and learn what is expected of them (Wheeler, 2012). For individuals (female post-deployment student veterans for the purpose of this research), this phase of the transition can trigger an identity crisis (Schlossberg, 1984). Transitioning from a highly structured environment where the whole or the group is the focus instead of the individual to the community college environment where each individual must stand alone and forge their own path may cause individuals to reassess who they are and what their purpose is. While serving in the military, many veterans have also earned medals, awards, and accolades that come along with prestige and honor. Individuals are defined by rank as a result of their accomplishments in the military; however, veterans must start with a clean slate in the *moving in* phase when enrolling at community colleges where their previous rankings do not factor into who they are as a student.

Like Schlossberg's transition framework, Bridges's framework starts the transition process with a term that he uses to signify that an initial change/trigger has begun. However, Bridges chooses a word that would signal the opposite of a new start. For his initial phase of a transition, Bridges chooses the word "ending." For veterans, this would be the end of their military service which propels them into the community college (which Bridges consequently sees as the neutral zone). Bridges believes that there must be an ending of one situation before there is a movement into a new situation. According to Schlossberg's framework, Bridges's ending would be a veteran's discharge or "moving out of the military" to be followed by another phase of "moving in" to the community college (Anderson et al., 2012; Bridges, 1980).

## Comparison to Bridges's The 4 Ds

Bridges's (1980) *Ending* phase of the transition is undergirded by what he sees as the 4 Ds: *disengagement, disidentification, disenchantment, and disorientation*. He sees the 4 Ds as necessary elements to explain the process of an ending. These elements share the prefix *dis*, which generally refers to something being apart or away from something else. However, Schlossberg (Anderson et al., 2012) reminds us that the 4 Ds are not sequenced the same for every individual, nor is it necessary to go through all four in the transition process.

Disengagement is an internal transition during which an individual must be separated from the familiar. Additionally, it is also the vanishing of an old way of doing things that forces an individual to come up with a new way which triggers an ending (Bridges, 1980). For military veterans, disengagement could manifest itself through the decisions that lead up to discharging from the military. For some veterans, disenfranchisement with the military as an organization or a disagreement with the military's presence in a war may trigger the eventual ending to the service member's time in the military. In general, people become disengaged when something no longer interests them or they are disappointed with overall outcomes.

Disidentification is characterized as a loss of self-definition or of an identifiable role or label (Bridges, 1980). For veterans, this would mean no longer being labeled a soldier, marine, sailor, etc. Without the label, veterans often experience an identity crisis after being discharged from the military. The general public will proudly laud discharged service members as distinguished members of society in return for their service to their country, but to some veterans, this label may bring mixed emotions of pride, shame, or ambivalence depending on their pre and post-discharge circumstances. Some veterans on college campuses deliberately choose to not identify themselves as veterans so that they can forge a new identity (Osborne,

2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Forging a new identity relieves them of having to explain and revisit parts of their lives that they would rather not be reminded of, and it allows them a sense of anonymity among their peers on a college campus or in new careers.

Disenchantment and Disorientation are characterized as phases of one's mental and spiritual development that cause re-examination of what was thought to be true and propels us into a state of limbo between the old and the new (Bridges, 1980). For post-deployment veterans, this is when support services from the military and other support professionals are needed the most. During this crucial time, these veterans look for guidance and direction both internally and externally to enable them to make important decisions for their future. Because everything is new and unknown, veterans become quickly unsure of themselves and their abilities. This experience can be compared to boot camp during their entry into the military. Because of the frustration associated with these feeling, student veterans may not seek out needed support.

### **Moving Through vs. The Neutral Zone**

Following Schlossberg's Theory of Transition, the moving through phase comes after the moving in phase and following Bridges's Transition Theory, likewise, the neutral zone follows the ending phase. Both phases of transition are where the navigation of the new environment starts. A re-evaluation of why the transition occurred and the decisions leading to it are also common in this phase (Schlossberg & Waters, 1995). Bridges (2009) refers to his neutral zone as "a nowhere between two somewheres" and the place between a "was and will be" (p.40). Like Bridges's neutral zone, Schlossberg's moving through phase is rife with ambiguity and frustration for individuals in transition.

According to Schlossberg and Waters (1995), the moving through period requires many adjustments and supports. For at least the first year of community college, post-deployment veterans will likely find themselves in the moving through phase/neutral zone and need a great amount of support from college faculty and staff, administrators, and peer groups. Though time spent in these transitional phases will vary from person to person (can last up until degree completion), individuals will likely begin to understand and better navigate their environments during this time (Wheeler, 2012).

### **Moving Out vs. New Beginning**

The moving out phase of Schlossberg's transition framework can be used to analyze a transition that can serve as the ending and the beginning. During this phase, the transition ends, and the individual is preparing for future transitions (Wheeler, 2012). Such is the case with military discharge. For one veteran, it can be the end of a career; for another, it can be the beginning of another depending on age, ability/disability, goals, or aspirations. Also, this phase can be used to analyze the transition that happens when student veterans complete a degree and leave the college setting and enter the workforce again or simply when they have fully assimilated to college life. The multi-use capabilities of this phase are seen in Bridges's framework when he categorizes presumed endings or moving out phases as new beginnings. Bridges puts his new beginning phase at the end because he sees it as a period of rebirth and renewal after old ways have been unlearned and the past forgotten, making way for a brand new start. Similarly, Schlossberg's moving out phase signifies that all of the old things are packed away, and the time has come to move out to a brand new start.

### Schlossberg's 4S System

Schlossberg's 4S System (*situation, self, support, strategies*) is seen as the set of factors that impact an individual's ability to cope during periods of transition and can be classified as either assets or liabilities depending on the individual (Anderson et al., 2012). The variables and their interpretation are as follows:

- Situation: What is happening? Does the transition come at a time of multiple stressors (ex. new job while coping with death or divorce)?
- Self: To whom is it happening? The emphasis is on the individual's personality and life issues.
- Support: What assistance is available? These will vary per individual.
- Strategies: How does the person cope? Individuals will navigate transitions differently. (Anderson et al., 2012)

In a study on veteran students in transition, Schiavone and Gentry (2014) state that the "situation" consists of seven variables that significantly impact transition. These variables are trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience, and concurrent stress. For several of the participants in the study, the trigger was their military service which caused them to decide to enlist to be eligible for benefits that would enable them to enroll and pay for college.

Most of the participants in the Schiavone and Gentry (2014) study felt that timing and control were manageable variables upon their conscious decision to enroll in the military. Similarly, the participants handled the expected role change from service member to student well except for the social aspect of interacting with others who were dissimilar to them in many ways. Overall, the concurrent stressors were the most significant to their success or failure

as student veterans in transition (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). In a similar study by Griffin and Gilbert (2015), finances and allocation of transfer credits were the two primary situational concerns among participants. These studies and others like them point to the complexities of each individual situation and the impact that individual circumstances have on transitions for student veterans.

Schiavone and Gentry (2014) refer to the self-variable in terms of individual assets or liabilities such as finances, state of mental and physical health, and self-efficacy. Because of varying combat experiences, post-deployment veterans are likely to bring emotional and physical baggage with them to college campuses. Therefore, transitions must be analyzed within the context of each student's individualities. All veterans do not suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), nor do all veterans have combat related injuries. This also applies to each veteran's outlook on their self-efficacy. Some veterans have great confidence in their ability to transition and do well in the college setting, and others have low levels of self-efficacy and need more support. The Griffin and Gilbert (2015) study echoes the findings mentioned above and refers to the self-variable as "one's internal resources that foster coping abilities" (p.92).

Griffin and Gilbert (2015) found the concerns about support varied among their participants. Some of the participants in this study were concerned about access to social supports on campus including support from their peers, but others were more concerned with the support of their immediate families (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Schiavone and Gentry (2014) refer to these types of supports as non-role dependent and role-dependent. In this study, non-role dependent support also comes from the student veteran's loved ones who see their family member as neither student nor veteran, and role-dependent support was found through the Veterans Affairs office on campus (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

Studies show that most transition strategies are specific to programs and supports that are established for veteran students only. Interviews from the Griffin and Gilbert (2015) study produced themes that supported the notion that institutions of higher learning are most important in helping veteran students strategize for successful transitions from service member to student. In these programs, veterans can interact with other veterans to plan strategic ways to transition into college and be successful. In addition to the veteran specific services as a strategy, Schiavone and Gentry's (2014) study highlighted interpersonal strategies such as sarcasm and joking, born of their military culture, as a coping strategy while transitioning.

Schlossberg's theory applies to how post-deployment student veterans make meaning of their transition to community college because it provides a perspective on the individual student, their environment, and pivotal points in the transition experience. Both Bridges' theory of transition and Schlossberg's theory are complex and multi-layered in their presentation of transition. Yet both can be viewed as complex yet simplistic depending on the individual or group, the transition, and the phase of the transition. Additionally, both theories share the basic concepts of transition as a phenomenon but vary in their dissection of them.

Schlossberg's 4S System (situation, self, support, and strategies) sets the transition theory apart from that of Bridges. This dimension of Schlossberg's theory was used to analyze the data collected in the research study. Because transition experiences of student veterans are evolving due to the drawdown of troops, there is an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to devise new theories that address the specificities of these experiences. For the purpose of this research, however, Schlossberg's theory and how its components apply specifically to the female post-deployment veteran's transition to the community college educational environment was the primary focus.

### **Transition Theory Implications for Instructional Design and Learning**

Post-deployment veterans who decide to enroll in the community college experience are sufficiently equipped with life experiences gained through their duties as a service member. These student veterans are also highly skilled in specific areas that were assigned to them by the military. Schlossberg's 4S system's support variable indicates that as student veterans are "moving in" to community college settings, they will rely heavily on the community college itself for support. An important way that the community college can support student veterans is by designing instruction that gives them the opportunity to express their military experiences. This would be done most effectively by offering veteran-only classes that give veterans a space to express and learn in an environment with other veterans.

Colleges like the University of Arizona (UA), West Virginia University (WVU), and The University of California at Berkeley offer for-credit cohort classes for veterans. UA offers a course based on resiliency research that uses journaling and personal reflection as an instructional design technique. WVU offers smaller classes specifically for cohorts of veterans in public speaking, English, and history that allow these students to write and speak about their military experiences. The University of California at Berkeley offers a veterans-only class (Education 198- Veterans in Higher Education) that is taught by Veterans Programs and Services staff who are trained to work with veterans who are transitioning or re-entering college (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

### **Major Principles and Practices**

Studies show that veterans benefit more from orientation sessions, support groups, counseling, and classes designed specifically for them (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). This information should be considered when developing, implementing, and evaluating programs for

post-deployment veterans based on the tenets of transition theory. Orientations are important because they prepare students for what is expected of them. Because veteran students have more specific needs and may need transitional courses and programs, colleges should implement orientations for veterans only. By doing this, colleges ensure that veterans do not get lost in the avalanche of information that is given to the student body as a whole. In veteran-only orientations and programs, veterans can ask questions and get information specifically tailored to their needs. Veterans who have vast world and personal experiences will most likely not have the same questions or concerns that 18-21 year-olds or their parents do.

The implementation of veteran specific advising and career counseling is also important. Some post-deployment veterans have post-traumatic stress syndrome or other psychological conditions as a result of their military service. Colleges should have trained counselors who understand the distinctive needs of veterans as they experience major transitions. Veterans will try to engage in a course of study that will prepare them for the next level in their career. Therefore, counselors should be prepared to make knowledgeable career suggestions and help veterans match the skills and experience that they acquire in the military to available jobs.

### **Community College Response to Veteran Transition**

In response to the needs of student veterans, a *veteran-friendly campus* distinction has emerged to describe campuses where there are programs and people in place to assist veterans with the transition between the military and college (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009). A veteran friendly campus is a campus that understands the plight of student veterans and has made an active commitment to the students' success. Veterans are able to research the term on the internet and find colleges with the veteran-friendly campus distinction, which directs them to colleges that may better assist with the transition process.

McBain, Kim, Cook, and Snead (2012) found that 62% of 690 institutions of higher learning (to include community colleges) provided programs and services specifically targeted toward veterans as a result of the rapid growth of veteran students since the Post-9/11 GI Bill was mandated. The study showed that colleges provide common methods of support to student-veterans, including:

scholarships for veteran-students, established policies regarding tuition refunds for military activations and deployments, special campus social or cultural events for veteran-students, counseling services for students with PTSD, programs designed to assist veterans with physical disabilities, academic credit for military training or military occupational experience, and the presence of a central office dedicated specifically to serving veteran-students and military service members. (McBain et al., 2012, p. 31)

Access to many of these services may depend on the size of the university or community college and the availability of funds to support veteran students' transition. However, veteran-friendly campuses and those without the designation should provide as many services as possible to address the needs of student-veterans and ensure their academic success and retention.

Faculty members play a major part in the veteran-friendly campus distinction. Veteran students see faculty members as a source of support, especially those faculty members who also have prior military experience (Rumann et al., 2011). Veterans perceive faculty as less supportive if, like some non-veteran peers, they are disrespectful and insensitive in their comments and show a lack of understanding and sensitivity for veterans' deployment service. Jones (2013) reports that the participants in his study expressed a great need for dedicated faculty and staff throughout the community college.

The presence of Veterans Affairs Certifying Officials (VACO) is also important for campuses that have been deemed veteran-friendly. According to participants in Rumann's (2010) study, VACO officers are instrumental and help veteran students access the GI Bill and transition into the student role. Participants in Rumann's study reported a sense of urgency and the feeling of being rushed in the military debriefing sessions and Transitional Assistance Program (commonly referred to as TAP) which prompted them to seek out Veterans Affairs (VA) officials after enrolling in their community college. Osborne (2014) discusses the inefficiencies of the TAP program. In his study on closing the military-civilian gaps on campus, participants reported that the TAP content was primarily designed to assist discharging soldiers with help finding jobs when they returned to civilian life. According to the participants in Osborne's study, the TAP was deficient because it lacked counselors who had adequate knowledge of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and answers to questions about the college application process.

Because all campuses are not created equal, veterans also have negative experiences when seeking help with their transitions from officials associated with the military and its benefits in connection with community colleges. Often this negative interaction and lack of information about benefits and services causes student veterans to discontinue their studies. Faculty and staff development programs on veterans' issues are important for establishing and fostering a veteran friendly campus (Osborne, 2014). According to Green and Hayden (2013), student veterans thrive when colleges and universities devote adequate attention to their special needs. Student veterans are more likely to successfully obtain a degree with assistance from administration, staff, and counselors, which, in turn, makes a positive impact on the transition from service member to student.

Community colleges can establish veteran specific clubs and organizations to ensure that veterans connect during their transition to life as a student. Student Veterans of America (SVA), which was created in 2008, is a national organization with chapter affiliations at institutions of higher learning across the country (Green & Hayden, 2013). This veteran support organization connects student veterans with each other and forms groups that advocate for the needs of the group and its individual members. In addition to peer groups, colleges can also foster individual mentoring relationships. Colleges can benefit from these mentoring relationships by providing a forum for veteran students to express their concerns about their transition to other college students without fear of recourse from the college administration.

Courtney (1992) makes a connection between adult education and change in the following statement: “Adult education is an intervention into the ordinary business of life- an intervention whose immediate goal is change, in knowledge or in competence” (p. 24). Learning in and of itself is about change, change in the way we see things, hear things, experience things, and speak about things. The acquisition of knowledge changes people and organizations. Jarvis (2006) sees change as a result of *purposeful learning*. In purposeful learning, Jarvis (2006) says that as a result of acquiring “new knowledge, skill, attitude, emotion, value, belief and appreciation”, a person is subsequently changed (p.25). At the center of this change is the individual. In the arena of adult education, institutions of higher learning are responsible for changing the knowledge, attitudes, and competencies of individual learners (Beatty, 1992).

Post-deployment veterans who enroll in community college are experiencing transitions in different aspects of their lives. Levels of change are happening simultaneously. Barclay, Stoltz, and Chung (2011) conclude that levels of change are represented by the depth of psychological foci such as maladaptation, individual cognition, interpersonal and intrapersonal

conflict. Some would argue that change and transition are interchangeable, perhaps seeing a change as a form of transition and vice versa. Bridges (1991) pointed out the distinct differences in the two by clarifying that change is an external process and transition is an internal process (Bridges, 1991). Bridges (1991) explains that change is something that an individual or group is trying to accomplish such as pursuing a degree or new career for individuals or a reorganization or merger for an organization.

Post-deployment veterans are experiencing a change in their environments. They left combat zones in foreign countries and now find themselves in a safer, neutral environment such as the community college. Psychologically, they are still dealing with the fear and anticipation of mayhem and chaos at any minute; so, though they find themselves in a safe environment, this fear and anxiety can still linger. Personally, veterans are still dealing with their decision to leave the military and enroll in community college while dealing with changes in relationship statuses with their friends and loved ones (Schiaivone & Gentry, 2014). Barclay et al. (2011) suggest that “the processes of change represent the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of engaging in a change process” (p. 388).

