ABSTRACT

BOJARSKI, JAMIE LYNN COCCARELLI. Exploring the Experiences of Student Veterans with Disabilities as They Transition to a Research Extensive Institution. (Under the direction of Dr. Chad Hoggan).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transition to a research extensive institution. Veterans are able to use the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Due to better medical care, student veterans are more likely to survive combat-related injuries than those returning from WWII (Gawande, 2004), and thus, able to return to school. In addition, with changes in civil rights laws, a wider range of disabilities were covered and those with disability impairments are able to enroll in educational programming. As student veterans with disabilities enter higher education, this population of students need to be considered when analyzing student transitions.

The overarching research question to address this problem was: How do the factors of situation, self, support, and strategies shape the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transition to a research extensive institution?

Transition theory (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) was employed as the framework for the study. Experiences shared by participants were analyzed using the Four S factors of the transition theory: situation, self, support, and strategies. To best understand the lived experiences of student veterans with disabilities transitioning to a research extensive institution, a qualitative, narrative inquiry was chosen as the research design. Fourteen student veterans with disabilities enrolled in a research extensive institution participated in the study. Each participant completed a demographic questionnaire, two-semi structured interviews, and submitted a response to a photo voice prompt.
Disability impacted all Four S factors and contributed to the transition experiences of student veterans with disabilities. Situational aspects shared included the trigger and timing of their transition, what it meant to transition to a student role, how previous educational experiences shaped their transition, and concurrent stress factors. Factors of self included identity, age, and other psychological features. Factors of support were most commonly found in institutional support and individuals at the university; however, support was also offered through close friends and family, and the community. Strategies of control were the most commonly employed by participants and where most of their photo prompt responses were found.

The findings from this study expands the current literature on the topic to include student veterans with disabilities at a research extensive institution, increases institutional awareness for administrators and programs they may implement, and generates a knowledge base for existing and non-existing programs. Future research should seek to better understand the identity development of veterans with disabilities, the debriefing processes a veteran goes through when separating from the military with intentions of returning to school, and the resilience of student veterans with disabilities. Recommendations for practice include: providing additional benefits to all student veterans, detailed information regarding campus resources at the time of enrollment, increase staff and faculty awareness through Green Zone Training, and strengthen the partnership between research extensive institutions and their local community colleges.
Exploring the Experiences of Student Veterans with Disabilities as they Transition to a Research Extensive Institution

by
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all current and former members of the United States Military. I thank you for all that you have done and for all that you continue to do. I am especially thankful for the fourteen participants who took the time to share with me their stories, their emotions, and their recommendations; without you, this study would not have been possible.
BIOGRAPHY

Jamie Bojarski was born and raised in Harborcreek, Pennsylvania and is a 2003 graduate of Harbor Creek High School. She earned a Bachelor of Art’s degree from Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 2007 and became the first in her family to graduate college. After graduation, Jamie worked as an educational assistant with a sixth grader who had multiple mental health diagnoses; this is where she found a passion for working with students with disabilities. The following year Jamie began a Master of Education program with a focus on Postsecondary Administration and Student Affairs at the University of Southern California. She graduated from the program in 2010 and immediately began her professional practice as a Student Access Coordinator at Indiana University. Although she enjoyed her area of work, the Midwest was not for her. In 2012, Jamie joined the Disability Resource Office at North Carolina State University.

Jamie was the Assistant Director and an Access Consultant at NC State for over six years. In addition to being a practitioner, Jamie knew she wanted to further her education to better support students and other disability focused offices in higher education. Beginning her second semester at NC State, Jamie began taking doctoral level courses and, in the fall of 2014, she enrolled as a part-time student in the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) program in Educational Research and Policy Analysis. For five years, Jamie worked full-time and was enrolled as a part-time student where she completed coursework, was a teaching assistant for multiple semesters, co-taught a graduate level course, and completed her dissertation research. In the summer of 2018, Jamie accepted the opportunity to become the Director of the Student Access Services Office at Vanderbilt University. Jamie and her family reside in Franklin, Tennessee.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Due to military downsizing and the Post 9/11 GI Bill, more veterans are returning to or enrolling in postsecondary education (Parks & Walker, 2014). In 2012, there were over 900,000 individuals using their educational benefits (United States Department of Veteran Affairs, 2014). The Million Records Project looked at 788,915 student veteran records; when looking at all degrees, certificate to doctoral level, 51.7 percent of student veterans completed their degree (Cate, 2014). The Million Records Project found that nearly twenty percent of student veterans seeking their bachelor’s degree took between five and six years to complete and after eight years, only 74.2 percent completed their bachelor’s degree (Cate, 2014). This varied significantly from the national average of students seeking their bachelor’s degree; 67 percent of the national student population completed their bachelor’s degree in five years and 76 percent within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). For students who delayed enrolling in postsecondary education, the median time to completion was six and a half years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Contributing factors to resulting in less student veterans graduating in fewer years can include the inability to transition from combat to classroom, mental health and physical disabilities, and the lack of awareness of resources on campus. Grossbard et al. (2014) suggested due to the feelings of isolation and feeling different from peers, student veterans are less likely to turn to campus resources, such as the counseling center, when they are feeling overwhelmed or need additional supports.