For the student veteran to be successful in a community college educational environment, there must be both individual and organizational changes. For the individual student to change, learning must take place. Veterans must yield to a more formal education than the mostly informal one they received through their experiences in the military. Veterans who received formal training such as language school or officers training may seek immediate reward or recognition for their successes because this was their experience in the military. They may be dismayed that there are no medals or promotions as a result of hard work in the community

college setting. Often, external and internal struggles occur from having to start the learning process over after serving in the military for an extended period of time.

In response to the influx of student veterans after the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill and after the drawdown of U.S. troops from Middle Eastern deployment zones, community colleges have had to reprogram and reorganize to meet the needs of these students. For student veterans to be successful, the community college as an organization will also have to make changes to adapt to this flourishing population. Because of the number of individuals involved for organizational change to take place, organizations such as community colleges would need to develop extensive plans and strategies to enact essential changes. Models and frameworks exist to help organizations in their efforts to understand and implement integrated organizational change such as Weisbord's Six-Box Organizational Model, the Nadler-Tushman Congruence Model, the Tichy TPC Framework, and the Burke-Litwin Causal Model of Organizational Performance and Change (Burke, 2008).

The Burke-Litwin Model suggests that external factors are the most important driver for change (Burke, 2008). External drivers for change include legislation, competition, and politics. In addition to external factors, other organizational factors such as mission and strategies, leadership, culture, and management practices are essential to the change process for organizations (Burke, 2008). Also, according to the Burke-Litwin Model, transformational leadership, which requires a change leader, would need to take place. Jarvis (2006) suggests that organizational change requires an individual to implement knowledge from a learning experience into an organization's policies and procedures to change them. The change in the policies and procedures would thereby change the actions of the individuals within the organization (Jarvis,

2006). The change leader for a community college would presumably be the Community College System leadership or the individual college presidents.

To apply a change model to a community college for the purposes of benefitting female post-deployment veteran students, the college would first have to identify what changes would need to be made to best address the needs of this population. Most community colleges have grouped student veterans' needs with other non-traditional students' needs. Non-traditional students are generally seen as students who do not go to college immediately after they graduate from high school, are perhaps financially independent, often work full-time and go to school part-time, and have a spouse or dependents. Though student veterans possess some of these same characteristics, I would argue that student veterans are vastly different from the typical non-traditional student.

Because of their military enlistment and deployment experience, the needs of student veterans should certainly be set apart from those of other non-traditional students. Studies show that veterans benefit more from orientation sessions, support groups, counseling, and classes designed specifically for them (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). For many reasons, community colleges and universities are unwilling or unable to allocate funds specifically for veteran students. Pfahl, McClenney, O'Banion, Gonzalez-Sullivan, and Wilson (2010) suggest that increased enrollments and changing state and federal funding formulas have adversely impacted community college campus policy making and funding allocation.

Limited funding causes institutions to be unable to prepare sufficiently for the special needs of veteran students such as separate orientation and instruction. Perhaps, in conjunction with more military assistance, funds can be allocated for veterans only programs and services that do not diminish or deplete other funds that colleges and universities receive from state and

federal governments. These proposed changes would affect internal and external factors and would most likely demand transformational change and leadership (Burke, 2008)

### **Program Planning for Post-Deployment Veteran Education**

Since female student veterans on community college campuses will most likely require different resources and instruction, there would need to be deliberate instructional design and program planning to ensure their success. Thomas Sork (2010) suggests the following program planning necessities: identifying learning needs; determining goals, objectives, and content; identifying and selecting learning materials; marketing; and evaluation. Additionally, Sork (2010) references other emerging factors such as “designing instruction, organizing administrative supports, and formulating an evaluation plan” (p.161) as vital to program planning for adult learners as well.

In the community college setting, program planning would specifically create services for student veterans and their distinct needs. Currently, programs like VACO (Veteran Administration Central Office) exist on college campuses. VACO offices serve veteran students by assisting them with the navigation of the military benefit bureaucracy for accessing education through the G.I. Bill and other military resources (Diramio & Spires, 2009). In response to the recent influx of post-deployment veterans to community college campuses, student veterans and the community college would benefit if community colleges would enhance their current programming for these students by assessing their needs and planning programs accordingly.

To plan these programs effectively, community college personnel can draw upon several existing program planning models. Rosemary Caffarella’s (2002) Interactive Model of Program Planning has proven effective in adult education. Drawn from previously presented program planning models, Caffarella (2002) espouses that her model is different from the existing models

in the following ways: 1) It has an interactive and comprehensive design; 2) It acknowledges people and place as important in program planning; 3) It takes into account differences among culture; and 4) It is found to be useful and practical by practitioners.

Caffarella (2002) refers to her model as interactive because it has no beginning or end and can, therefore, be used in any setting. The fluidity of this model most effectively addresses the needs and planning programs for adult learners because of their inherent diversity. Programs for female veteran students should also be planned to fit the needs of the particular college and its culture. Caffarella (2002) suggests that program planning is best done collectively by learners, instructors, and the organizations that they are affiliated with. Smith (2010) adds that adult learners are better able to make sense of learning in environments that are learner-centered and yield to their active participation in their education within social and diverse contexts. Other stakeholders such as the military and the surrounding community are also important in program planning for adult learners.

Caffarella (2002) offers those who implement her program planning model the following components (checklist) as a guideline: discerning the context; building a base of support; identifying program ideas; sorting and prioritizing program ideas; developing program objectives; designing instructional plans; devising transfer of learning plans; formulating evaluation plans; making recommendations and communicating results; selecting formats, schedules, and staff needs; preparing budget and marketing plans; and coordinating facilities and on-site events. Again, this model allows for the individual needs of each organization; therefore, some of the components are not applicable to all planning projects. Program planning for female student veterans may include all of them because of the scope of the needs of these veterans and the often complex landscape of the community college system.

The Interactive Model for Program Planning is based on the following seven assumptions: (1) Focusing on learning and change; (2) Recognizing the non-sequential nature of the planning process; (3) Discerning the importance of context and negotiation; (4) Attending to preplanning and last-minute changes; (5) Honoring and taking into account diversity and cultural differences; (6) Accepting that program planners work in different ways; (7) Understanding that program planners are learners (Caffarella, 2002). These assumptions are fundamental to program planning for female student veterans as adult learners, especially the assumptions that address diversity, culture, and the focus on learning and change. Female student veterans are better served by a program planning model that allows for flexibility in the process and accounts for the specific needs that they bring to the community college setting based on their military experiences and exposure.

### **Relationships and Social Supports**

Resuming relationships and initiating new friendships in general are particularly challenging for post-deployment veterans. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) report that relationship transitions are among the transitions that veteran students experience because of the combination of identity roles, functions, and environments with which they are involved. Relationships with family and significant others, pre-military friends, and their peers on community college campuses are among the major relationships affected during the transition experienced by post deployment student-veterans (Wheeler, 2012).

Movies like *The Hurt Locker* show the viewer how relationships can be affected once post-war veterans return home. In the scenes following the main character Sergeant First Class William James's return to his family, the viewer is shown the apparent disconnect between the sergeant and his wife and infant. Throughout the scenes, Sgt. James is speaking about his

experiences in the war zones as his wife continues to go about her daily responsibilities, seemingly unmoved or disinterested. Sgt. James's new normal of peace and tranquility does not provide the stimulation he is used to, and his experiences and new sense of self prohibit him from reconnecting with his family and friends. His inability to reconnect and reestablish relationships leads Sgt. James to ultimately re-enlist in the military and return to a war zone versus continuing to attempt to fit into civilian relationships and situations.

Though *The Hurt Locker* only focused on how the post-war veteran transitions affect intimate relationships, other relationships are also affected. According to Wheeler (2012), relationships with pre-military friends are also affected. The researcher reported that the veterans in her study, with an average of 6.7 years of active military service, found that their service experience caused such significant personal changes that they could not resume friendships with pre-military friends that they felt had not changed much at all. Presumably, this disconnect with pre-military friends could be a result of post-deployment veterans' need to discuss and process their military experience with those friends who can readily relate, such as the friends that they made in the military. It is in those relationships where veterans would most likely not have to explain or simplify their experiences because their military friends have similar experiences

During the transition from post-deployment veteran to community college student, relationships with peers become important to the academic success and retention of veteran students. Wheeler (2012) found that veteran students often face problematic relationships with their peers because of the vast age differences and perceived lack of respect for combat experience. Wheeler's research also showed that among veterans' primary frustration with their

peers is classroom behavior, lack of knowledge about wars, and insensitive remarks or questions (Wheeler, 2012).

Veterans who come from a rigorous military existence are bothered by the lack of discipline and dedication that their peers exhibit. Wheeler (2012) found that veterans often struggle with the lack of effort that their peers put into their work, their focus on TV and social media instead of their education, and their lack of respect for authority figures such as instructors and administrators. Some of the participants in Wheeler's study reported that they would often choose to leave class when students became disrespectful for fear of letting their tempers get the best of them. Veterans also find that students who are often fresh out of high school do not have many experiences at all and know little about what is going on in the world (Wheeler, 2012). However, these veterans reported that they were able to better connect to older students in the classroom who have significant life experiences. Veterans are simultaneously dealing with other aspects of transitioning back into civilian life like managing the aforementioned relationships. Couple these frustrations with the weariness of being a community college student, and it is easy to understand why veterans who are able to do so discontinue their pursuit of higher education.

Veterans who find themselves in an environment where their deployment experience is seemingly not respected or understood may often choose not to continue the pursuit of their education because of the high frustration and stress level. The lack of knowledge about the wars that they had served in was most irritating to the veterans in Wheeler's study (2012). To offset the disconnect between them and most of their peers, veterans often seek to connect with other veteran students (Rumann, 2010; Rumann, et al., 2011). Relationships with other veterans offer a comfort level and a camaraderie that veteran students cannot find with their peers who do not

share combat or military experience. These relationships can assist veterans with their transition to community colleges and with their persistence and retention.

Community college as institutions are also important for building peer-to-peer relationships. Although students share a bulk of the responsibility in the transition to find ways to build and maintain relationships and co-exist with their peers, instructors and administrators at community colleges must foster an environment that encourages academic success and persistence among student veterans. An optimal community college environment will actively and purposefully help facilitate the transition from deployment to first time community college student.

As the influx of post-deployment veterans to college campuses continue, research will need to include more on how veterans build and rebuild relationships. Knowing how the success and failure of relationships shape the success and retention of veterans on college campus is important in the study of veterans. How institutions of higher learning can facilitate relationship building through education is also important to the field of adult education.

Gunter-Hunt, et al. (2013) state that, “The reintegration challenges for women veterans concern the unique or disproportionate physical and mental health readjustment issues and obstacles they face on their return to civilian life” (p.27). These readjustment issues include limited social supports, homelessness, PTSD and other mental illness, sexual trauma, and physical health challenges (Gunter-Hunt, et al., 2013). Because female post-deployment veterans have different psychological and mental health needs than their male counterparts, it is imperative that support networks be structured differently. Support networks include, family, community, and for purposes of the research, community college campuses.

Because there is an overwhelming sense of isolation felt by female post-deployment veterans that is a result of intentional (sexual trauma) and unintentional trauma (physical and psychological as a result of combat), programs and personnel must be put in place in community college systems to ensure that these veterans feel that their concerns are being considered and addressed when they are enrolled in community colleges. Some of the isolation is a result of colleges not fully recognizing the veteran status of females like they do their male counterparts. This leaves female veterans feeling like there are two classes of veterans- male and female; as well as combat or non-combat. It is often assumed that female veterans are non-combat because it has only been since 2015 that the federal government passed legislation that allowed women in combat zones (Gunter-Hunt et.al, 2013).

Because a large number of female post-deployment veterans are unmarried, single parents (DiRamio et. al, 2015), it is imperative that community colleges take into consideration the scheduling and accessibility needs of these veterans. Because of their single parent status, it is likely that there will be day care issues as well as other issues associated with the caring of children. This issue is often accompanied by the lack of a support system. Perhaps creating a daycare for nighttime classes or extending the hours of daycare already in existence on community college campuses would give female veterans more incentive to come to class and to feel comfortable with their daycare situation.

Also of importance will be formal support groups designed specifically with the female post-deployment veteran in mind. Because of some of the issues with military sexual trauma, it is imperative that these veterans feel safe in their new environment. Employing female instructors, more specifically females with military background, may most likely put female post-deployment veterans with any traumatic experiences more at ease. This is because of the kindred

nature of the relationship and because females may be less threatened by a female instructor than a male instructor in the event there has been some MST in their past.

Also, as part of program planning efforts, community colleges should be strategic and intentional about creating and maintaining female veteran-only support groups. Because it is important that female post-deployment veterans feel safe in their environments, this would give them the feeling of safety and security that they need in a peer-led environment.

### **Summary**

The literature reviewed to frame the female post-deployment veteran transition to the community college educational environment involved a detailed glance into the history of the military and higher education along with the military experience of the female post-deployment veteran and its impact. It also examined theories of adult transition and the implications for veterans in general and female veterans specifically. Veteran reintegration challenges including relationships and social supports were also reviewed. Finally, the community college response to veterans and implications for instructional design and program planning were examined.

Each of these elements provided insight into the multi-layered research problem. This research sought to fill in the gap in the understanding about how female post-deployment veterans transition from military service to the community college educational environment. Additionally, it sought to provide suggestions on how the community college could respond to the needs of female post-deployment veterans with specific program planning and access to service.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of female post-deployment veterans as they transitioned to two southeastern community colleges. This qualitative study also sought to study these veterans' perceptions of the community college response to their needs. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the transition experiences of female post-deployment veterans in a community college educational environment from service member to student?
2. How do personal, social, and environmental factors affect the service member to student transition of female post-deployment veterans attending a community college?
3. How do female post-deployment veterans attending a community college negotiate the transition from service member to student?

This chapter outlines the overall methodology of the study by describing the research design, sample selection, and data analysis. This chapter also outlines the study's trustworthiness, assumptions, and researcher subjectivity.

### Study Design

Qualitative research was chosen for this study design. Creswell (2012) proposes that qualitative research has the following characteristics: natural setting, researcher as key instrument, multiple methods, complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic, participants' meanings, emergent design, reflexivity, and holistic account, and that we conduct qualitative research to empower individuals to share their voices and hear their stories (2012, p. 45, 48). Josselson (2006) says that qualitative research requires that the researcher gather

narratives by written, oral, and visual methods and pay attention to how participants make meaning of their experiences.

Charmaz (2004) believes that researchers enter into qualitative research to “discover what is significant from the viewpoint and actions of people who experience it” (p. 981), and it allows the researcher to make meaning of the experience while the participant is making meaning of their experiences, as well. While both participant and researcher are practicing reflexivity, both are openly interpreting each other’s action and intentions.

The narrative inquiry methodological approach was most appropriate for this study. Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) proposed eight essential elements of narrative inquiry that create a framework for designing and conducting narrative inquiry. These key elements are justification, naming the phenomenon, consideration of the method of inquiry, analysis and interpretation of the research text, positioning of the research, uniqueness of the study, ethical considerations, and the process of representation (Clandinin et al., 2007, p.65).

Narrative speaks to the structure of the experience being studied and describes how the inquiry will be conducted (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative is also the process of “creating a story, its plot, theme, and its resolution” (Green, 2013). Therefore, the use of narrative research as research methodology allows researchers to describe the lived existence and communicate the stories of their subjects.

### **Site Selection**

The proposed site for this research study was Rural Community College (RCC) located in the southeastern United States. However, due to some unexpected delays in the review and approval of my request at RCC, alternate sites were chosen. While I waited for the review and

approval of my study at RCC to be completed, I submitted a request to conduct research at two urban community colleges in the approximate geographical area.

One of those colleges replied that they did not have the staff to assist in the process and could, therefore, not grant permission to conduct a research study there. The other, Urban Community College (UCC), required its own IRB process which included having a sponsor on staff. Since I did not know any staff members at UCC, I requested one from the college, and a sponsor was provided for me. Once I had a sponsor, I prepared and submitted the college's IRB materials and received approval within a few weeks. I was granted permission to recruit for my study at the RCC 3 months after my initial request to conduct my study there. I ultimately decided to collect data at both UCC and RCC.

### **Sampling Procedures**

Criterion and snowball sampling were used to select participants for this study. According to Patton (1990), criterion sampling means selecting settings and/or participants based upon whether or not they meet certain criterion. Participants in this study were selected based upon criteria established according to the phenomenon under study.

The essential criteria for participant selection were:

- Gender: participants were female veterans
- Experience: participants had post-9/11 deployment experience
- Enrollment: participants were enrolled in a community college and had completed at least one semester with a minimum of six credit hours.

The first criterion was that each study participant be a female veteran. This study was designed specifically to highlight the transition experiences of female veterans in transition to

community colleges. The veteran designation was to separate active military personnel from those that had been discharged.

The second criterion was that the participants had post-9/11 deployment experience. Prior to the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, female enlistees did not experience much direct combat. However, after the 9/11 attacks, the military loosened its policies that prohibited females from fighting alongside their male counterparts in warzones. The exclusion of women in direct-ground combat was officially eliminated in 2013 in an announcement made by Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey.

The third criterion was that the participant was enrolled in a community college and had completed at least one semester with a minimum of six credit hours. This criterion was important because it signified the commitment and intention of the participant to pursue an education through the community college. A student who had completed at least six credit hours in one semester had shown persistence through the transition of a semester of college. Completion also indicates perseverance, which is often difficult to maintain for students entering college with mitigating factors such as health, mental, or personal issues common among female veterans.

Snowball sampling was also used to maximize the participant pool. Patton (1990) referred to snowball sampling as sampling that involves interviewing people who can refer other people that can contribute rich data to the study. Female student veterans who responded to the recruitment material were asked to refer other female veterans with deployment experience that they were acquainted with to the study.

I began the selection process for the study by requesting that the recruitment information (Appendix A) be sent to all female veterans at the selected community colleges. Emails were

sent out by the director of the Research and Institutional Review staff at each college. Interested participants were asked to email me for further information. Quite a few of the responses received were from women veterans with no deployment experience. Although, grateful for the responses, I was unable to include these female veterans in my research. However, I asked that they share my recruitment information with other females at the college that they knew with deployment experience.

Because of difficulties associated with timing (inclement weather and holidays) and communication, I enlisted assistance from my sponsor at UCC. She was able to employ different recruitment efforts throughout the college that enabled me to successfully recruit six participants there. Though there was not an assigned staff person for veterans at RCC, there was staff that agreed to forward my recruitment information to the female veterans that they came in contact with. I was able to recruit two participants from RCC.

## **Data Collection**

### **In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews**

The primary data collection method for this study was semi-structured interviews, which were conducted at a face-to-face meeting between researcher and participant. Merriam (2001) states that “interviewing is the primary method of data collection wherein one attempts to uncover the essence, the invariant structure, of the meaning of the experience” (p. 93). Semi-structured interviews allow for a more open environment that enables study participants to have more control over what they decide to share and how they choose to answer the interview questions (Esterberg, 2002).

To establish reflexivity, the researcher and the participant should have an opportunity to reflect upon the research questions and responses after the interview. Each participant was given

an opportunity to review the transcript from their interview. Providing copies of transcripts gives participants an opportunity to clarify any information and make corrections and additions to the interview transcripts (Rumann, 2010).

With each participant, I provided a brief introduction of the research study, administration of the consent form, administration of the demographic questions, and administration of the interview questions. The questions were designed to prompt participants to share information about their individual experiences as female post-deployment veterans as they relate to their experience enrolled at community colleges through the lens of Schlossberg's 4S System (self, situation, strategy, and support).

### **Journaling**

Creswell (2009) suggests journaling as one way to collect data for narrative research. Because journals are typically used to record day-to-day events in a person's life or summarize what one sees as important during a certain time period, journals are an effective way to collect data in narrative research. Journaling also helps the researcher reflect on the research process and may perhaps produce ideas for future research and contributions to the field of study. Journaling allowed me to reflect on the process and how it developed, some of the pitfalls of the process, and how to use lessons learned for future research projects.

### **Field Notes**

Throughout the course of the interviews and immediately afterward, notes were taken about participant disposition, attitude, personality, time of day interview was conducted, differences and similarities between study participants, any distractions, etc. These notes enabled this researcher to reflect about each participant as an individual and the participants as a group. Phillipi and Lauderdale (2018) posited that taking these field notes during the interview can help

the researcher remember important details but should not disrupt the interview or distract the participant. To insure this, I wrote in shorthand and sometimes employed pictorial clues and colloquial phrases to be able to connect the interview as it was happening in real-time during the reflective process. Care was taken to not write anything that identified the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The data gathered from the participant interviews was audio-digitally recorded and transcribed. Once the transcription was completed, it was shared with each participant via email for their review. Participants were allowed to edit the documents and ask for clarification of any of the contents.

To analyze the data gathered from the interviews, I used the 4S System of Schlossberg's transition theory. Schlossberg's 4S System (*situation, self, support, strategies*) is seen as the set of factors that impact an individual's ability to cope during periods of transition and can be classified as either assets or liabilities depending on the individual (Anderson et al., 2012). The variables and their interpretation are as follows:

- **Situation:** What is happening? Does the transition come at a time of multiple stressors (ex. new job while coping with death or divorce)?
- **Self:** To whom is it happening? The emphasis is on the individual's personality and life issues.
- **Support:** What assistance is available? These will vary per individual.
- **Strategies:** How does the person cope? Individuals will navigate transitions differently (Anderson et al., 2012).

Once the interviews were complete and the data was transcribed, first cycle coding was done. This round of coding is important in structuring the retrieval and organization of data for

analysis, so it must be precise (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Themes were identified with a focus on the 4Ss of Schlossberg's transition theory.

Once this initial round of coding was conducted, a pattern or second cycle coding took place. Second cycle coding is a way of grouping the information gathered from first cycle coding into smaller categories, themes, or constructs (Miles et al., 2014). According to Miles et al. (2014), second cycle codes identify emergent themes and pull data together into more pertinent units of analysis. Data was analyzed to look for occurrences where more than one participant had the same or similar responses to an interview question. Both 1st and 2nd cycle coding provided multiple opportunities to look back through the interviews.

### **Trustworthiness**

Polit and Beck (2014) referred to trustworthiness as the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and the methods used to ensure the quality of a study. For the purposes of this research and to ensure trustworthiness, I employed the use of peer debriefing, document review, and member checking.

Peer-debriefing sessions gave the researcher an opportunity to discuss the research study with her committee chair and colleagues. These valuable sessions provided motivation and encouragement and allowed the researcher to consider other ideas, methodologies and approaches to problem solving. Member checking and document review was insured as interview transcriptions were made available to study participants to review for accuracy. Any edits or feedback to these documents was encouraged and welcomed. This also gave the researcher the opportunity to review the data multiple times.

### **Researcher Subjectivity**

Creswell (2009) offers that the story of the researcher must also be known as it is important in the representation and the transference of the participant's voice. In that vein, the following subjectivity statement is provided to ensure transparency concerning who I am as a researcher and the kinds of professional and personal experiences that have brought me to this research. I am first and foremost a female researcher; which gives me a particular insight into research on female participants. As a female (sister, daughter, sorority sister, friend and confidante to many other females), I hope to be seen as a relatable, reflective listener because of shared perceptions and experiences due to the nature of being a female. However, this is where the similarities between me and the female post-deployment veterans that I studied ended. I have no military experience, and I have limited contact with any females who have this experience. I do, however, have a professional background in mental health and substance abuse counseling to include crisis management that has focused on at-risk groups to include women who have experienced trauma.

Concurrently, I have been an adjunct faculty member at a community college for six years. This experience has exposed me to non-traditional students acquiring basic skills to earn a high school equivalency diploma. It has also caused me reflect on how community colleges can better serve their non-traditional students by providing services and instruction specifically tailored to the needs of these students. Because my experience is mainly with basic skills students, I have not been directly exposed to veterans in the classroom.

I have been "green zone" trained, however, which identifies me as a resource for veterans all over the campus when they need help navigating community college campus life and resources. During my green zone training, I was exposed to information about military

experiences and some of the frustration shared by veteran students. It is my hope that through this research my own personal narrative will become richer by the exposure to these brave women.

Overall, I am a very passionate practitioner of adult education, particularly the special populations that exist within adult education settings. A history of working with at-risk youth populations has allowed me to follow some young adults through their transition to adulthood while bringing with them the struggles from their youth. People with existing struggles, like the female post-deployment veteran population, will also bring with them the struggles from their military experiences. Additionally, I am passionate about assisting those pursuing education as adults in making these transitions smoother and am a huge proponent of resource and referral sharing with adults in their transition processes.

### **Assumptions**

Creswell (2009) proposed that methodological assumptions are the assumptions that the researcher makes regarding the process of qualitative research. For this research, narrative inquiry as a research method was utilized. As a result of studying the logic, context, and frameworks associated with narrative inquiry, the prescribed process of the research methodology was followed. This method was chosen based on the experience of collecting and analyzing data for other research projects, and the assumption was that it would yield similar results. Conceptually, the assumptions in this research were based on expectations and beliefs about Schlossberg's transition theory as a conceptual framework.

### **Summary**

Chapter Three established the overall design for this research study. It set forth qualitative research as an appropriate method for this study because it involved data collection in

the natural setting of the participants using semi-structured interviews, journals, and field notes. It provided an overview of the data collection and data analysis processes. This chapter also discussed trustworthiness and explained the researcher's subjectivity and assumptions. The next chapter reports the findings of this study.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this narrative inquiry, qualitative, research study was to explore the perceptions of the transition experiences of female post-deployment veteran students at two southeastern community colleges. Additionally, this study sought to explore female post-deployment veteran perceptions of the community college's response to their transition needs. This study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the unique transition experiences of female post-deployment veterans in a community college educational environment from military service member to student? (2) How do personal, social, and environmental factors affect the military service member to student transition of female post-deployment veterans attending a community college? (3) How do female post-deployment veterans attending a community college negotiate the transition from service member to student?

Chapter Three provided information on the study design, site selection, data collection, and methods of analysis. Chapter Four begins with a demographic overview of each participant, followed by individual participant profiles. Next, results are presented that were acquired from themes that emerged using the Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a theoretical framework in conjunction with the research questions. The chapter ends with a brief summary.

### Participant Profile Overview

Demographic questions were asked at the beginning of each interview to gather a more descriptive analysis of the personal variables of the female student veterans. Each participant was asked their age, whether they were a full or part-time student, how many semesters they had completed, what branch of the military they had served in, how many deployments they served on and those deployment locations, and the goal of their enrollment in the community college. This information is presented in Table 1. The U and R on the chart under college indicate if they

attended the rural or the urban community college. There were six participants in the study who attended the urban community college and two participants in the study who attended the rural college.

The female veterans who participated in the study ranged from ages 25 to 34, with an average age of 29. Participants included three women who had served in the Army, two women who had served in the Air Force, two women who had served in the Navy, and one who had served in the Marine Corps. One Army veteran was medically retired, while the others separated voluntarily. All participants received honorable discharges. Deployments varied by branch of military service. Army deployments included Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kuwait. Navy deployments included, Israel, Dubai, Greece, Syria, Jordan, and Bahrain. Air Force deployments included Qatar, Afghanistan, Chad, and Ethiopia. The Marine Corp deployment included Iraq, The Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, and Malta.

Of these participants, five were enrolled at the community college full- time, and three were enrolled part-time. The number of semesters completed varied as well, ranging from one to five semesters. Six of the female veterans were enrolled in a community college for the first time. Two female veterans had tried and failed at community college before deciding to enlist in the military.

The goal of enrollment for the female veteran participants varied between wanting to obtain an associate degree and join the workforce in the field of their study or obtain an associate degree and transfer to a four-year college or university to further their studies. One female veteran had a college degree before enlisting in the military and decided to pursue a certificate in a field that was different than the one she had pursued in college.

Table 1 presents participant profiles, followed by individual profiles.

Table 1.

*Participant Profiles*

Pseudonym	Age	Full or Part-Time enrollment	Semesters of Community College Completed	Branch	Deployments	Goal	College
Emily	25	Full	3	Army	Afghanistan	IT Degree	UCC
Michelle	27	Part	5	Air Force	Ethiopia, Chad	Associates	UCC
Stacey	25	Full	4	Navy	Israel, Dubai, Greece	Assoc/Transfer	UCC
Alaria	34	Part	1	Army	Iraq	Diploma (MRI)	UCC
Larissa	32	Full	2	Navy	Syria, Jordan, Bahrain, Dubai	Radiology Degree	RCC
Lauren	32	Part	4	Air Force	Qatar, Afghanistan	Assoc/Transfer	RCC
Sarah	29	Full	1	Army	Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan	Associates	UCC
Marie	30	Full	4	Marine Corps	Iraq, Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, Malta	Assoc/Transfer	UCC

**Participant Profiles****Emily**

Emily decided to enlist in the Army after deciding that she could not pay for college. No one in Emily's family had ever gone to college. Her mom had served in the Army Reserves and encouraged her to enlist in the Army so that the military could pay for her education. Emily admitted that she did not do any research herself about college, nor did she talk to her guidance counselor in high school about attending college or how to pay for it.

Emily's transition to community college was marred by a paperwork mix-up. Emily reported that she turned her paperwork in so that she could start receiving her GI Bill benefits, but it was never turned in to the proper entity. This mishandling of her paperwork caused her benefits to be delayed by three months. She and her husband struggled financially during that time. Emily had to work full-time and go to school, which caused her grades to suffer. Once Emily was able to get her benefits straightened out, she reduced her workload to part-time and was able to concentrate more on school.

Emily met and married her husband in the Army. Emily's family was in the Midwest, and she had not connected with anyone in the community or on campus. She would like to see women veteran support groups, meet and greets with other veterans, and perhaps a separate orientation for veterans. At a veteran-only orientation, Emily felt that veterans could meet each other and be able to network and form support groups.

Emily did not feel as if being a female had factored into her transition to community college but had noticed some misconceptions about being a female veteran. People are generally surprised that she was in the military and served in Afghanistan.

“Just cause I'm a female doesn't mean I couldn't...I can't be a veteran...So I feel like there's still this stigma out there that like it's...it's not normal for women to be a veterans.”

Emily felt like her experience with the Army's transition program was adequate. It was two weeks long and was divided into sections on employment and sections on education. Emily credits the military base that she discharged from with having good programs for service members. However, Emily wished that the military stressed degree attainment while service members are enlisted because she found it hard to find a job without a degree.

So, I feel like maybe the army needs to focus on some sort of way of helping soldiers get a degree while they're in and then when they get out they're more likely to get a job.

Because if you don't have a degree when you get out, you're going to have a hard time finding a job. At least a job that you're going to enjoy or have, you know, decent pay.

Emily wants to obtain an IT certificate and see if she can get a job in the industry. If she is not able to, then she plans to return to school to further her education.

### **Michelle**

Michelle had attended a community college for two years prior to enlisting in the Air Force. Michelle was a newlywed and was planning to join her husband who was also in the Air Force wherever he would be stationed once she completed her program at the community college. Michelle has a very supportive family whom she credits for her confidence and success.

Michelle had a rather smooth transition to community college after she was granted residency. She credits the attentiveness of the Veterans Resource Center staff with helping her decide to come to the college.

Mr. Dwight, he was really great. Like he helped me fill out my waiver for residency.

He was always in constant contact with me and that's what kind of made me want to come to Urban Community College because he was so helpful and reached out so much to help me get into school.

Michelle also found the fact that UCC gave veterans priority registration beneficial.

Michelle wished that the military had provided her with more information about the GI Bill prior to her discharge so that she might have been better prepared for the transition. She also thought that having a day or opportunity for all females who were transitioning out of the

military at the same time to get together would be beneficial. Michelle thought this would be a great opportunity to network, share information, prepare for interviewing, etc.

To assist female veterans in transition, Michelle suggested that the community college host all female veteran events so that she could meet other female veterans, especially ones her age. She also suggested that informal mentoring could spring from these all female veteran events. She offered that since she had been at the community college for five semesters that she could possibly assist a new female veteran and answer questions about classes, etc.

Michelle believed that with better communication, more veterans would use the Veteran Resource Center. She suggested that in addition to the emails that were sent out about the services, that instructors place material around the classrooms and even in the syllabus so that all veterans would be aware of the services available for them:

you'd even get more response if teachers put it in their syllabus like a certain...hey for like if you're a veteran in the class, there's a Veterans Resource Center. I mean I don't expect anyone to like cater to the veterans but just to throw it out there...

Michelle had experienced some uncomfortable situations in one of her classes related to her being a veteran. This happened when an instructor asked the class's thoughts on a picture of the family of a service member that had died in combat being presented a flag. In response, a Muslim student said, "maybe he deserved it cause he was in a country that no one wanted him in." Michelle was offended as was a fellow service member in the classroom who provided a verbal response. Michelle felt that overall people had negative views of military service, but she was respectful of all opinions.

Michelle suffers from hearing loss in one ear that happened while she was deployed. In addition to the hearing loss, Michelle had constant knee and back pain. Michelle had not filed her disability claims with the VA but was planning to.

### **Stacey**

Stacey was a Navy veteran who had been out of the military two years. She and her wife had a son. In addition to a wife, Stacey had a very supportive family that encouraged her to return to the community college after the military. Stacey failed at her first try at community college before entering the military but was confident and focused this time around. Stacey still struggled with some areas but was doing better overall.

Stacey suffered from PTSD and received counseling and medication therapy from The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Stacey had to work through her mental health issues before returning to school. She would have been able to transition to community college sooner but was hindered by the depression and anxiety that she suffered from after her discharge from the military. For Stacey, her mental health issues continued to cause problems with school after she enrolled.