Student Veterans

The term veteran has numerous definitions. The United States Department of Veteran Affairs (2014) defines veteran as “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service
and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable”. The Veterans Authority does consider those in the Reserves and the National Guard for veteran associated benefits. The United States Census Bureau (2013) defines veteran as,

Veterans are men and women who have served (even for a short time), but are not currently serving, on active duty in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or the Coast Guard, or who served in the U.S. Merchant Marine during World War II. People who served in the National Guard or Reserves are classified as veterans only if they were ever called or ordered to active duty, not counting the 4-6 months for initial training or yearly summer camps.

This definition will serve as the definition of veteran throughout this study; however, this study does not include National Guard members or members of the Reserves. In addition, there was one participant who was still active duty.

Student veterans on campus tend to fall in the non-traditional category, usually older, married, and may have children. Student veterans who engage in combat may also experience a traumatic event. Student veterans tend to be more mature than the traditional undergraduate student (American Council on Education, 2008). Along with non-traditional demographic information, student veterans also make decisions about postsecondary education differently than the traditional undergraduate; student veterans attend two-year institutions at a much higher rate than those that attend four-year institutions (Whitley & Tschudi, 2014). Of 788,915 records analyzed by the Million Records Project, 407,483, or 51.7 percent, of records indicated the student veteran had attainment of a postsecondary degree; the degrees ranged from a vocational certificate to a doctorate (Cate, 2014).
In addition to more student veterans taking advantage of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, Gawande (2004) stated due to better medical care, student veterans returning from combat are more likely to have survived combat-related injuries than those veterans returning from World War II, increasing the percentage of student veterans returning to postsecondary education. With better medical care and the opportunity for students with disabilities to attend postsecondary education, more student veterans with disabilities are enrolling in these institutions.

**Student Veterans with Disabilities**

In 1989, an article was published by Kimberle Crenshaw titled, Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. This article focused on black feminist criticism and introduced the theory of intersectionality. Crenshaw stressed the importance and change of dynamic when two or more oppressed identities intersect; it is critical to understand how these identities work together rather than individually (1989). Walby, Armstrong, and Strid (2012) add that while it is important to understand the power dynamic of which the oppressed individual has, it is also important to understand the inequality as it applies to social relations. Specific aspects of social inequalities are compromised and fought for and therefore, the environment changes and evolves as social institutions change.

Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, and Tomlinson (2013) explained intersectionality is a theory that is never static; it is constantly evolving. Because of the notion that intersectionality is an always-in-progress theory, it does not have a set framework to understand or investigate its realities. Carbado et al. (2013) used the theory of intersectionality to analyze other inequalities such as social categories, civil rights problems, and legal doctrines. This was done with the intent to show the flexibility of the theory of intersectionality. McCall (2005) also agreed the theory is
complex but can be used to take multiple approaches to examining and understanding intersectionality.

When exploring the experiences of student veterans with disabilities, the theory of intersectionality is used because it is important to keep the identity as a student veteran and the identity as a student with a disability together as both identities are part of the individual. More importantly, these two identities are oppressed groups of individuals, and their inequalities is what will be analyzed. Carbado et al. (2013) explained using an intersectional analysis can often bring hidden dynamics forward and thus change them. The following literature focuses on the commonalities of students who identify as a veteran with a disability.

The 2016 U.S. census reported 18.5 million veterans; 4 million of those veterans reported having a service-connected disability rating. Students with disabilities, regardless of veteran status, are entering higher education at rates higher than ever before. Changes in civil rights laws have provided the opportunity for individuals with disabilities to have equal access to their education. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, The American with Disabilities Act of 1990 defines disability as “a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (2009, para 2).

In postsecondary education, student veterans with disabilities have the opportunity to receive support from the institution which they attend (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003). Students with disabilities who encounter attitudinal barriers may be able to overcome those social interactions if they have strong self-efficacy beliefs (Conyers, Mary, & Strauser, 1998; Saracoglu, Minden, & Wilchesky, 1989). Milsom and Dietz (2009) explained that a student who
is able to self-advocate but refuses to do so will not receive the support he or she needs; a student who is willing to ask for help but does not know where to seek help will also not receive the support he or she needs. Janiga and Costenbader (2002) indicated it was more difficult for students with hidden disabilities, such as learning disabilities and posttraumatic stress, to disclose their disability because their peers or faculty members are unable to physically see the disability, and thus it harder to understand the limitations of that disability.