I was going to see a therapist last year and that kind of swayed me a little bit because when I messed up that semester, it kinda messed up some other stuff for me. I was on probation, stuff like that, because I had did bad that semester. So, I think that, like the thoughts I was having in my head and stuff like that kind of hit negatively, so it impacted my being here.

Stacey had not connected to anyone at the community college and would like to have seen veteran women's groups be made available. She believed a group comprised of veteran women would give female veterans an opportunity to discuss common issues such as childcare,

parenting, marriage, military trauma, etc. It was important to Stacey to have a good school/life balance.

Stacey found the military transition program helpful but would like to see the military set up internships to help veterans transition to the workforce. She believed that the military should make either school or internships mandatory to help veterans be more successful in their transition to civilian life. Stacey felt like veterans have a harder time finding jobs post-military because of public perceptions. “I think everybody thinks that we always get good benefits and treated as such but I think that hinders more than it helps.” However, she believed that females may transition into the community college and workforce easier because no one expects a woman to be a veteran.

### **Alaria**

Alaria had enrolled in a certificate/diploma program at the community college despite having obtained a 4-year degree from a university before enlisting in the military. Alaria was medically retired from the Army due to being diagnosed with major depression and anxiety, along with some physical issues she suffered while deployed in Iraq. Alaria was a single parent of a two-year-old child who she credits for her day-to-day survival.

I have a two-year-old daughter. So, I don't really have a choice. If it was me, probably a long time ago, I would have laid down and died...But because of her, I'm determined. I have to. So, I guess, she's kind of, my strength, my go-to when I just don't feel like pushing anymore.

Alaria described her major depression as “like an iron weight just dragging you down physically and mentally. It makes everything... like 10 times as hard as it would be.” And having depression like “being in a cycle of a hamster wheel that you can't get off of.”

Alaria explained that a medical retirement meant that she did not know her discharge date, which completely threw her transition off. Alaria had been assisted by the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program since her discharge. She described VR as an organization that helped people “crawl, walk, run.” Alaria had recently connected with the Veterans Resource Center, which she credited with walking her through her benefits as they relate to her education. She had been waiting 3 months to get connected with the VA. She describes the transition program (TAP) that the military provided as “rushed” and “a whole lot of information at one time.”

Alaria planned to reach out to classmates to set up study groups. She wished that the college had other support groups for veterans and/or female veterans, but she had not heard about any. She also planned to join PTSD support groups at the VA once she was connected. Alaria recognized that she would have to juggle the support groups that she needed with school and caring for her child and that she would have to work really hard on her time management. Alaria lamented that much of the information that she needed for a successful transition was not shared by the military or veteran agencies in the community. She acknowledged that certain people had access to information, but often it was not shared amongst veterans.

Alaria suggested that the community college be more flexible with people with mental disabilities like they are with people with physical disabilities. “They come up with seating for people who have physical disabilities...unable to walk. So maybe they have policies that they have to adhere to for people who have...mental issues or whatever.” She also suggested that veterans be up front with their instructors about their mental or physical issues so that they can work on a solution that works for the veteran and the class. Alaria also thought it would be beneficial if the community college would assign advisors individually and that these advisors

reach out to their students. She had not been contacted by an advisor but had reached out to three for help with her program.

### **Larissa**

Larissa enrolled in RCC due to its proximity to her home, even though the program she initially wanted to enroll in was offered at UCC. In addition to being a full-time student, Larissa was also a caregiver for her 95-year-old grandfather who lived with her. Larissa had a very supportive family who encouraged her to return to school versus re-enlist in the military when the time came. She credits them with helping her make sense of her transition.

The biggest challenge Larissa had faced in her transition from service member to student was the isolation she felt. Larissa was the oldest student in her class and felt she had nothing in common with the others; whom she said were high school aged. Larissa missed the camaraderie that she shared with her fellow service members in the Navy.

...because you were stuck with a set of people that understood who you were because you were deployed with them. They seen you at your worst and at your best. It's hard because people don't really know who you are around here.

Larissa had only found two veterans on campus. One was a male Marine veteran, and the other a female Navy veteran that she was able to identify by her backpack. There was also no student veteran organization, veteran support groups, or any area designated specifically for veterans on her campus that she knew of. Larissa suffered from PTSD and was receiving counseling through the VA. She was also on medication that she said kept her calm.

Larissa went to a class that was provided by the Navy before she discharged that was designed to prepare service members for going to college. She said it was separate from the TAP

and was very informative. She was able to get most of the information she needed for college doing her own research.

### **Lauren**

Lauren was an Air Force veteran who attended school part-time. She hoped to transfer to a 4-year college upon graduation from the community college. Lauren was stressed due to obligations at school and at home, where she had a husband and two small children. She chose Rural Community College because of its proximity to her home and the daycare that was offered on campus.

Lauren's biggest challenge during her transition had been not being able to work full-time and therefore managing to live off of one income while she went to school. She struggled with having time to take care of her family's needs and having time for herself. She was sacrificing so much so that her children would have a mom with a college degree. Lauren felt that female veterans have to sacrifice the most because they are responsible for more at home.

Lauren had struggled academically when she first began her studies at the community college and had to take remedial classes to get her back to the level she needed to be. Lauren used the tutoring services on campus frequently. She had received help with her GI Bill and other military paperwork from a VA liaison that visits the campus.

Lauren thought it would be more helpful if the credits she received in the military would transfer to community colleges. This would give veterans more credits toward their degrees so that they could finish school or transfer earlier. Also, she thought it would be more helpful if the military would focus as much on education as they do employment in their transition program.

**Sarah**

Sarah is an Air Force veteran who was planning to transfer to a university upon completion of her associate degree. She chose community college because of the cost. “It’s cheaper, so until I figured out what I wanted to major in, I didn’t want to use up all of my benefits.”

Sarah found herself unable to relate to her classmates at the community college because of their age. She described herself as a single mother with two children in classrooms full of teenagers. The toughest part of Sarah’s transition was the loss of the camaraderie she felt with her fellow service members in the Air Force. She had not been able to connect with anyone in class but had attended a Student Veterans Association (SVA) meeting. Sarah would like to see a female veteran support group on the campus of UCC.

Sarah had PTSD and was often crippled by anxiety and depression. She attempted to take her own life after she was discharged from the military. Since that time, she had been able to find support in family and church members to get her through that tough time.

Sarah had trouble understanding her Post 9/11 GI benefits when she considered applying for school. The military transition program (TAP) was not beneficial for her, mostly because she was allowed to take it online. Not being in the classroom setting caused Sarah to miss much of the information about benefits and school.

**Marie**

Marie enrolled in the community college after serving in the Marine Corps for eight years and working an overseas job for two years. Her choice of community college depended on proximity to home so that she could be near her daughter in case of an emergency. She planned

to transfer to a community college located in the same city as a major military installation upon completion of her core classes at UCC.

Marie suffered from PTSD. Her severe depression and anxiety made it hard for her to get up and come to school every day. The anxiety flared up in class when she did not understand the material. She was unable and sometimes unwilling to ask for help in class due to her Marine mentality which caused her to “suck it up” and show no signs of weakness. She saw asking for help as a sign of weakness. Marie had found support at UCC in the library, the ILC Center, and in her instructors. Marie came from a close-knit family who she described as her support system. Marie had not connected with the VA yet but planned to. She was beginning to connect with the Veterans Resource Center at UCC.

Marie wished she had received more information from the military transition program about education. She received job information through a series of PowerPoint presentations but did not find it useful. She had received emails from UCC about the services they offer, but many of the programs conflicted with her class schedule. Evening programs would work best for her.

Finances had been a source of stress for Marie and her family since discharging from the military. Going to school was a sacrifice because she was unable to work, go to school, and take care of her daughter. She intended to remain in school full-time until she graduated.

### **Overview of Findings**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the perceptions of female post-deployment veterans transitioning to two southeastern community colleges. After analyzing the data using the 4S System of Schlossberg’s transition theory as a guide, along with the demographic information and the semi-structured interviews, definite themes emerged. Four major themes that are attributed to the 4S System were presented. These themes and subthemes

as they relate to the 4S System and the research questions, along with supporting data are presented in Table 2. After Table 2, the research questions, their associated themes, and subthemes are provided and are accompanied by supporting data from participant interviews.

Table 2:

*Summary of Themes and Subthemes by Research Question*

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1. What are the unique transition experiences of female post-deployment veterans in a community college educational environment from military service member to student?

Theme 1: Situation

Subthemes:

- a. School Status (FT/PT, U/R)
- b. Responsibilities (caretaker, parent, spouse)
- c. Isolation (no involvement with school orgs, military groups, etc)

2. How do personal, social, and environmental factors affect the military service member to student transition of female post-deployment veterans attending a community college?

Theme 2: Self

Subthemes:

- a. Being a veteran in transition
- b. Being a female veteran in transition
- c. Common Personality Traits
- d. Mental/Physical Health Issues
- e. External Stressors

3. How do female post-deployment veterans attending a community college negotiate the transition from service member to student?

Theme 3: Support

Subthemes:

- a. Military
- b. Community College
- c. Family/Friends

Theme 4: Strategies

Subthemes:

- a. Help-seeking from the Community College (tutoring/labs, advisors, instructors)
  - b. Help-seeking from the VA
  - c. Help-seeking from the community (Vet Organizations, Support Groups)
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*Figure 1.* Schlossberg's Transition Theory: The 4S System

### **Question 1: What are the Unique Experiences of Female Post-Deployment Veterans at Community Colleges (Theme 1: Situation)**

The first S of Schlossberg's 4S system is for situation. Situation speaks to role changes, concurrent stress, timing, duration of the transition (perm/temp), etc. The participants in this study shared their perceptions about their situations as military service members transitioning to community college students. All participants were in the early stages of their transition, having recently discharged from the military, all within the last 1-3 years. Role changes included service

member to student, absent parent to active parent, full-time employee to part-time employee or unemployed, and part-time or absent spouse to full-time spouse. The sub themes that emerged from the first research question themed as situation were: (a) school or work status, (b) responsibilities, and (c) isolation.

**School or Work Status.** According to participants, in navigating the transition from service member to student, each had to make decisions that affected not only them, but their loved ones as well. Among these decisions was whether to attend school full-time or part-time and whether or not to work.

Because the Post 9/11 GI Bill had certain specifications pertaining to course load, most participants felt it in their best interest to be full-time students so that they could receive full benefits. Often, however, the full course load proved to be too much for the student veteran to handle along with co-occurring pressures. Stacey shared her experience with taking a full class load:

I had five classes that semester. I was trying to finish and I was also going through my own little post-deployment depression...seeing a therapist type thing. So I think a lot of that was taking on too many classes and then I was still like coming out of military mode.

For most students, attending school full-time means a faster completion, which will inevitably lead to employment and career fulfillment. For example, it would take 2 years to complete an associate degree full-time versus 4 years to complete an associate degree part-time. However, attending school full-time most often means that a student is only able to work part-time or not at all. Veteran students are eligible for a stipend to help offset costs of attending school in addition to having their tuition and fees paid. Many find, however, that a stipend is not

enough to live on. As a result, these students seek employment to help fill in the financial gap. Emily was forced to decide whether to work full-time while attending the community college:

...when I was working full-time going to school, that was very stressful cause I didn't have as much free time to just decompress and then not worry about getting up in the morning, go to work, and then try to figure out when I'm gonna do my school work. ...but if I get that much stress and...and it starts negatively impacting me, then I have to make a change...I'm not working full-time anymore cause it was negatively impacting me so...

Female veteran students like Emily are forced to decide to take a full load of classes (required by the GI Bill) to receive full benefits in lieu of working but often find themselves trying to work anyway to make ends meet. Emily was fortunate enough to have a husband with an income. However, because he, too, was receiving veteran benefits and going to college, they often came up short financially. Lauren had to also make a decision about working and going to school because of the demands on her time that caused schedule conflicts:

I was working before and now I'm not working. Sometimes the schedule conflict can interfere with homework and tests and stuff like that, so if it's a part-time versus a full-time, you really have to like monitor and watch your schedule more precisely.

Both Lauren and Emily were married, Lauren with a husband and two children, and Emily with a husband but no children. However, the addition of an income from their spouses was not sufficient for them to not have to worry about their finances while they were attending the community college. Both participants struggled trying to take a full load of college coursework, which meant some financial shortfalls due to their inability to work. Both tried to

work anyway but found that it was too stressful to try to juggle familial responsibilities, attending school full-time, and work.

**Responsibilities.** In addition to figuring out how to maintain a full course load at school and juggle financial responsibilities if they had made the decision to not work, the participants in this study also had to consider other responsibilities. In addition to being a full-time student, Larissa was also a primary caregiver for an elderly family member:

I take care of my grandfather, so that's just been very difficult for me as far as like, he's 95 so he's a little bit more needy than, like, maybe a 60 year old right now. My mom helps, but it's just been kind of hard because we live together. I go home and it's just like I don't know what I'm getting myself into as soon as I walk in. It's just been kind of hard because trying to, like, balance school and then take care of him at the same time. He thinks school work is like a sheet of paper and that's it. He still wants to talk and do stuff, so it's just kind of hard.

Larissa, like most of the participants, was having to consider her responsibilities as a primary caregiver to a family member while she carried a full college course load. Because she was a primary caregiver, she was unable to work and was depending heavily on her GI benefits to make ends meet. Being a primary caregiver for someone else meant that the participants were not always able to control the time they spent on their academic work. Similarly, Alaria's responsibility as a single parent caused a conundrum for her:

Being a single parent is kind of hard. Her dad is involved, but...he's not that helpful at times, so it's still - basically, I'm still a single parent, having to deal with and juggle taking care of her and school, study or attend to her needs. So, that's a - that's a lot and I'm trying to figure out the balance for that right now.

Like Alaria, Lauren was a mother who was balancing school and the responsibilities of motherhood:

I have two kids and a husband. I go to school but am not considered full-time, but I'm taking 10 credit hours with a bunch of rather intensive classes. I got a lot going on between the kids and my school... I'm trying to get this done in the midst of raising a family, and to be there for my kids as much as possible, while still trying to keep somewhat on track with graduating at a reasonable time.

Some of the participants who were mothers/caregivers/spouses expressed guilt at having to take time away from their family members to study and attend school. However, they all felt like the benefits of obtaining a college degree would be worth the temporary time away from their families. The benefits include better jobs and more financial freedom for their families.

Stacey spoke of her responsibilities in reference to gender:

I think being a female in general; we have to give up more. We have to sacrifice more because we are responsible for more in the home. I feel like every class I take, I'm sacrificing something at home. Every decision I make takes away a bit, but in the future I know that it will add up, so it's a balance.

**Isolation.** The participants in this study ranged in age from age 25-34. This meant that they were older than most of their classmates who were mostly teenagers completing high school while taking college courses or recent high school graduates. For some participants, this vast age difference and level of maturity caused them some angst and feelings of isolation. Lauren was one of the oldest participants and felt particularly out of place in the community college classroom:

Coming in and having someone with less life experience than me in front of the classroom where I want to be, that's a real blow. Having my peers look like babies...that's been a big challenge. Learning to work beside someone that's so much younger rather than manage over them as I was in the military, as a supervisor. It's a huge difference.

Similarly, Sarah was experiencing the effects of being an older student at the community college:

Honestly, it was hard because it's like I'm older. I'm 29 and I'm going to school with a bunch of 18, 19, 20 year olds. So it's like their mentality is different. Their frame of mind and mindset, they're completely different you know, I'm a single mom with two kids and so I just sit back and watch how they act and I'm like, gosh. Where are the people that I can relate too? So my first semester was really hard, it's a lot easier now because I have those people from the first semester that I see passing to other classes.

Most of the participants also expressed isolation as a result of the loss of the camaraderie that they experienced in the military. Sarah shared her sentiments on this loss:

You don't have that camaraderie that you have in the military. You don't see the same people every day because you don't have the same classes every day. Then even when you do have those classes you're not going to click with everybody. Especially being older, my maturity level ... In the military you have to grow up quick because if you don't grow up, especially during deployment, you need to grow up because your life is on the line.

Larissa expressed similar sentiments:

I was around like-minded people and they understood me or they understood, like, my personality versus when I came back home. A lot of people don't really get me now versus when I was in. It's kind of hard to come back to the real world and try to act

normal, because it's not, because you were stuck with a set of people that understood who you were because you were deployed with them. They seen you at your worst and at your best. It's hard because people don't really know who you are around here.

**Question 2: How do personal, social, and environmental factors affect the military service member to student transition of female post-deployment veterans attending a community college? (Theme 2: Self)**

The second S of Schlossberg's 4S system is for self. Self asks to whom the situation is happening and also speaks to self-perceptions and personalities. Self also speaks to socioeconomic status and its effect on the overall well-being of the individual. The participants in this study shared their perceptions about themselves as it related to their status as veteran military service members transitioning to community college students. The sub themes that emerged were: (a) being a veteran in transition, (b) being a female veteran in transition, (c) common personality traits (d) mental/physical health issues, and (e) external stressors

**Being a veteran in transition.** For many veterans on community college campuses, there is a unifying sense of isolation among them. Many veterans do not readily self-identify as veterans for various reasons and are, therefore, harder to identify as veterans. Stacey talked about being able to meet other veterans on her large campus- "...I don't see many of them. I have yet to really meet a veteran who's my own age. I haven't come across one at all to be honest. I don't really know where they are all at."

Sarah also spoke on being identified as a veteran:

I don't know about the other veterans, but I don't wear my ID. I don't know that we're supposed too. How else are you going to know that they're veterans? I mean, there are certain things that you can tell a veteran from a regular person...

Similarly, Larissa found it difficult to meet other veterans on her much smaller campus. She had learned to rely on certain mannerisms or clothing items worn by other veterans to help her identify them:

There's not many at this school, but you can tell which veterans are which, and where they came from. Like first semester there was one guy. He was in the Marines... I guess our mannerisms, and plus, I ended up wearing a shirt one time. You could tell as far, as like, how his mannerisms were, and you could just point us out sometimes. Or, like, we're kind of shy and don't really say too much, or you have the ones that like to say where they've been. Then everybody's like, "Oh, okay." The females, I've met just one here and she had a Navy backpack on. That's the only reason I really knew. It's different here because there's not many, versus, like if I was to go to UCC, there's plenty of them, so it would be easier. I think they have, actually, a program, which here they used to, but they don't have one anymore. It's just kind of hard to, like, meet people around here.

Many of the participants also shared an overwhelming sense of responsibility and pressure as veterans to succeed. This meant that in addition to the pressures of being a college student, they were still grappling with their identity as veterans and what they had been taught about what that meant. Marie explained the pressure to succeed like this:

For me, I think being in the Marine Corps they teach us ... They pound it inside of your head like, "Suck it up." That whole mentality. I'm speaking for myself. For me, that's what's going on in my head. Like, "You can do this. Why are you ..." Even though I need help, I'm still telling myself, "You can do this." Because that's what we've been taught. Suck it up, you'll be fine, whatever. That's the mentality that we have. That's for a majority of the Marines that I know. I know that's a big thing for me. I know it's a big

thing for other veterans that have gotten out of the Marine Corps who I still keep in contact with.

In a similar manner, Sarah expressed her thoughts on the pressure to succeed as a veteran:

For me, I'm kind of hard on myself and I blame the military at the same time, but not in a negative way. Just because you always strive to be better than you were yesterday or not so much better than the person next to you because you want the person next to you, when you're going into battle, you want them to know everything that you know.

Sometimes even more, but you strive to know and learn everything that you possibly can.

**Being a female veteran in transition.** The participants had varying opinions about the role that being a female played in their transition experiences. There were some who felt like being a female had no effect on their transition and that their experiences were solely attributed to their veteran status. However, most could readily identify the role that being a female played in their transition experiences. Carried over from their thoughts on being a veteran in transition on a community college campus was the same feeling of isolation due to lack of exposure or interaction with other female veterans on campus. Sarah summed up her feelings like this:

It's a lot harder with female veterans because we kind of, we don't want to stand out, but at the same time not wanting to stand out you kind of do stand out because it's hard to blend in when you're different. It's like a Fruit Loop in a bowl of Cheerios.

Most suggested that having female veteran support groups would be beneficial. Two participants had these suggestions for their college campuses. Alaria explained:

There might be other single mom veterans out there. Yes. But that's two special populations, single moms and veterans – I mean – and I happen to fit in both of those and I need people to talk to.

Sarah had similar thoughts:

I feel like maybe they can have a female only group because we can relate to each other better. Sometimes we don't want to be around guys because we're always around guys in the military. So I guess maybe just like having a female veteran's support group or not even a support group, just like getting us together so we can talk and meet each other.

The idea of having support groups designed specifically for veterans as well as those for female veterans was suggested by most of the participants at both community colleges to bring veterans together and help develop a sense of camaraderie among them.

Another unifying theme among the participants was how the stigmas that were attached to being a female veteran affected their transitions. Erica shared her sentiments about perceived stigmas about female veterans:

...but like they're really surprised that I was...like I was in the army too.

Just cause I'm a female doesn't mean I couldn't...I can't be a veteran...

So I feel like there's still this stigma out there that like it's...it's not normal for women to be a veteran.

Sarah added her sentiments:

I guess I feel like we're looked at like we're delicate and we're fragile and just as a female in general. I feel like there's people who get intimidated because female veterans, we're strong, we're strong minded because we worked with so many males so we have to stand our ground. We have to be independent and stand our ground because the military is a, as they say, is a man's world. So, we're just kind of there trying to fit in and have a voice... So it was slightly intimidating just because it was like oh, we're females, we get frowned upon or we don't get enough credit for the stuff that we do. Or it's like, oh she's just

saying that, she's trying to get out of doing this. And not all females are like that, that's like one bad apple in the bunch and it ruins it for the rest.

Also commonplace among the participants' views on being a female veteran in transition was the sense of sacrifices that were specific to them. Lauren shared this:

I think being a female in general, we have to give up more. We have to sacrifice more because we are responsible for more in the home. I feel like every class I take, I'm sacrificing something at home. Every decision I make takes away a bit. In the future I know that it will add, so it's a balance. As far as the military, I gave up my career in the military after nine years to be with my family, because we were geographically separated. To also come back to school to further my education and to get into teaching, which is what I want to do. I think I sacrificed a lot as a female both career and family, and time in home life in order to come back to school, to college to do what I want to do with my life... I'm trying to get this done in the midst of raising a family, and to be there for my kids as much as possible, while still trying to keep somewhat on track with graduating at a reasonable time.

**Common personality traits.** When asked to describe themselves in the interview process, most of the participants described themselves as having it together on the outside but being stressed and conflicted on the inside. Alaria described herself this way:

I'm quiet, laid back, funny, sarcastic people would say I'm smart. I beg to differ sometimes. I'm just extra hard on myself... Pretty competitive with myself. I think I'm a strong person, physically. I'm not sure about mentally, yet. I'm still working that out.

In like fashion, the majority of the other participants described themselves as strong yet conflicted. Emily described herself mostly in terms of her work ethic: "I'm outgoing

...independent...I like to make sure I complete my work, so I'm a Hard-worker...I'm a creative person..."

Many participants spoke of their work ethic and how it had transformed or strengthened throughout their career in the military. They accounted that before enlisting, they were not as mature and focused, with most enlisting out of high school. However, with the discipline and structure that the military had provided, the participants were able to be more focused and productive in their new roles as college students. Additionally, the participants perceived themselves as having hard exteriors. Michelle shared the following when asked to describe herself: "I come off as really harsh sometimes. I like to think that I'm kind of stubborn but I'm really honest and I work really hard."

Other participants saw themselves as more easygoing with a few of them using the term "laidback" to describe themselves. When asked to describe herself, Stacey said that she was "laidback, funny, hardworking, energized". Marie expressed similar sentiments when asked to describe herself. She described herself as "a really reserved person, laid back." Some of the contradiction in the ways that the participants perceived themselves can be attributed to co-occurring issues that they were experiencing as a result of their deployments.

**Mental/Physical health issues.** All participants in the study had been deployed at least once throughout their military career. Because of their different deployment experiences, they were managing different degrees of physical and mental health issues. Some of the issues were associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or injuries received while on combat duty. Michelle spoke only of the physical injuries that she endured as a result of her combat duty: "I lost hearing in my left ear so I have...I don't have hearing in this ear very well. My knees hurt all the time-they crack a lot. I have back pain."

Alaria, unfortunately spoke of both mental and physical health issues: “I'm medically retired. So, I had major depression disorder and anxiety, along with some other physical issues.”

The majority of the other participants spoke of the depression that they were experiencing and the effects of it post military. For Sarah, it was an ongoing battle- “Because you can beat depression. I've done it. Multiple times. Mindset really, just like conditioning your mind. Because if your mind isn't right, nothing else is going to be right.”

For Larissa, counseling had become the key to her recovery and survival:

They said as long as you were in a combat zone, they can sit there and do your counseling with you. I'm going through a lot of counseling. I wasn't on medication before I went to the military. It just calms me down compared to where ... I used to be calm, but, like, when I went into the military it was a little bit different. Like I said, I go to counseling. It's just kind of hard because, like, I'm on medication now.

Stacey was more reflective of how her mental health issues had affected her at school after having to take some time off from school to regroup: “So, I think that, like the thoughts I was having in my head and stuff like that kind of hit negatively here.”

Similarly, Marie spoke of the effects that her mental health issues had on her ability to manage school:

I've been diagnosed with depression. That's been a real challenge to me to get up, come to school every day. It's hard. It really is hard to do. I have to think about why I'm doing it. For my family...to better our lives and stuff like that. That's my biggest challenge, the depression and anxiety that I have.

Overall, these post-deployment veterans were dealing with a multitude of issues that they attributed to their combat duty experiences. As community college students, they were learning to navigate their current realities while managing serious mental and physical health issues.

**External stressors.** In addition to issues with self-perception and mental and physical health issues, there were also external stressors that the participants were dealing with in their transition from military service member to community college student. The predominant stressors were finances, finding balance, and excelling in the classroom (making good grades).

Because most of the participants had separated from the military in the last 1-3 years, they were still trying to manage their new status as full-time military service member to full-time college student with little to no income. Lauren shared what it had been like for her: “Not earning my own income was a significant blow...There is a lot of hurdles to get over, both financially and time at home in order to get back to school.”

Emily shared the same sentiments:

...it's tough if you want to just be full-time student getting out of the military, you're used to that you know, that paycheck coming in every month. And to go from that to school kind of makes you a little nervous.

Sarah was worried about having to obtain loans to go to school if she used up her GI Bill: “So I don't want to rack up a whole bunch of loans and use all my tuition from the military taking random classes because I don't know what I want to do.”

Similarly, Marie was also stressing about her finances:

I kind of stress out about money. If I'm having to worry about if we're going to be able to get this paid, I don't like having to do that. That's one of the reasons why I procrastinated so long for going to school because I had a job that I didn't have to worry about that but I

didn't like the job. The job was not fulfilling at all. It was draining. Mentally, physically, it was draining. Now I'm making the sacrifice to actually go to school and do what I need to do. The finance issue is there strong. That's the biggest one for me is finances...Success for me is definitely not having to worry about finances.

Another source of stress for the participants was trying to find a balance between attending school and their other responsibilities. Some of the participants that were parents seemed to find this more difficult. Alaria, who was a single parent shared her experience:

Being a single parent is kind of hard. Her dad is involved...he's not that helpful at times, so it's still - basically, I'm still a single parent, having to deal with and juggle taking care of her and school, study or attend to her needs. So, that's a - that's a lot and I'm trying to figure out the balance for that right now. And it's hard enough to find the time during the day when you have a kid that you have to pick up from daycare.

Although Lauren was married, she too found it difficult to find a balance:

All the extra work after you go to school puts stress on my family doing homework and such...This will be my fourth or fifth semester and we've sort of got a routine down, finally, that works. They also have pretty good hours in classes here, so I'm able to work around my children's school schedule. I got to get my daughter to kindergarten, my son to daycare, and then be able to pick them up in the evening as well, and then all the things that kids have to do, cheerleading, and girl scouts, and all of that. The biggest hurdle for me was time scheduling and getting used to really not have any time to myself.

Sarah added her experience with balancing:

So just like time management, which is still something that I struggle with, being a single mom, trying to balance everything out and still going to the gym. Finding that balance is really key to that success and using your time wisely.

Additional stress was caused by the pressure to succeed in the classroom. For these participants, failing a class was not an option because it affected the amount of GI Bill funds that would be available to them. Also using the GI Bill meant taking full class loads to get the full benefits. Sarah suggested this: “Staying on course. Not overloading myself on classes and trying to keep my class load balanced.” Michelle had also experienced struggling with a full class load:

I knew last...my first spring semester here, I was struggling a little bit and I think one part of that was I was enrolled in so many classes. I had five classes that semester. I was trying to finish and I also going through my own little post-deployment thing, seeing a therapist type thing. So I think a lot of that, taking on too many classes and then I was still like coming out of military mode. I would definitely say when you're coming out, don't jump into like – let me take five classes and be full-time. It's tempting because the benefits offered, you get full benefits if you're a fulltime student but if you're going to work or you have kids and stuff like that, I don't want to recommend jumping right into full-time. Maybe take one or two classes just to get your mind wrapped around it, your job, and your family. Stuff like that before you just jump right in to try to do full-time job, full-time student, full-time mom and dad. Like it's a lot.

**Question 3: How do female post-deployment veterans attending a community college negotiate the transition from service member to student? (Theme 3: Supports)**

**Support from the military.** Depending on the experience transitioning out of the military, each participant had varying levels of difficulty transitioning to community college

campuses. Before separating from the military, each service member was required to attend and complete a mandatory transition program most often referred to as TAP (Transition Assistance Program). This program was designed to provide service members with information about benefits and services available to them once they were discharged from the military. Based on the delivery of the programming, most of the participants saw the Transition Assistance Program as relatively ineffective based on their post-military needs, especially regarding their post-secondary education pursuits. Alaria shared her thoughts on the presentation of the transition information:

...but it still seems rushed for the amount and the volume of information that you have to get. So, I remember one of the workshops, resume building and whatnot, that was like a week-long class and... you're in there for like – Jesus, that was like seven hours a day, five days a week and so – and it's still rushed. It still felt rushed. There was so much information that they were trying to cram into this time...but you can't help but wonder maybe if that was a course that probably should have lasted – I don't know, a month or something.

...it's usually PowerPoint...and they have all this information. “Here's a list of your benefits. We're going to go on to a little detail about this, but we're not really going to touch onto this. If you would like more information about this, you need to go to this link or go to this service.” And then you get all the services mixed up. You don't know who's supposed to be taking care of who.

But time is money and there's a lot of veterans coming by. There's a lot of people coming by, they're getting out, so, we need to cram it all in and keep it moving. And that's why there's like a factory line for people getting out. It's like – moving on. So, it's just an

assembly line of people going out and people checking boxes and it's like wrapping you up, get on out of there. Good luck in the world kind of...

Alaria also spoke about the volume of information given to service members and how confusing it becomes when it is time to utilize the information:

...you have this big, old bag full of stuff, and you know it's in there somewhere, but you can't find it, because there's just so much crap in your bag. So, they just need to - kind of, need to be able to say, "Oh, you need this? Go here." Even if you've had that bag full of crap and you know it's in there somewhere and they know they gave it to you, you didn't know you needed it and it's at the bottom somewhere.

So, whenever you get to a service, you're like, "Hey, do you know anything about this?" And then, they'll point you to another direction. So, it's just kind of there's no one-stop shop and I don't expect them to be – there need to be people who are professionals in each area that they're – that they're talking about, but there's so many areas that you get lost sometimes.

Marie shared similar sentiments:

We got a ... It was kind of like a week-long class. I want to say it was a week-long class of transitioning out of the Marine Corps. Honestly, for me, I kind of felt like it was more like a checking the box for the military itself like saying, "Okay, we did this." For me, I didn't get anything from it. It was like a weeklong class or whatever. I didn't get much from it. I got more from people who had gotten out of the Marine Corps. I talked to people who had been out for years or whatever. I got more from that than the actual ... The way they had the class structured, I didn't feel like it helped me the way it should have.

The majority of the participants thought that they would have been better served had the military divided the transition programming into education and job-seeking and allowed each service-member to decide the pathway of programming that suited their intentions post-military.

Lauren expressed her sentiments about having a choice:

Before getting out, every military member has to go through a program and then do things like resume-writing, and see how people prepare for a job. But none of it is really, "Hey, do you want to go back to school? These are the programs at whatever college you want to go to. These are the liaisons at that place." Those things could be included in the exit briefs and things like that that we have to attend. It's a week long, they can fit it in there somewhere...I think I was maybe prepared to go off and find a job, but not prepared to come back to school, which I know is not really their job to do that. But if it's going to be something that they're making you go to, a program anyways, then they should have two paths in that program to prepare you for the future, and what you're going to do once you leave. It would have really been beneficial if they had an education track along with the business to prepare you for a job after you get out track, whatever that's called. That would really benefit a lot of people, I believe, if they offer that.

Michelle shared her thoughts on being offered a choice in transition programming:

I think maybe if they made it mandatory that if you're getting out in the next five or six months, just take like a small English course or something like that just to see if that's what you wanted, because everybody's just not ready to jump out of military and jump into being a student. But then, I guess they can't make people do this. Not everybody goes to school when they get out, so. Maybe set something up like an internship, like maybe your last few months before you get out. "What do you want to do?" You go to

this job once a week and just – because you know sometimes internships turn into employment and stuff.

Marie shared the same sentiments as the other participants:

The biggest one for me I would say is they should have talked more about stuff like school. They harped a little bit on jobs, what it would be like to get jobs. They told us how hard it would be but they didn't really give us the tools to go out there and do what we needed to do.