**Transition to Postsecondary Education**

Making the transition to postsecondary education can be trying for any student, whether coming from high school or a deployment. Parks and Walker (2014) explained many student veterans are not used to the culture of higher education have a difficult time transitioning because the culture of the military is much different. Behavior in college tends to be more individualistic, while in the military, behavior has more of a group mentality. This difference in behavior has implications on help-seeking behaviors of student veterans (DiRamio, Jarvis, Iverson, Seher, & Anderson, 2015). High levels of social support are needed for veterans to have better mental health outcomes (Romero, Riggs, & Ruggero, 2015; Soltani, Karaminia, & Hashemian, 2014; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013;). Rumann and Hamrick (2010) found student veterans were often challenged to make new friends and build relationships with their non-military counterparts.

**Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study**

As veterans return to campus it is critical that university staff, faculty, and administrators know the best possible resources to ensure a successful transition. This study focused on the lack of research and best practices available to help ensure a successful transition for student veterans with disabilities. Although student veteran retention rates have recently been studied (Cate,
2014) and some combat to college transitions have been examined (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012;), no scholarship exists on student veterans with disabilities transitioning to a research extensive university. The findings of this study fill this gap in the literature.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transition to a research extensive institution. To best understand student experiences, I chose a qualitative, narrative approach. Qualitative research looks to understand the why and how of a problem or phenomenon. Narrative research focuses on the stories of the participants who are answering the how and why.

**Research Question**

The research question guiding this study is:

1. How do the factors of situation, self, support, and strategies shape the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transition to a research extensive institution?

Currently, there is no literature that discusses the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transition into a research extensive institution. With the number of veterans enrolling in postsecondary education rises, it is critical to fill this gap in the literature. This study’s research question provided an opportunity to do so. By understanding the four factors of situation, self, support, and strategies as a student transitions, educators are able to apply that knowledge to inform faculty, staff, and administrators of best practices within a research extensive university to provide an opportunity for a successful transition for student veterans with disabilities. As best
practices are put into place, the university can see positive impacts such as retention, student involvement, and alumni support.

**Methods**

This narrative inquiry aimed to better understand the transition experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transition into a research extensive institution. The findings add to the literature and inform current university professionals of the transition experience so that more adequate, supportive programs can be put into place.

**Framework**

The framework for this study is Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman. 1995). Schlossberg’s transition theory (1995) explained that transition can be “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998 p. 111). Schlossberg et al. (1995) describe effectiveness in coping with transition through four aspects: situation, self, support, and strategies. Each of these four aspects are explored as they relate to student veterans with disabilities in their transition to a research extensive institution.

Situation as described by Schlossberg et al. (1995) includes factors such as trigger, timing, control, role change, or having a similar previous experience. Self encompasses those factors related to personal demographic characteristics as well as psychological features. Support can include different types, functions, and measurement, along with social supports such as intimate relationships, institutions, and communities. Strategies are those factors that modify, control, or aid in managing the stress of the aftermath.

Previous studies have used Schlossberg’s (1995) transition theory to understand how high school students were prepared to transition to college (Kohler, 2003; Levinson & Ohler, 1998;
Neubert, 2006; Oesterreich, 2008; Skinner, 1998). Coccarelli (2010) used the theory to analyze this same transition process for students with learning disabilities. This framework has also been used to explore the transition of student veterans to postsecondary education; however, the analysis of transition for student veterans with disabilities has yet to be investigated.

**Significance of the study**

With a substantial rate of student veterans enrolling in postsecondary education, this study is significant in many ways. The study expands the literature on the topic, increases institutional awareness, and generates knowledge for existing and non-existing programs. Through these opportunities, direct and indirect interaction with the student veteran is also impacted.

**Literature**

The literature available on student veterans with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education is scant. This study adds to the literature on student veterans, disability, and transition theory. As veterans return to campus, it is essential institutions and people around the community understand the experiences student veterans with disabilities face. As more stakeholders of the community understand these experiences, the more likely best practices will be put into place for better transitions into civilian life. This literature should be available to community psychologists, Veterans Affairs (VA) centers, and other community centers.

**Institutional**

This study provides feedback to institutions. As veterans make the return to college campuses, faculty, staff, and administrators will be able to better understand the experiences student veterans with disabilities face. With this information, they can better accommodate student veterans with disabilities as they transition into the institution. There are large research
extensive universities that do not have a center for student veterans; this study will show the benefits of providing additional resources.

Adjusting university policies to include a focus on student veterans, such as creating a student veteran’s center or providing Green Zone training to faculty and staff, will provide a more welcoming environment for student veterans and their dependents. Through trainings such as Green Zone, faculty and staff will become more aware of some of the challenges that student veterans and student veterans with disabilities may face as they transition into the university (Parks & Walker, 2014). Although this study only applies to research extensive institutions, the experiences may be comparable to other institutions depending on the similarities of resources available to the student veteran.