Stacey spoke of the benefits of having a transition program that was just for female service members:

Maybe they could have...kinda like female geared, maybe a female day in the TAP program. Or like we could kind of come together as like women who are getting out. And whether it's like we work on interview skills or like career goals or just kind of going over the claims process. I know being around women and doing that might help if they kind of focus their attention...So, maybe if there's just a day that you could have the women get together. Maybe even if it's like in a separate room you know. Just like as women this is kind of what's offered to you because there are different programs for women veterans through the V.A. system and then like they really focus on those. You could do this, you could that, and then you could all talk to each other and kind of get where everyone's feeling and going.

Stacey lamented about her encounter with an older female in the TAP:

There was a lady that sat next to me, she's a Master Sergeant. She's been in for twenty-two years and the woman couldn't write a full sentence because she'd done twenty-two years of her life printing abbreviations for EPRs and she was in she was in sheer panic

mode. “I can’t...I can’t write a sentence that sounds good... like I can’t write paragraphs.” And I was just like “It’s okay ...like it’s going to be okay ma’am.” She’s like “I just...it’s all I’ve ever done. It’s all I’ve ever known.”

Per the expressed sentiments of the participants, it can be concluded that service members could benefit from a restructured Transition Assistance Program that would be better tailored to the post-military needs and intentions of its veteran members. Because service members have not lived a civilian lifestyle for long periods of time and are solely dependent on the military for guidance, perhaps the volume of information and the time that that is allotted for its dissemination could be redesigned. Based on the participants views in this study, it would be important to also look at gender specific programming.

**Support from the community college.** The amount of support needed from the community college varied from participant to participant. RCC had no VRC (Veterans Resource Center), something Larissa found particularly discouraging as she was trying to establish relationships among fellow veterans on campus:

I feel like, in general, at this school, they just need a veterans program. Like I said, they did have one, but they don't have one anymore. It's just kind of hard to even meet anybody that used to be (in the military)...unless you can tell. I just feel like this school would need a type of program for females or males (veterans).

Lauren on the other hand felt that the community college could work more closely on their articulation agreement to give veterans credit for courses that they took while serving in the military:

I think the only thing that comes to my mind is when we were in the military, we got credit for the community college in the air force for management and leadership classes

that we took through in my leadership school and things like that. And those things are not transferable to an outside community college. If they would accept that, that would be a few more credit towards my degree.

Michelle felt like some type of veteran-only orientation would be beneficial for veterans in transition:

Maybe right before the semester starts and stuff, have like a - have everybody come meet and they express what you need or what questions you have and what you need to fill out. Maybe they can do something like that. So, that way, you won't have to just call just anytime of the day or whatever. You only have to come in just one set date, we all come with questions you have and they will help you.

Michelle also thought that a female support group on campus sponsored by the college would be a good idea:

Maybe a female support group for veterans because...we could talk to each other and stuff and help each other with classes or whatever.

This sentiment was also shared by Stacey:

I think it would be kinda cool to just do an all-female event where I can just walk into a room and just maybe meet someone my own age that's a veteran...and maybe she's going for the same program as me so I can kind of see what's she's done or maybe help her because like I've been going to UCC for five semesters now. Like at this point, I feel like a veteran at school so...

Stacey also felt that having a flag on her ID tag that represented her status as a military veteran and having priority registration was valuable in her transition:

They put like a flag on it...for veteran students and that's pretty cool and I like that UCC gives veterans priority registration.. But also...I get to pick my classes first. It's like 60,000 students that go to UCC...and only a certain amount of seats. So it's really nice that I get to register a week before everybody else. That's something that I really like. I want to be the first to know my number of classes.

Stacey suggested too that perhaps instructors could help make veterans aware of resources on campus for them:

I'm sure like you'd even get more response if teachers put it in their syllabus like a certain..."hey, for like if you're a veteran in the class, there's a Veteran Resource Center." I mean I don't expect anyone to like cater to the veterans, but just to throw it out there to people...cause I mean I guess UCC has a bunch. There's what 1600 veteran students that come here?

**Support from family and friends.** Support from family and friends was crucial to a successful transition for the participants. Some of them were married with their spouse providing the majority of the support. Lauren was grateful for her supportive husband: "The support system that I have with my husband, and able to support me coming back to school, those are the two main ones that I have that enabled me to come back." Whereas, the single participants depended on long distance support or surrogate family support in their transition. Stacey was appreciative of the continued support she was receiving from her family: "I think that I have a really great family...and they've supported me in every decision that I've wanted to make."

The support that Marie received from her family, along with a fellow veteran, played a major part in her getting the help she needed in her transition:

The biggest one is my family. That's the number one. Like I said, I'm really family-oriented. I'm really close to my family. I have brothers that live in Georgia and I go see them regularly. My mom is in Florida but she comes to North Carolina and stuff like that. My family is like my support system.

This support was vital for Marie in helping her recognize that she could benefit from counseling:

It was a veteran that I spoke to. He's actually the one that told me that I needed to go see someone. I was not going to go. My family was telling me, "You're not the same. You need to go talk to somebody." I didn't notice the change in myself... They're looking at me and the way I'm acting on a daily basis or whatever but I didn't see it myself. To me, I'm still the same person.

Sarah was a single mom living away from her family who had learned how valuable finding a support group was to a successful transition:

...With me being in North Carolina, I have my family and then my daughters, they have their dad. So that's huge just in itself because it allows me to get a break whether they go with their dad for the weekend and I can go on a little getaway, just go do whatever, just have that me time because it's really important. Especially when you're going to school full-time and they're in school too.

...Feeling alone just because...that camaraderie... like you don't have that group of people that you know are going to be there. I actually recently just found that in my church, so it's like I'm alive again. I found where I'm supposed to be now away from the military, when I found that new family. Having a different mindset and being poured into by others and your environment is key.

#### **Theme 4: Strategies**

**Help-seeking from the community college.** The strategies that were used by the participants varied mostly in the way that they sought help. Some of the veterans sought help from the community college, its staff, and resources. Others sought help from other students at the college. Some participants were successful at finding the help they sought from the college, and others were not. Stacey suggested seeking help from a college advisor, in particular, program advisors: “I found talking to the advisor that was specific to my program like the dental hygiene advisor, she was really helpful.” Like Stacey, Alaria suggested seeking help from college staff as well. In her case it was seeking help from college professors (instructors):

The most you can do, like I said, if you have issues that you brought back with you, is speak to your professor and then be understanding of it. I may be struggling a little bit with, I don't know, time management or study, or whatever, just retaining the information. So, I mean, you can go to that person and depending on what kind of person they are, you can let them know, “Hey, this is my situation, this is what I've been through, this is what I'm dealing with, if for some reason, I can get to class because of this, what can we do?”

...maybe they can make a policy for the instructors to try to come up with plans for people who have these types of issues. Because they come up with seating for people who have physical disabilities, like unable to walk. So, maybe they have policies that they have to adhere to for people who have, kind of, mental issues or whatever.

Like Alaria, Marie sought help and understanding from her instructors. Overall Marie wanted instructors to know how difficult it is for veterans to ask for help:

That's the hardest thing for veterans when they get out of the military. We don't know how to ask for help. We really don't. I know as a civilian that this teacher is like, "Well, if she needs help she'll ask me."

Either we don't know how to ask for help, or we don't want to, we feel embarrassed, all those things wrapped up into one. I would definitely say that's the biggest issue. I probably would have all A's in my classes right now if I had raised my hand a little more, if I participated more in the class or whatever. I tried to, it is very hard.

Other participants sought help from other students at the college by the way of support groups. Alaria had plans to be a part of a study group:

I've already talked with classmates and we've already exchanged numbers and we're going to set up study groups. So that's going to be beneficial for me to help retain or understand the information, so I can start out on a good foot with education. Because it would probably deliver a pretty bad blow if I were to fail a class. It would affect my benefits and it would just affect me mentally after being out of school for so long and coming back, and then failing at this. So I'm definitely going to utilize the study groups.

Other participants sought help through the Veteran Resource Center (VRC) or veteran support groups. Unfortunately for Larissa, RCC had no veteran support groups or veteran resource center (VRC):

I just study at home and flashcards, Quizlet, and YouTube. That's pretty much it. I don't really like groups. I tried, but it just didn't work. Not here. I went to TRIO one time and I asked everybody, but...they lost their program, I guess, like a while back.

UCC had both but many of the participants were unaware of their existence, perhaps due to the way the college was marketing them. Most participants found the VRC at UCC by chance and

were largely unaware of what it offered. However, the staff sent out marketing material and emails that the participants said would get lost in the plethora of emails that they received from the college. Also, if the participants did not find themselves in the building that housed the VRC at UCC, then they would not frequent it and thereby not enter it for service.

By comparison, UCC was a veteran-friendly community college, and RCC was not. A veteran-friendly campus 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). UCC had a veteran student organization, a dedicated veteran student center that offered services specifically for veterans, and a qualified staff of veterans in place to serve its veterans; while RCC offered a financial aid representative to provide information to veterans.

Prior to meeting a VRC staff person at UCC who told her about the center and some of the programming it offered, Alaria said that she had seen no advertisement for the center around either of the campuses. Luckily, she ran into the staff member who shared some information with her:

She was telling me about some coffee group or something that they were going to have and I was like, “That’s great because that – it’d be nice to meet other veterans because they know what you’re going through.” They might be going through similar things. They might even have a trigger to handle some stuff. So, it’s always good to be in that group or have someone to go to when you have a veteran moment or something. It’s always nice to be among people like you and who understand where you’re coming from and because it’s nice to complain together or talk about the good stuff.

Emily, on the other hand, had found the VRC and was actively utilizing it:

This one is really nice and they have the computers here that you can work on and they did have a veteran's food drive so my husband and I we got to select a bag of food. So, that was nice...so like vegetables and other snacks in there. I was very pleased that people donated and tried to help us out.

Most of the participants felt that veteran only or female veteran only support groups would be beneficial. Emily suggested well-timed meet and greets for veterans:

So, maybe they can have like the website designed...to accommodate everyone a little bit better...they could have like some sort of get together so that other females can meet each other cause I don't really know too many veterans at this school. So, maybe some sort of like meet-and-greet with others, either on a monthly basis or something just to come chat, hang out, get to know each other and maybe you never know they might be more of a friend or someone you can rely on if something is going on. But it really just depends on the time of day, cause some people might be working while these are going on or in class so they might not be able to go to them.

Sarah shared similar sentiments:

You always see these groups of people walking together and I'm just here bebopping by myself. It would just be nice to have that group and I have found that a little bit with the other veterans and stuff. It's still a challenge that I face, finding people that I click with at school because I found that elsewhere, but it's still I haven't completely found that here at school...I don't know if they have those veteran groups. I know on campus for all the students they have support groups and peer-peer groups, but I'm not 100% sure with the veteran's thing. I feel like maybe they can have a female only group because we can

relate to each other better. Sometimes we don't want to be around guys because we're always around guys in the military. So I guess maybe just like having a female veteran's support group or not even a support group, just like getting us together so we can talk and meet each other

Other participants sought help from the colleges learning resource centers and/or tutors. Lauren found the learning resource center at RCC particularly helpful:

I needed remedial math classes because I'd been away too long, and didn't have access to a calculator in probably a while. Remedial math and a whole lot of tutoring, but it's helped me. I had A's and B's, so had it not been for the tutoring to get me back to where I needed to be after being out of school for so long, it would probably be a different story. If it weren't for them helping me get back to the point where I need to be as a college student, and then I would be in trouble. Thankfully the community college offers a great deal with the tutoring sessions, and the labs that they have... There's a lab that offers tutoring, and I was told in one of my other classes that tutoring for just an hour at another school is \$500 an hour, and you get six hours for free a week here.

Marie also found similar success at UCC using their learning resource center:

I use the resources here at the school. I use the library. I use the ILC Center. I use the teachers. They're a big help for me.

**Help-seeking from the VA (US Department of Veterans Affairs).** Although there were resources for veterans at the community college, some participants had chosen to only rely on the VA for help at the time of the interviews. Alaria, due to the nature and complexities of her experiences and subsequent disabilities and needs, relied heavily on the VA for assistance:

I utilize the VA programs that they have. Because they have - other than seeing a therapist and psychologist, they also have groups for PTSD and anxiety. So, I'm also going to look into getting into those, but all that is going to require time management. Because that's a lot of places to be and a lot of things to do, and they all take time.

Lauren appreciated the liaison that the VA provided on the college campus:

It's very convenient that the VA has an on-site liaison. That has significantly helped my ability to come back, because I would be lost in paperwork had it not been for the liaison here. They are very well educated. If they don't know the answer to something when I go in, she's like, "Hold on. I'll find out," and make a phone call right there, and I'll always have an answer. It's been very beneficial having someone here.

**Help-seeking from the community.** Outside of the community college and the VA, the community offered support by way of groups and resource centers as well. Emily sought support from the local American Legion which is a war veteran's organization:

So there are different places you can go to like they have the American Legion. And they have the VFWs (The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the US). Now, I know there's like this stigma of just a bunch of old people going to them...and I think part of that is because you know there was a big boom of people going into the military at that time and they want new people in the organizations (VFW/American Legion).

Marie had been contacted by some veterans groups in the community:

I'm on the list for it because I'm a veteran. Anything that they have, any type of activities ...They recently sent out one about women veterans. It was an email. I read it. I wasn't able to go because I had class during that time. If I hadn't, I would have gone. I actually want to get myself out there. I haven't had the chance to really get to know the people in

my community because I've always been overseas and deployed and stuff. That's a goal of mine to actually get more involved in what's going on around me in my community. They do try. They do send the emails out.

This chapter presented the findings from the eight interviews conducted with female post-deployment veteran students who were matriculating at two southeastern community colleges. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain the perspective of the participants concerning their needs during their transition from post-deployment veteran to community college student. After the data was collected and coded, it was analyzed in terms of the research questions and the 4S System of Schlossberg's Transitional Theory. Chapter Five provides a summary of the study, conclusions, and implications for practice and future research.

## **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of post-deployment female veteran students as they transitioned to two southeastern community colleges. The research questions were:

1. What are the unique transition experiences of female post-deployment veterans in a community college educational environment from soldier to student?
2. How do personal, social, and environmental factors affect the soldier to student transition of female post-deployment veterans attending a community college?
3. How do female post-deployment veterans attending a community college negotiate the transition from service member to student?

This chapter provides a summary of the study and presents key findings and conclusions based on the research questions and the 4S System of Schlossberg's Transition Theory. This chapter is presented in four sections. The first section is a summary of the design of the study and how it was conducted. The second section presents key conclusions obtained from the findings based on the data analysis and includes a discussion of the conclusions. The third section presents implications for practice for the community college and the military and community agencies. The fourth section provides recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of the Study**

This narrative inquiry study was conducted with female post-deployment veterans transitioning from life as military service members to life as community college students at two southeastern community colleges. Criterion and snowball sampling were used to select the study participants. To be selected, participants had to meet the following criteria:

- Gender: participants were female veterans

- Experience: participants had post-9/11 deployment experience
- Enrollment: participants were enrolled in a community college and had completed at least one semester with a minimum of six credit hours.

The age of the participants ranged between 25 and 34 years with an average age of 29.

Three of the participants had served in the Army, two in the Air Force, two in the Navy, and one in the Marine Corps. Five of the participants were enrolled in a community college full-time, with the remaining three enrolled part-time. Of the five participants who were enrolled in school full-time, two worked part-time jobs. Six participants were unemployed.

Of the participants, six were seeking associate degrees. Among this group of six, three were planning to transfer to a university after completion of the associate degree. One participant had obtained a four-year degree before entering the military and was pursuing a diploma/certificate through the community college. Two of the participants were enrolled in a small, rural community college. The other six participants were enrolled in a large, urban community college. Both community colleges were located in the southeastern United States.

Data for this study was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews averaged sixty minutes each and were conducted at the community college where the participant was enrolled. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed in accordance with IRB confidentiality requirements. A copy of the transcript was emailed to each participant for review to ensure accountability and member checking. Additional data collection methods were journaling and field notes.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a theoretical framework was used to guide this study and analyze the data. The 4S System of Schlossberg's Theory was used to code themes for the

study. From these themes (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies), subthemes emerged. Each “S” related to a research question.

The first research question inquired about the unique transition experiences of the participants in the community college educational environment. The applicable theme was situation with sub-themes of (a) school status (b) responsibilities and (c) isolation. The second research question inquired as to the personal, social, and environmental factors affecting the transition of the participants from military service member to student. The applicable theme was self, and the subthemes were (a) being a veteran in transition (b) being a female veteran in transition (c) common personality traits (d) mental/physical health issues and (e) external stressors. The third research question inquired as to how the participants were negotiating their transition from service member to student. The applicable themes were support and strategies. The subthemes for support were (a) military (b) community college and (c) family/friends. The subthemes for strategies were (a) help-seeking from the community college (tutoring/labs, advisors, instructors) (b) help-seeking from the VA and (c) help-seeking from the community (vet organizations, support groups).