**Government and Non-Government Organizations**

The US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the US Department of Defense (DOD) provides transition programs (for example, the Transition Assistance Program) for active duty members entering civilian life. These programs provide training and information to make transitions into civilian life more successful. For veterans with disabilities, their transition programming is more rigid; the more severe the disability, the more rigid the transition programming. Programming can include mental health transition, employment transition, and academic transition. For veterans who acquire a disability, they may experience a crisis period as they may no longer be able to physically or mentally, participate in their assigned duty. Then, the veteran must transition from a very systemic institution to a loose, free-form institution such as a university. This study provides the VA and DOD with this knowledge to tailor their transition programs to accommodate challenges or strengthen any successes. For example, if there is a student veteran with a disability who had a successful transition into the research extensive
institution, the VA and DOD can draw from the steps that veteran took and determine if those steps could be applied to future veterans.

Other, non-government related organizations, such as the Wounded Warrior Program, also serve veterans with disabilities hoping to return to academia. This study provides those organizations with a better understanding of the challenges veterans with disabilities would face in an academic environment. Government, or non-government organizations, that have access to this study will have first-hand examples of student veterans with disabilities transitioning into an academic environment. When staff within these organizations meet with student veterans with disabilities, they can provide these veterans with this knowledge to set them up for a successful transition.

**Individual**

This study is significant because of the influence it has on individual student veterans, immediately and in the future. Immediate feedback was provided within the study when appropriate; I ethically provided feedback once the interview was over if the participant needed a resource. In the future, this study will be disseminated in a format where student veterans with disabilities can read about the experiences of their peers.

The outcomes of this study allow for communities and institutions to be better informed about the experiences and needs of these students, thus having a positive impact on the student veteran. Additionally, this study impacts student veterans by providing awareness of available resources they can seek to make their transition as seamless as possible.

**Definition of Terms**

Disability: a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a
person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment (US Department of Justice, 2009, para 2).

Research Extensive Institution: As defined by the 2000 Carnegie Classification, Doctoral/Research Universities – Extensive, are institutions that typically offer a wide range of baccalaureate programs, and they are committed to graduate education through the doctorate. They awarded 50 or more doctoral degrees per year across at least 15 disciplines (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2000) These institutions are more commonly referred to as R1: Doctoral Universities, highest research activity.

Veteran: Veterans are men and women who have served (even for a short time), but are not currently serving, on active duty in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or the Coast Guard, or who served in the U.S. Merchant Marine during World War II. People who served in the National Guard or Reserves are classified as veterans only if they were ever called or ordered to active duty, not counting the 4-6 months for initial training or yearly summer camps (American Community Survey, 2013). Individuals who served in the National Guard or Reserve who were not classified as veterans are not reflected in this study.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Due to military downsizing and the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, more veterans are returning to or enrolling in postsecondary education (Parks & Walker, 2014). Of 788,915 records looked at by the Million Records Project (Cate, 2014) only 51.7 percent of student veterans completed their degree (ranging from certificate to doctoral level). Contributing factors to this statistic can include the inability to transition from military member to civilian to student, mental health and other disabilities, and the lack of awareness of resources on campus. Even when campus resources are available to student veterans, the veteran may not know of the resource or may choose not to use the services available.

Student veterans on campus tend to fall in the non-traditional category; they are usually older, married, have children, or have experienced traumatic events resulting in a maturity that is beyond that of a traditional undergraduate student (American Council on Education, 2008). As student veterans are non-traditional, they may have difficulty connecting with their peers across campus and could be at risk for social isolation (Whiteman et al., 2013). Social isolation may make the student veteran feel disconnected to the institution in which they are enrolled; this feeling of isolation may heighten their desire to interact with other veterans on campus. Student veterans may be more comfortable interacting with other veterans because they share a common work ethic. For instance, Glover-Graf, Miller, and Freeman (2010) conducted focus groups with seven student veterans who deployed to Iraq; one finding of the study was that student veterans believed they were more disciplined than their non-military peers and had a stronger work ethic.

Along with non-traditional demographic backgrounds, student veterans also make decisions about postsecondary education differently than the traditional undergraduate student.
McGovern (2012) found student veterans tend to choose colleges that can provide career and networking support, which is assumed to be more convenient at a nearby community college. Whitley and Tschudi (2014) share student veterans attend two-year institutions at a much higher rate than those that attend four-year institutions. For those students wanting to attend four-year colleges, some may enter the military first. Through their seven focus groups, Glover-Graf et al. (2010) found many student veterans chose to enter the military as a means to a better life, knowing they would be able to attend college once they completed their commitment. The number of student veterans in postsecondary education is increasing, however they encounter barriers along the way. This chapter will present a synopsis of the current literature that focuses on the resources and barriers faced by student veterans with disabilities as they transition to a research extensive institution.

**Student Veterans with Disabilities in Higher Education**

The return of troops from recent wars is resulting in more veterans entering higher education (Parks & Walker, 2014). The US Department of Veterans Affairs (2014) reports the number of student veterans using their benefits increased from 400,000 in 2000 to 900,000 in 2011. It is common for this population of students to have experienced frequent moves, deployments, and possibly psychological issues (such as post-traumatic stress disorder), which can all be understood as part of the military culture (Hall, 2008). Some veterans do not want to be identified as being part of the population; therefore, they may have difficulty finding the resources they need on campus to be successful (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014). Student veterans need to have officials and other administrators who understand their unique and diverse needs (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). This section will explore the student veteran population in postsecondary education. First it will cover
identity development and sense of belonging. Next, the military culture and the characteristics that make it a distinct population on a college campus. It will then cover the importance of self-advocacy, followed by relationships between student veterans and university faculty and staff. Finally, the section concludes by discussing institutional barriers student veterans may face as they transition to their institution.

Identity

When looking at the identity of student veterans who acquired disabilities while in the military, there are two identity labels present: veteran and disability. Notably, both of these identities were acquired during adult years; the person was not born as a veteran nor as someone with a disability. There are differences in identity development for those with congenital and acquired identities. Bogart (2014) had 226 participants with acquired and congenital disabilities complete a cross-sectional online questionnaire that measured satisfaction with life, self-esteem, disability identity, disability self-efficacy, and demographic information. Those who were born with a disability had a higher satisfaction with life, disability identity, and disability self-efficacy, but not self-esteem (Bogart, 2014). Those with congenital and acquired disabilities had varying levels of self-esteem.

O’Shea and Kaplan (2018) conducted a phenomenological study with five participants to better understand how their disability identity motivated them to use supports on campus. For these students, identity formation varied depending on the context of the situation at a certain time. Those who viewed their condition as real and valid, were more likely to actively use disability support systems on their campus. Viewing a disability as real and valid impacts the decision to disclose that information to other university offices. Miller, Wynn, and Webb (2018) investigated how students manage the disclosure of disability and queer identities. From their
interviews with 31 students, at two universities, the authors found three themes: 1) disclosing their identities to others on campus, students felt it was their way of supporting those with similar oppressed identities, 2) they disclosed identities through signifiers, such as a student using a computer to read text aloud in the classroom, and 3) they did not disclose and tried to pass as a member of the privileged group as it was easier to hide than disclose multiple identities (Miller et al., 2018).

Whether one was born with a disability, or it was acquired, self-esteem levels are varied (Bogart, 2014). Students with psychiatric disabilities used supports more often when they viewed their disability as real and valid (Kaplan & O’Shea, 2018). And disclosing multiple oppressed identities was a process that had to be managed by the student; that management style fell into three themes discussed above. Overall, this began with identity development. After interviewing and observing 17 college students with disabilities, Forber-Pratt and Zape (2017) created a model of psychosocial identity development for those with disabilities. Data resulted in a model which included four themes: acceptance (accepting the disability), relationship (meeting other with similar disabilities), adoption (adopting core values of the disability community), and engagement (helping other learn the ways of the cultural group).

Raver, Murchake, and Chalk (2018) conducted a study that included 502 individuals with disabilities across 32 different universities to look at disability identity and sense of belonging. They found those who had social supports were more likely to report a sense of belonging as well as those with positive disability identity. Sense of belonging was predicted by positive disability identity, even after controlling for effects for social support and the need to belong (Raver et al., 2018). Students who were able to identify as having a disability as a positive, also had a greater sense of belonging.
Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging, while impacted by identity development, is also a factor when considering college retention rates. O’Keeffe (2013) looked at retention risk factors for college students and shared that not being able to develop a sense of belonging on campus was a cause for student attrition. Another study analyzed 205 questionnaires regarding freshman and their sense of belonging (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Solomone, 2003). The questionnaires were derived from a previous focus group that consisted of feedback from roughly 2000 students in a university seminar course. Overall, the authors found that the freshman felt a strong sense of belonging when there was valued involvement; this valued involvement included establishing supportive peer relationships and believing faculty members do not see the student as another face in the crowd (Hoffman et al., 2003).

Additional authors have investigated other factors that impact a college student’s sense of belonging. Jones, Brown, Keys, and Salzer (2015) surveyed 386 current and past students with self-reported diagnoses of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression to better understand how their symptoms predicted sense of belonging. They found that while campuses should continue to treat symptoms, more focus should be placed on prevention strategies focus on the social context; community integration and inclusion is essential for better for overall sense of belonging on campus.

As with identity, authors have also analyzed sense of belonging for those in minoritized groups. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) developed a model to assess the sense of belonging in privileged and minoritized groups. The sample consisted of 51 first year students (31 white, 5 Asian American/Pacific Islander, 5 Black, 3 Latino/a, 7 bi/multiracial; 8 LGBT, 8 disability, and 14 having a different religion than Christianity). Participants in both privileged and minoritized
groups described sense of belonging as feeling comfortable or fitting in. However, those students in privileged groups had more positive descriptions (friendly or fun), while minoritized students felt like they were the only one and regularly felt judged by others (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Sense of belonging is a component in the transition and college retention process. Military culture can also captivate this sense of belonging for an additional population.