The literature reviewed to frame the female post-deployment veteran transition to the community college educational environment involved a detailed glance into the history of the military and higher education along with the military experience of the female post-deployment veteran and its impact. This literature was relevant to establish the connection between the military and higher education, and it set the stage for an understanding of the importance of the military G.I. Bill. Because of the GI Bill, many veterans can finance their education and launch themselves into new careers post-military. Though it is not always a seamless process for veterans, the GI Bill has proven to be beneficial to veterans and allows institutions of higher

education access to a group of valuable adult learners. The literature review also examined theories of adult transition and the implications for veterans in general and female veterans specifically.

Additionally, literature on veteran reintegration challenges including relationships and social supports was reviewed. This literature was a preface to how integral relationships and social supports are to the success of post-deployment veterans. All participants in the study reflected upon how different levels of relationship and support was needed for their transition from service member to student. This need for these relationships and supports proved to be both formal and informal. Most veterans had not found the relationships and support that they needed outside of their immediate families, however, and sought them out on both community college campuses and in their communities.

Finally, the community college response to veterans and implications for instructional design and program planning were examined. This literature review was relevant because it provided a glance at how community colleges had responded to post-deployment veterans on their campuses and what needed to be done to help post-deployment veterans have more successful transitions to college campuses. The literature on instructional design and program planning was also relevant and was supported by participant narratives about the kinds of programs and courses they need to help them gain success at community colleges.

## **Key Conclusions and Discussion**

### **Conclusion One**

The first major conclusion is that female post-deployment veterans come to the community college with complex needs as a result of their individual situations predicated by the effects of their deployment experience. In accordance with this conclusion, the first S of

Schlossberg's 4S System represents the participants' situation. Situation speaks to role changes, concurrent responsibilities and/or stressors, duration of the transition, etc. Among the participants were post-deployment veterans who had transitioned back into their roles as parents managing single parent households. There were also others who were managing households with the support of a spouse or partner. One participant was the sole caretaker for an elderly relative. Simultaneously, the participants in this study were dealing with varying physical and mental health issues.

A majority of the participants had transitioned into life as full-time students. As a result, they were unable to work to attend school full-time and maximize their VA benefits. This situation often caused financial hardships for single participants and even for those who had partner or spousal support. This was due to the reduction in income or the sole dependence on the VA benefits.

Another reality for the participants was the loneliness and isolation they were experiencing at the community college and in the community as opposed to the camaraderie that they had experienced in the military. Many found it hard to make connections on the community college campus, within their families, and in the community because of the idiosyncrasies they possessed as a result of their deployment experiences. Some participants expressed that their families and friends had noticed the changes in their personalities and behaviors that made it difficult to connect to others. While serving their deployments, the participants felt that they had developed a camaraderie with their peers that was difficult to replace as they transitioned to civilian lives.

Though the participants did not see themselves and their transitions as uniquely different, they had a desire for separate meetings and support groups designed for female veterans who

were transitioning out of the military and into their role as community college students. The participants felt that these meetings would help create support among other female veteran students at the community college. These meetings could also serve as outlets for the participants to share their experiences and the coping mechanisms that they had developed with other female veterans.

To explain why women veterans may not want to readily express any unique differences in their experiences, Culver (2013) proposes that women veterans have been conditioned to suppress their identity as females to conform to the masculine culture of the military. The desire for separate meetings may be an effort to create a safe space for them to shed the expectations that they conformed to in the military and expect to be held to as civilians. To admit that they in fact have different experiences than their male counterparts in the military, women veterans may feel that they run the risk of calling into question the equality and abilities that they fought so hard to prove in the military.

**Discussion.** This study supported the notion that female veterans may have a different set of responsibilities and self-perceptions. Most participants felt an innate obligation to be caretakers to family members including spouses and children upon their discharge from the military and transition to community college students. For some of the participants who were single parents, there was a distinct responsibility to care for their children while attempting to take care of themselves and their debilitating physical and mental health needs.

To cope with the isolation that they felt at the community college and in the community, the participants suggested that female veteran groups be formed to provide the support and camaraderie they experienced in the military. On the campus where there was a support group, participants suggested that the effort to include veterans and disseminate information to them be

a campus wide effort. Some suggestions were to have instructors place flyers in or near their classrooms and veteran information on their syllabi and to have the veteran centers in more high traffic areas so that the participants would not have to go to a remote area of campus to access it. Though a remote location provided privacy, it ran the risk of being missed by veterans who spent limited time on campus.

The literature suggests that for the student veteran to be successful in a community college educational environment, there must be both individual and organizational changes. Veterans will need to do more to assimilate to the college culture and process shedding their military exterior and way of operating. Additionally, each campus will need to aspire to be more “veteran-friendly” and establish veteran specific clubs and organizations well as have dedicated faculty and staff for veterans.

This will most likely require a cultural change and mandatory participation for community college faculty and staff. According to Osborne (2013), faculty and staff development programs on veterans’ issues are important to establish and foster a veteran friendly campus. According to Green and Hayden (2013), student veterans thrive when colleges and universities devote adequate attention to their special needs. Student veterans are more likely to successfully obtain a degree with assistance from administration, staff, and counselors, which, in turn, makes a positive impact on the transition from service member to student.

**Practical implications.** For a cultural change to materialize, there must be mandatory professional development opportunities and campus wide recognition of veterans to include recognition of all veteran related holidays. Community college administrators must acknowledge the detrimental effects that non-recognition of holidays such as Veterans Day and Memorial Day have on their veteran populations. It is literally the proverbial “slap in the face” to veterans who

are proud of their service to their country but are met with disdain and historical ignorance concerning veterans and their sacrifice for their country. A suggestion for how to execute this acknowledgement is to include Veterans Day and Memorial Day in the list of approved holidays for the community college campus. If this is not practical for a myriad of reasons, then college administrators should approve veteran absences on these holidays.

### **Conclusion Two**

The second S of Schlossberg's 4S system represents self. Self asks to whom the situation is happening and speaks to self-perceptions and personalities. Self also speaks to socioeconomic status and its effect on the overall well-being of the individual. The second major conclusion is that a successful transition for participants in this study was largely based on their self-efficacy as a result of or in spite of their deployment experience.

Generally speaking, this study did not yield data that indicated uniquely different experiences for female veterans when they compared themselves to their male counterparts. What some of the participants saw as uniquely different about them can be more adequately attributed to their status as non-traditional student (older, employed), single parent/caregiver, or their status as students with disabilities as a result of trauma associated with deployment duty. However, community colleges have large numbers of students with the same or similar classifications except for disabilities resulting from military deployment related trauma.

Participants in this study prided themselves on being veterans, allowing minimal nuances to distinguish themselves from their male counterparts. Aside from having experienced disbelief and skepticism from people upon the revelation that they were veterans, the participants did not believe that being female played a major part in their transition experiences. Overall, the participants felt that their status as veterans who had experienced trauma associated with

deployment experience instead of their status as female veterans was the major factor in whether or not they experienced successful transitions to community college.

The study participants also prided themselves on the strength and resilience they had shown throughout their deployment experiences and the ways that they were managing their transitions from military service member to community college student. Common amongst the participants was a sense of exterior strength paired with internal weakness brought about by mental health issues associated with PTSD. When asked to describe themselves, the participants used terms like “laid-back,” “outgoing,” “independent,” “stubborn,” “honest,” and “reserved.” These words can mostly be associated with terms of individuality, which seem to reflect civilian attitudes or lifestyles instead of terms that would have been used to describe the participants as military personnel.

Schiavone and Gentry (2014) refer to the self-variable in terms of individual assets or liabilities such as finances, state of mental and physical health, and self-efficacy. Because of varying deployment experiences, post-deployment veterans are likely to bring emotional and physical baggage with them to college campuses. Therefore, transitions must be analyzed within the context of each student’s individualities. All veterans do not suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), nor do all veterans have combat related injuries. This also applies to each veteran’s outlook on their self-efficacy. Some veterans have great confidence in their ability to transition and do well in the college setting, and others have low levels of self-efficacy and need more support. The Griffin and Gilbert (2015) study echoes the findings mentioned above and refers to the self-variable as “one’s internal resources that foster coping abilities “(p.92).

**Discussion.** Recognizing that veterans are accustomed to structure and formality is important to their persistence and completion on college campuses. Because they possess and exhibit different communication skills, they need faculty and staff that can “decode” their verbal and non-verbal communication. Veterans are used to being given orders and following them to completion without asking for help, which can be seen as a sign of weakness in the military. As a result, the female veterans in the study had developed hard exteriors to cope with life in the military. The formation of support groups for these veterans on community college campuses would allow them access to others with their same experiences, responsibilities, and disabilities to aid in their transition from service member to college student.

The literature reflects the sense of responsibility and self-perceptions of female post-deployment veterans. Both play a major role in the transition from service member to community college student. While in the military, female veterans categorize responsibility as “having a deep-rooted sense of responsibility to their units, specifically, and to uphold the reputation of women service members” (DiRamio et al., 2015, p. 56). These veterans also feel a responsibility to increase efforts to gain equality and advancement in a male dominated military (DiRamio et al., 2015). This sense of responsibility may become burdensome in and out of the military and is doubled when coupled with dueling responsibilities of being a civilian again (motherhood, caregiver, student, employee, etc.). Carrying the weight of representing all women of the armed forces and vying for respect and equity often prove too much to bear physically and mentally.

**Practical implications.** Implications for practice include specific recognition of female veterans on college campuses for the roles that they play in the military and to highlight the fact that there are women who have served in combat roles in the military. Because female service members’ efforts are often overlooked in the military specifically pertaining to combat related

issues, colleges should provide support and recognition of these veterans. The establishment of female veteran organizations on campus would aid in this effort. In these organizations, veterans could receive support and acknowledgment from their veteran peers on campus. Another suggestion is that community colleges design specific awards to highlight the accomplishments of female veterans with deployment experience on campus as well as their accomplishments in their communities.

### **Conclusion Three**

The third and fourth S of Schlossberg's Transition Theory speaks to support and strategies. Support asks what assistance is available. Strategies asks how does the person cope. The third major conclusion is that for participants in this study to experience a successful transition, they must have identified adequate support systems and developed effective strategies to cope with their transition from service member to community college student. These varied among the participants.

Amongst the prevailing issues that the participants were managing were mental and physical health issues that manifested as a result of their deployment experiences. As military veterans who were transitioning to community college students, the participants carried the extra burden of managing their often debilitating illnesses. This often meant juggling class schedules, doctor's appointments, and other responsibilities when the participants were not mentally able to do so. Some of the participants compared themselves to students who were recognized by the community college as students with disabilities.

In addition to participants' self-perceptions as veteran students and their service related physical or mental health issues, they battled external stressors such as finances, finding balance in other areas of their lives, and excelling in the classroom (making good grades). Though these

stressors are common among all college students, what set the participants apart from their peers at the community college was the lingering impact of their deployment experiences.

Among the support that was needed, as expressed by the participants, was a more relevant and beneficial military Transition Assistance Program (TAP), more streamlined services and support for veterans, and support from family and friends. Strategies that were utilized by the participants at the community college were help-seeking via the use of on campus tutoring or learning labs, and the use of one-on-one contact with advisors and instructors. Strategies that were utilized by the participants in the community were help-seeking from the VA and attempts to connect with other veterans through community veterans organizations and support groups.

Participants in the study were also being strategic about managing their stress. Strategies included taking smaller course loads, voluntary unemployment or underemployment, and taking online courses versus on campus ones.

**Discussion.** For community colleges to be successful at providing for the specific needs of female veterans on their campuses, they must be more intentional about creating and maintaining support systems for them. For the community college, this means that in instances where there are minimal to no services specifically for female veterans, funding must be acquired from governing authorities to create these services. If separate space is needed for support groups, veteran only classrooms, a specified veteran's center, etc. then to retain veterans during their transition, community colleges must commit to providing them.

Also important is the commitment to employing qualified staff to work with veterans. Qualified staff for veterans would be faculty and staff with military experience or who have expertise in handling veterans affairs to include GI Bill and VA paperwork. For female veterans

with deployment experience, perhaps employing other female veterans with the same or similar experience would be beneficial to post-deployment female veteran transitions.

For the military to better serve post deployment female veterans in transition, putting services in place pre-transition out of the military would better benefit these veterans. Beneficial services would include connection to educational institutions and appointed faculty or staff at each. For those female veterans who are planning to transition to colleges or universities, this would take some of the stress from managing their other responsibilities while trying to meet GI Bill deadlines for enrollment and other transition deadlines. The TAPS could be restructured to have a gender focus and a career path focus to better serve veterans in transition.

For community veteran organizations, actively recruiting and doing outreach on community college campuses would be beneficial for female veterans who are struggling with time management and cannot find the time to seek out these agencies in the community. Partnering with community colleges to do programming for female veterans would be beneficial to community veterans' agencies by increasing their membership and highlighting their services for veterans.

According to the literature, Schlossberg discusses this in her proposals about the "moving through" period of transition. It is in this phase where female veterans in transition need the most support from community college faculty, staff, and administrators as they adjust to their new environments. As these veterans begin to understand civilian life and life as a college student, support is needed to help them navigate and persist.

The literature also highlighted the importance of relationship building and social supports. During the transition from post-deployment veteran to community college student, relationships with peers become important to the academic success and retention of veteran

students. The participants in this study had not been successful in connecting with their peers due to the inexperience and immaturity of their peers. Most of the students that the participants had encountered had little knowledge about war or world affairs. This lack of knowledge often made for uncomfortable class discussions for veterans.

Griffin and Gilbert (2015) found the concerns about support varied among their participants. Some of the participants in this study were concerned about access to social supports on campus including support from their peers, but others were more concerned with the support of their immediate families (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Schiavone and Gentry (2014) refer to these types of supports as non-role dependent and role-dependent. In this study, non-role dependent support also comes from the student veteran's loved ones of the student veterans who see their family member as neither student nor veteran, and role-dependent support was found through the Veterans Affairs office on campus (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

Studies show that most transition strategies are specific to programs and supports that are established for veteran students only. Interviews from the Griffin and Gilbert (2015) study produced themes that supported the notion that institutions of higher learning are most important in helping veteran students strategize for successful transitions from service member to student. In these programs, veterans can interact with other veterans to plan strategic ways to transition into college and be successful. In addition to the veteran specific services as a strategy, Schiavone and Gentry's (2014) study highlighted interpersonal strategies such as sarcasm and joking, born of their military culture, as a coping strategy while transitioning.

**Practical implications.** The findings from this study provide practical implications for community college administrators, faculty, and staff and will inform the practice of planning veteran student support services and program planning. More specifically, the findings can

support the creation of support services and orientation events designed specifically to meet the needs of veterans. Optimally, these tailored support services and orientations would be led by staff or personnel with military experience.

Veteran-only orientations on all community college campuses would create situations where veterans could receive veteran specific information and meet fellow veterans at the onset of their transition to the community college. Because veterans often find it hard to assimilate after their military service, having veteran-only orientations would give them an opportunity to receive information that is tailored to their experiences and is relevant to their transition to community college student. Also, because veterans are accustomed to receiving most of their information from a central location or source, these orientations would ease the frustration of having to go from place to place and person to person to get the information that they need.

In addition to veteran only orientations, veteran support services such as veteran only support groups, gender-specific veteran support groups, and support groups for veterans with deployment experience would be beneficial for veterans on all community college campuses. In these groups, veterans could combat the sense of isolation and lack of camaraderie they feel once their military service is over. Also, these support services would aid in the transition of veterans to community college students and increase retention and degree completion rates. The same would be true for creating and managing student orientation and support groups at the community college where female student veterans can meet other female veterans and organically form support groups or decide to join existing ones.

In reference to instructional design, community colleges could secure funding and resources for veteran-only courses to include the hiring of staff with military experience as instructors and counselors for veterans. Additionally, community colleges could allow college

course credit for military experience and for courses taken in the military. Suggestions specifically for community college instructors were that instructors should help make veterans aware of resources on campus for them by putting information for veterans on the syllabus and around the classroom. Also, it was suggested that instructors disseminate surveys at the beginning of class to assess for veteran student needs. The survey would assess the need for special seating or other accommodations. However, this would not be a survey specifically for veterans (seating, etc.), but would include questions designed to assess their specific needs.

The findings from this study will also inform the practice of colleges, universities, and other institutions and organizations that service or employ persons who have experienced trauma including but not limited to deployment in combat zones. The practice would involve structuring operations to reflect consideration for populations of constituents that may need sensitive and targeted care to help them manage post-traumatic stress symptoms while at institutions such as community college campuses.

Additionally, the findings from this study can help military transition personnel create a military transition assistance programming (TAPS) that is more goal specific (college or career). The military should restructure its Transition Assistance Program (TAP) to be better tailored to the post-military needs and intentions of its veteran members. The majority of the participants thought that they would have been better served had the military divided the transition programming into education and job-seeking and allowed each service-member to decide the pathway of programming that suited their intentions post-military. Because service members have not lived a civilian lifestyle for long periods of time and are solely dependent on the military for guidance, perhaps the volume of information and the time that is allotted for its dissemination could be redesigned.