**Military Culture**

Making the transition to postsecondary education can be very trying on any student, whether coming from high school or a deployment. Parks and Walker (2014) explain many student veterans are not used to the culture of higher education and have a difficult time transitioning, as the culture of the military is much different. Hall (2008) refers to the military as a culture of its own, thus having its own standards, jargon, and belief system.

The military culture is built on strength and power, and military members do not dwell on their problems or injuries (Church, 2009). There is also a part of the military culture that focuses on group mentality. Sporner (2012) advised when working with student veterans, it may be difficult to take the veteran from the group mentality way of thinking back to focusing on themselves as an individual. DiRamio et al. (2015) explained the way of thinking in the military is very dualistic and it can be a difficult transition to think about problems or issues in college in a holistic manner. Contrarily, Rumann and Hamrick (2010) investigated the transition experience of six student veterans who returned to their institution after being deployed and found those veterans had a bicultural literacy in understanding military and academic cultures; these student veterans were able to identify as being members of both cultures.

Behavior in college tends to be more individualistic, while in the military behavior is more group-oriented. This difference in behavior has implications on help-seeking behaviors of
student veterans (DiRamio et al., 2015). Whitley and Tschudi (2014) suggest the military culture can also lead to other barriers such as not accepting the need for help, unawareness of resources available, and equating seeking help with failure. Women who served in the military may need even more assistance in being led to the resources available to them on campus (DiRamio et al., 2015). After reviewing national trends, Church (2009) indicates the military culture does not allow for one to focus on their problems or injuries. DiRamio et al. (2015) surveyed 167 student veterans at seven different institutions and noted that women are even more likely to keep their problems to themselves and may need assistance when seeking psychological help or assistance for academic matters.

**Self-advocacy**

The identity of a military member is built on strength and power (Church, 2009). When enrolling at a university, the strength and power aspect of the veterans’ identity may diminish. Although more than half of 189 student veterans surveyed found faculty to be welcoming to them (Love, Levin, & Park, 2015), Sporner’s (2012) review of current literature concluded student veterans have difficulty taking orders, or following the commands, from a supervisor who is non-military. One suggestion to help decrease this difficulty was for student veterans to work with rehabilitation counselors to identify coping strategies allowing the student veteran to self-advocate (Sporner, 2012). Sporner (2012) concludes that when the student veteran is able to self-advocate, they will be able to more easily communicate with their non-military faculty member about their needs or accommodations.

**Faculty and Students**

Griffin and Gilbert (2015) conducted 52 individual interviews with university faculty and staff at seven institutions; they also held seven focus groups with 28 student veterans. Drawing
from this study, Griffin and Gilbert strongly advocate for the student veterans at an institution to see student veteran representation on campus or to have the ability to more easily identify other student veterans (2015). High levels of social support are needed for students with mental health disabilities to have more positive academic outcomes (Romero et al., 2015; Saltani et al., 2014; Whiteman et al., 2013). In their interviews with six returning veterans, Rumann and Hamrick (2010) found students with posttraumatic stress disorder were often challenged to make new friends and build relationships with their non-military counterparts. In their online survey, Love et al. (2015) determined less than half of 189 student veterans found their peers to be welcoming. In a study conducted by Olsen, Badger, and McCuddy (2014), the authors suggested that although student veterans have these challenges, they also have many strengths in a college environment such as self-discipline, leadership, and teamwork. After completing focus groups, when comparing themselves to their non-military peers, Glover-Graf et al. (2010) found the student veterans in their study believed they were not only more disciplined than their peers, but they also had a stronger work ethic. Glover-Graf et al. also found student veterans in their study tended to join social groups that push them to excel academically or to meet their goals; Rumann and Hamrick (2010) listed this behavior as a form of support.

There is a clear chain of command in the military showing who has authority; this chain of command is not always as clear on campus (Summerlot, Green & Parker, 2009). For example, if a faculty member voices their frustrations or shows a lack of respect for an administrator, the student veteran may view this as disloyalty (Summerlot et al., 2009). Student veterans who perceived adequate support from their faculty members were less likely to have negative academic consequences, such as failing a course; however, the relationship between the faculty member and the student veteran could be strained as most faculty are not familiar with aspects of
military culture (Grossbard et al., 2015). When a faculty member criticizes the military or government in a classroom, this may cause the student veteran to feel threatened or unwelcome (Summerlot et al., 2009). In an ideal classroom environment for student veterans, faculty would know how to support veterans and how to build their self-efficacy levels. Another challenge can be working with faculty members. Grossbard et al. (2014) used the Boynton Health Services Survey to examine 1679 student veterans’ responses examining mental health. These authors found student veterans’ perceptions of faculty and their ability to manage their own personal stress was also associated with grade point average and academic standing. After conducting focus groups with 28 student veterans, Griffin and Gilbert (2015) concluded student veterans valued the relationships they built with their peers and other personnel on campus.

**Institutional Barriers**

University processes can be confusing and difficult for students to follow. In a survey that sampled 316 student veterans, one of every five respondents considered dropping out due to the difficulties they were experiencing (Gwin, Selber, Chavkin, & Williams, 2012). Whitley and Tschudi (2014) add that student veterans with combat experience who have emotional instability can face additional challenges as they enroll in college. Student veterans returning to campus can have many difficulties that are different than those of their non-military peers. Some of these differences can include personal adjustments, for example, developing and maintaining relationships, and educational adjustments, such as the infrastructure and polices of the institution, due to extra processes they must go through to receive their educational benefits (Whiteman et al., 2013). The student veterans in the study conducted by Griffin and Gilbert (2015) value having specific campus policies and procedures when handling and processing their benefit information.
Additional institutional barriers can include difficulty with paperwork, financial difficulties when processing benefits, and balancing multiple roles (Gwin et al., 2012). When enrolling in higher education institutions, student veterans have difficulty accessing assistance to eliminate or work through these barriers (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011). Unfortunately, if the student veteran feels they are being susceptible to the institutions bureaucratic policies, they may view this as a sign of failure (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Due to the numerous procedures student veterans must go through to receive their education benefits, it is difficult to understand these benefits and the complexities of the policies and procedures until they are already enrolled in classes (Norman et al., 2015).

Student veterans fall into the non-traditional student category on university campuses. This population of students are more likely than traditional students to have children at home and thus, have work and family responsibilities (Gwin et al., 2012). Two-thirds of student veterans that responded to the NSSE in 2010 were first generation college students (Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Liu, 2012). Most students attend college as continuing education after high school. Many veterans join the military for future benefits, such as the ability to attend college using their education benefits (Glover-Graf et al., 2010), thus attending many years after they have graduated from high school. Many student veterans enter higher education via the pathway of the community college system before entering a larger institution for their baccalaureate degree (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013). Due to these differences, student veterans tend to have a difficult time fitting in to the campus community (Norman et al., 2015).

Student-veterans are not always aware of support services on campus such as child-care, campus employment, and the assistance to become involved with the campus community. When investigating support services for student-veterans on campus, peer supports can be useful.
DiRamio et al. (2015) suggests, in addition to these supports, campus administration should also specifically consider the needs of female student veterans as they transition from a male-dominated culture. There are also support systems and organizations outside of the institution, such as the one from the American Council on Education (ACE). The ACE program serves to mentor and place student veterans at colleges and universities in which they are interested. Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) works with ACE to provide the veteran with a point of contact at that university (DiRamio & Spires, 2009).

To ensure student veteran needs are met, authors suggest a team approach should be taken (DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Sporner, 2012). This includes incorporating faculty, staff, administrators, and military and non-military peers. Over the past five years, colleges and universities have been devoting more resources to the needs of student veterans to assist in successful transitions (DiRamio et al., 2015). Establishing a student veterans’ center on campus is a new idea to most universities; those institutions that do have the centers on campus are new and must still take the time to establish their identity (Kirchner, 2015). The American Council on Education conducted a study in 2012 in which 40 percent of institutions surveyed planned on opening a student veterans’ center on campus over the next five years.

**Disabilities in Higher Education**

To best understand the population of student veterans with disabilities in higher education, it is important to know why individuals with disabilities are on campus and the civil rights that allow equal access to their education. This section will explore a brief history of students with disabilities and their right to access education and the process of seeking accommodations at a university. Next, this section will discuss how a student’s self-
determination impacts their likelihood of using those accommodations as well as the importance of that student being able to advocate for themselves.

The disability population has dramatically changed on college campuses over the past 50 years. Until 1973, government agencies did not count how many students had disabilities (Rothstein, 2010). Since 1973 the number of students with disabilities on college campuses continues to increase. This is due to the amendments of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which were passed by Congress, and included a policy regarding discrimination of those with disabilities. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 stated recipients of federal financial assistance were prohibited from discriminating against otherwise qualified individuals with disabilities (US Department of Education, 2015). Most colleges and universities receive federal funding and therefore fall under this policy.

**Common Disabilities**

Student veterans with disabilities returning to campus may have a wide range of disabilities. Due to this wide range, it is impossible to generalize all of the possible limitations of student veterans (Church, 2009). Branker (2009) argues that student veterans with disabilities parallel with other historically underserved students such as students of color, first generation students and low-income students. Student veterans with disabilities have a wide range of complex needs (Sporner, 2012). Sporner explains disabilities such as posttraumatic stress, anxiety, and depression may be tied to the veteran accepting (or not) the additional idea of having a disability. Meaning, if the student veteran is uncomfortable having the title of a person with a disability, that student veteran may have more depression, stress, or anxiety-related symptoms. Burnett and Segoria (2009) reviewed current collaborative approaches between student veterans and disability services offices and emphasize that veterans with physical and/or
psychological disabilities do not identify themselves as someone who needs support services or accommodations. Those that do identify themselves as someone with a disability may not disclose that information to the proper university office (Church, 2009).