Participants also suggested that they be allowed to take pre-requisite college level courses to better prepare them if they decide to go to college once separated from the military. They asked specifically for developmental courses that would indicate whether they were prepared to take college level courses. Some of the participants expressed that since it had been so long since they had been in high school and most went straight to the military after high school, that refresher courses would perhaps save them time and money if they were not college material.

Another suggestion is that the military work more closely with institutions of higher education when planning coursework and paths of study for its members. This would ensure the likelihood that military veterans would get college transfer for the coursework that they completed while in the military. The same holds true for credit for military work experience. It would benefit veterans more if they could also get college credit for some of the specific job details that they master while in the military. Rewarding veterans with college credit of their service like it is rewarded in the work force would be beneficial for both veterans and institutions of higher education to include community colleges.

Veterans organizations and support groups in the community could be a beneficial partner for community colleges if reciprocal relationships were formed. Veterans from these community organizations such as women veteran support groups, VFWs (Veterans of Foreign Wars), DVAs (Disabled American Veterans), etc. could link with community colleges to perform outreach services to veterans on campus. This presence on campus would alleviate the frustration that veterans often experience when they have to search for community support. In return, community colleges could also supply staff and programming out in the community to assist veterans organizations with their outreach effort. Additionally, each could promote and support the other's programming efforts.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Participants in this study expressed the isolation that they felt on their campuses because there were no cohesive veteran groups that they had been made aware of. They spoke of having little to no contact with other veterans on campus and of having to devise their own ways of determining which students were veterans. Often, the participants were only able to identify other veterans by the way that they dressed or if they had backpacks or items of clothing with their branch of service written on them.

In addition to meeting other veterans on campus, the participants in this study expressed a particular desire to meet other women veterans at their respective colleges. Their hope was that they might become a part of a peer group that shared deployment and civilian experiences. This was especially true with the participants who were single mothers. These participants longed for a way to commune with female veterans like themselves to perhaps assist each other with common dilemmas that they faced as they tried to navigate life as students, veterans, and single parents.

Some of the suggestions that the participants had were that their colleges offer veteran-only orientations. According to the participants, veteran-only orientations would enable them to easily identify other veterans on campus and perhaps form peer groups that they could maintain throughout their time at the community college. The absence of these veteran-only orientations made it harder to identify their peers at the beginning of their studies. The participants expressed that they were not presented ample opportunities to meet with a group of veterans on their campuses. A recommendation for future research would be to investigate the effectiveness of gender specific (female) and veteran-only community college orientations and support groups.

This research would involve studying the effects of this structured support on female veteran retention and persistence and would involve feedback from students, faculty, and staff.

Participants in this study also had strong opinions about gender role expectations or stereotypes that they had experienced as service members and civilians. A general consensus was that as female service members, they were expected to perform the same duties as their male counterparts. In fact, most of the participants had held leadership positions while in the military and had been in charge of both male and female subordinates while serving on deployment duty. The expectation was that they would assume similar roles once they became civilians.

As community college students, the participants were finding that some of the authority figures that they encountered were younger or had less life experience than they had. This situation often caused resistance and a hesitancy to ask questions or seek help. In addition, the participants were often questioned or second-guessed about their roles in the military and their deployment experience. They expressed that while in the military, it was normal and expected that they would be in leadership positions and active military personnel. However, as civilians and college students, they were often met with disbelief and skepticism about their roles in the military. An additional recommendation for future research is to investigate how the public perception and self-perception of female veterans who have deployment experiences affect the transition from service member to community college student.

Much of the research that is done on female veterans and veterans in general is focused on issues associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with an emphasis on long-lasting mental health issues. For female veterans, especially, there has also been specific research done on the effects and implications of military sexual trauma (MST). In response to a recognition of the effects of traumatic experiences on the day-to-day functionality of victims of

trauma, there has been increasing research on what has been termed trauma informed systems, trauma informed care, or trauma informed approach. Trauma informed approach can be defined as having these characteristics: (1) recognition of trauma's prevalence, (2) recognition of how trauma impacts all individuals within an organization, and (3) responses that put this knowledge into practice (Shalka, 2015).

Though the participants in this study were not specific about the types of trauma they had experienced, they indicated that their traumatic experiences had resulted in the need for intensive mental health counseling and ongoing care for persistent medical issues. A recommendation for future research is to investigate female veterans who have experienced trauma while serving on deployment duty and how entities such as organizations, employers, education systems, etc. should prepare themselves to serve these veterans during their transition to civilian life by operating from trauma informed perspectives.

As the influx of post-deployment veterans to college campuses continue, research will need to include more on how veterans build and rebuild relationships. Knowing how the success and failure of relationships shape the success and retention of veterans on college campus is important in the study of veterans. How institutions of higher learning can facilitate relationship building through education is also important to the field of adult education.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of post-deployment female veterans as they transition to the community college educational environment. This study was guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory as its theoretical framework. The sample for this study was chosen purposefully from female veterans who were attending two southeastern

community colleges and had been deployed while serving in the military. One of the community colleges was a smaller, rural college, and the other was a larger, suburban one.

This chapter provided a summary of this qualitative study and explored the conclusions that emerged from the data and supplied implications for theory and practice. This chapter also provided recommendations for future research.

The research study will impact the services provided to female veterans and veterans as a whole who have life-altering deployment experiences and are attempting to transition to life as a college student. Using the tenets of Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a guide, organizations such as community colleges can better understand the different phases of transition and what veteran students need in each phase. In addition, recognizing the 4S System as a valuable tool will help faculty and support staff better assess individual veteran needs. Though this study did not yield specific data to support a uniqueness of transition experiences for female veterans, it is still important to note that female veterans do have needs that are specific to them on college campuses. Future research should focus on the specificity of these needs.

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**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A: Informational Letter

Greetings:

I am currently a doctoral student in Adult and Community College Education at North Carolina State University and would like to invite you to participate in a research study that I am conducting with female post-deployment veterans who are attending a community college. The study is entitled “Voices of Warrior Women: A Narrative Analysis of Female Post-Deployment Veteran Perceptions of the Transition to a Southeastern Community College.”

This research perspective is significant because it is important to study female post-deployment veteran transition experiences within the community college educational environment as these veterans face different circumstances upon their return from deployments that include balancing multiple roles while trying to re-establish themselves as civilians. This research will highlight why it is important to recognize female post-deployment veterans as critical stakeholders in developing policy and programming for community colleges and other institutions of higher learning.

This study will answer the following question:

- 1) What are the transition experiences of female post-deployment veterans in a community college educational environment from service member to student?
- 2) How do personal and situational factors affect the service member to student transition of female post-deployment veterans attending a community college?
- 3) What supports and strategies are needed by female post-deployment veterans attending a community college as they negotiate the transition from service member to student?

I will be conducting personal, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes. Please be assured that your responses will be confidential and anonymous. If you are interested in participating in this research study, please let me know by return email. I will respond to your email with all other pertinent information. Also, please feel free to contact me if there are any clarifying questions about the study. My email address is [tmcadona@ncsu.edu](mailto:tmcadona@ncsu.edu). Thank you in advance for your assistance with this study.

My warmest regards,

Teresa McDonald  
Graduate Student, North Carolina State University

### Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the research study entitled: “Women Warrior Voices: A Narrative Analysis of Female Post-Deployment Veteran Perceptions of the Transition to the Community College Educational Environment” conducted by primary researcher, Teresa McDonald, doctoral student within the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development at North Carolina State University.

This research study is being conducted for a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Adult and Community College Education. The purpose of this project is to explore the narratives of female post-deployment veterans as they navigate their transition to community college. Additionally, it will serve to help understand how women in the military are returning to education, the challenges that they face, and the support and strategies needed to help ease the transition.

I understand that my participation in this research is completely voluntary. I agree to be interviewed by Teresa McDonald for approximately one hour with the understanding that the interview will be auto-digitally recorded and transcribed later. I am to be assured that these audio-digital files will be secure and confidential and will be disclosed with my permission only or as required by law. Once the interview has been transcribed, a meeting will be arranged with the researcher to review the transcript. Once this review is completed, to ensure confidentiality of my responses, I will supply the researcher with a pseudonym to replace my name on all research data.

I understand that I am able to skip any question that makes me uncomfortable. Also, I may terminate the interview at any time and for any reason and ask that any information that I have supplied be destroyed. I am to be assured that foreseeable risks or potential discomfort to me as a result of participating in this study is minimal.

I understand that my participation in this study will allow me to contribute to the formal knowledge and literature base on this topic as well as inform educators, policymakers, and administrators on the unique plight of the female post-deployment veteran as she transitions to the community college educational environment. Additionally, I understand that upon completion of the interview, I will be given a \$20 gas card as compensation for my participation in this study.

Additional questions or problems regarding my 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 and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I agree to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Having explained this research study in detail, I am co-signing this form and accepting this person's consent.

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

### **Demographic Info:**

Name:

Age range:

Full-time or part-time student:

Semesters completed:

Branch of military service:

Number of deployments:

Deployment locations:

Goal of enrollment in community college:

What program or what types of courses are you enrolled in?

**Self- How would you describe yourself? What made you decide to attend a community college versus a university? Describe your transition from being a post-deployment service member to community college student? What personal strength has most fostered your transition from post-deployment veteran to community college student? What personal challenge has most distracted you in your transition from post-deployment veteran to community college student?**

**Situation- What circumstances about your life have or are positively impacting your transition to community college? What circumstances about your life have or are negatively impacting your transition to community college? How does being a female post-deployment veteran factor in?**

**Support- What kind of supports, services, or tools have you had in your transition to a community college student? What additional supports, services, or tools do you need or could you have used in your transition to a community college student? How can the community college better meet the needs of female post-deployment veterans in transition? How can the military better prepare female veterans for transition to educational environments?**

**Strategies- What does success look like to you in terms of meeting your goals at the community college? What strategies or tools have you used to help achieve that success? What is your plan for completing your studies at the community college?**

## Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter



### Notification of IRB Approval

November 22, 2017

Ms. Teresa McDonald  
 Education Leadership Policy & Human Development (NCSU)  
[tmcdona@ncsu.edu](mailto:tmcdona@ncsu.edu)

Project Title: Voices of Warrior Women: A Narrative Analysis of Female Post-Deployment Veteran  
 Perceptions of the Transition to a Southeastern Community College  
 Proposal #: 20171104

Dear Ms. McDonald:

As Chair of Wake Technical Community College's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the "Exempt Protocol Summary Form" for the research project indicated above.

**Finding:** I find that the research described in the attached documents falls under federally approved Category of Exemption #1 and, therefore, does NOT require formal review by Wake Tech's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

"Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings involving normal educational practices, such as: (a) research on regular and special education instructional strategies; (b) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques curricula, or classroom management methods."

This project does not require further review provided the research is conducted as described AND the principal investigator adheres to the following responsibilities: (1) submits any additions or changes in procedure to Wake Tech's IRB for approval; (2) communicates to the IRB chair any problems connected with the use of human subjects; (3) retains informed consent documents for three (3) years.

Research proposals are only granted approval for a one-year period, according to OHRP Federal guidelines. If research extends beyond a period of one year, and the research procedures have not changed, then the researcher shall request an extension by emailing the IRB Chair. If research extends beyond a period of one year, and the research procedures have changed, then the researcher must submit a new proposal. Please keep Dean Terrill informed about your research progress.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bryan K. Ryan".

Bryan K. Ryan  
 Senior Vice President, Effectiveness & Innovation Services &  
 Chair, Wake Tech Institutional Review Board

cc: Marilyn Terrill, Dean - Veterans Programs and Innovation, Wake Tech

## Appendix E: IRB Approval

10/2/2018

North Carolina State University Mail - Fwd: Chapman - 12362 - IRB Protocol assigned Exempt status



Teresa McDonald &lt;tmcдона@ncsu.edu&gt;

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### Fwd: Chapman - 12362 - IRB Protocol assigned Exempt status

1 message

Diane Chapman <ddchapma@ncsu.edu>  
 To: Teresa McDonald <tmcдона@ncsu.edu>

Mon, Oct 2, 2017 at 11:33 AM

Yay!

Please excuse the brevity, this message was sent from a mobile device.

Begin forwarded message:

**From:** IRB Administrative Office <pins\_notifications@ncsu.edu>  
**Date:** October 2, 2017 at 10:25:59 AM EDT  
**To:** ddchapma@ncsu.edu  
**Subject:** Chapman - 12362 - IRB Protocol assigned Exempt status  
**Reply-To:** debra\_paxton@ncsu.edu

Dear Diane Chapman:

Date: October 2, 2017  
 IRB Protocol 12362 has been assigned Exempt status  
 Title: Voices of Warrior Women: A Narrative Analysis of Female Combat Veteran Perceptions of the Transition to a Southeastern Community College  
 PI: Chapman, Diane D

The research proposal named above has received administrative review and has been approved as exempt from the policy as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations (Exemption: 46.101, Exempt b.2). Provided that the only participation of the subjects is as described in the proposal narrative, this project is exempt from further review. This approval does not expire, but any changes must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

1. This committee complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU projects, the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.
2. Any changes to the protocol and supporting documents must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
3. If any unanticipated problems or adverse events 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: <http://research.ncsu.edu/sparcs/compliance/irb/submission-guidance/>.
4. Any unapproved departure from your approved IRB protocol results in non-compliance. Please find information regarding non-compliance here: [http://research.ncsu.edu/sparcs-docs/irb/non-compliance\\_faqsheet.pdf](http://research.ncsu.edu/sparcs-docs/irb/non-compliance_faqsheet.pdf).

Please let us know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Deb Paxton  
 919.515.4514  
 IRB Administrator  
 dapaxton@ncsu.edu  
 NC State IRB Office

Jennie Ofstein  
 919.515.8754  
 IRB Coordinator  
 irb-coordinator@ncsu.edu

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/07ik=f6403da415&view=pt&search=all&permthid=thread-f%3A1580160441337638653&siml=msg-f%3A15801604413...> 1/2

## Appendix F. Letter of Permission

10/1/2018

North Carolina State University Mail - Fwd: Chapman - 12362 - IRB Protocol renewal/amendment approved



Teresa McDonald &lt;tmcдона@ncsu.edu&gt;

### Fwd: Chapman - 12362 - IRB Protocol renewal/amendment approved

Terri S Lee <tslee@johnstoncc.edu>  
To: Teresa McDonald <tmcдона@ncsu.edu>

Mon, Dec 18, 2017 at 4:07 PM

Hi Ms. McDonald! After reviewing the methodology for your dissertation, I approve your request to conduct research on female post-deployment veteran perceptions at Johnston Community College (JCC). Per the materials you provided, you plan to interview 8-10 female veterans who have completed at least two courses at JCC. As you indicated in your informed consent, the data that you collect and report will not contain any identifying information, and participants may decline or withdraw from the study at any time with no harmful consequences. If you change any of the aforementioned parts of your methodology, please contact Research and Institutional Effectiveness before implementing new practices.

I would suggest the second or third week in January as the best time to contact potential participants. It may be less likely at that time that the call for participation would be lost in the end/beginning of semester emails. When you are ready, please contact me, and I will email your informational letter to possible participants. We will probably want to send the informational letter to all females between the ages of 18 and 64 who have taken at least two classes. This way the participants can self-identify as a veteran. Not all possible veterans are indicated as such in our student information system. It is an optional question on our application, and the only records we would have are from those receiving financial aid. If we send the informational letter out to all 18-64 females who have taken at least two classes, we will be more likely to reach participants who are not identified as veterans in our system. Will that work for your study?

Good luck completing your dissertation, and let me know when I can be of any additional assistance. Take care and have a great day!

Terri S. Lee, Ed.D. | Director of Research and Institutional Effectiveness/SACSCOC Accreditation Liaison

Johnston Community College | P.O. Box 2350 | Smithfield, NC 27577

Office: Wilson C1019B | Phone: 919-209-2125 | Fax: 919-209-2142 | [tslee@johnstoncc.edu](mailto:tslee@johnstoncc.edu)

**From:** Teresa McDonald [<mailto:tmcдона@ncsu.edu>]

**Sent:** Thursday, December 14, 2017 9:26 AM

**To:** Terri S Lee <[tslee@johnstoncc.edu](mailto:tslee@johnstoncc.edu)>

[Quoted text hidden]

[Quoted text hidden]

E-mail correspondence to and from this address may be subject to the North Carolina Public Records Law and may be disclosed to third parties by an authorized state official. ( NCGS.Ch.132)

E-mail correspondence to and from this address may be subject to the North Carolina Public Records Law and may be disclosed to third parties by an authorized state official. ( NCGS.Ch.132)

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0?ik=f6403da415&view=pt&search=all&permmsgid=msg-f%3A1587157377745136614&simpl=msg-f%3A15871573777...> 1/2