Unfortunately, for student veterans, it can be difficult to have their mental health and other disabilities treated or assessed by a professional. Since the late 1990s the Veterans Administration has had to outsource their veterans to local civilian clinicians, thus only serving about one-third of veterans directly (Meyer, 2015). This is one of the many challenges student veterans face when transitioning back to civilian life. A veteran may have a difficult time sharing their information with a civilian practitioner, even more so if that practitioner is not a veteran themselves. Combat veterans with disabilities have a difficult time relating to those who have not served in combat situations (Madaus, Miller, & Vance, 2009).

Bryan, Bryan, Hinkson, Bichrest, and Ahern (2014) surveyed 422 student veterans throughout the United States and found student veterans who had greater emotional distress also reported worse academic performance. Students need to seek accommodations to ensure they have equal access to the educational information being provided to them. However, due to military culture, as discussed earlier, the acceptance of this identity can be trying on the individual. The student veteran previously understood their well-being to be insignificant and therefore, seeking assistance or care on campus may be seen as selfish in their opinion (Meyer, 2015). As with the general population of students with disabilities who prefer not to disclose their disability to the university and seek support services for that disability, the same is true for student veterans who have disabilities.

**Brain injuries.** The National Center for Post-traumatic Stress, through the US Department of Veterans Affairs, estimates that 60-80 percent of soldiers who experience combat
related injuries, have a traumatic brain injury (www.ptsd.va.gov). Brain injuries can have limitless symptoms on a veteran and every brain injury will be different. Student veterans who had difficulties with memory loss and confusion stated those symptoms contributed to the decision to not attend college (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Working with a rehabilitation counselor may be one way to work around this barrier. Sporner (2012) recommends student veterans with disabilities to work with rehabilitation counselors to assist in the transition from active duty to civilian life. Meeting with a counselor is something Sporner (2012) suggested for combat veterans with and without disabilities.

Barriers to education, such as physical or psychological limitations, or feelings of rejection by classmates and instructors, may deter the student’s choice to enroll in postsecondary education (DiRamio & Spires, 2009). Goldberg, Cooper, Millerville, Barry, and Schein (2015) conducted a case study to explore the barriers student veterans with disabilities face when transitioning to college. The authors found that online courses can be beneficial to student veterans with concentration, memory, and processing difficulties as the online format allows the student veteran to work at his or her own pace and re-listen to lecture information as necessary. The limitations of concentration, memory, and processing are not specific to brain injuries, but to many other disabilities as well, particularly mental health disabilities.

**Mental health.** The number of student veterans with disabilities is increasing as more veterans with psychological disorders are returning after their deployments (Parks & Walker, 2014). Up to 75 percent of student veterans have service-related disabilities; the majority of these disabilities are psychological such as anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress (Vance & Miller, 2009). Mental health disabilities are perceived by student veterans as being barriers to achieving their academic goals (Norman et al., 2015). Student veterans with mental health
disabilities report worse academic performance than those without mental health disabilities (Bryan et al., 2014).

Posttraumatic stress. What we know about posttraumatic stress today has changed vastly since the mid-1800s. The Civil War was the first time Americans were able to recognize that trauma from combat could cause diagnosable disorders (Parks & Walker, 2014). At that time, the symptoms and problems were known as battle fatigue. It then evolved into traumatic war neurosis at the end of the 19th century and after World War I, shell shock (French & Nikolic-Novakovic, 2012). Student veterans with posttraumatic stress can experience strains in intimate relationships, more problems with alcohol, and more academic difficulties (Elliot et al., 2011). Military members exposed to combat are more likely to experience posttraumatic stress than non-combat military members and other civilians (Barry, Whiteman, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2012).

Posttraumatic stress symptoms were greater for those exposed to combat related trauma (Barry et al., 2012; Elliot et al., 2011); however, the symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress, such as alcohol abuse, were the same for both combat related trauma and other military groups. The ways in which student veterans cope tends to be the same regardless of the diagnosis. Considering these symptoms, Smith-Osborne (2012) suggested when planning educational programming for student veterans, it should use resilience theory-based concepts and avoid eligibility criteria that are restrictive. Blackburn and Owens (2015) surveyed 93 veterans online and found when educators focused on strengthening student veteran’s self-efficacy, it may help to lower symptoms of posttraumatic stress and depression after veterans return from their deployments. In addition, Van Dinther, Dochy, and Segers (2011) examined and analyzed 39
empirical studies and concluded planned programming was significantly associated with self-efficacy levels.

**Anxiety and depression.** Stress is a contributing factor in understanding the success of the returning veteran. Of student veterans interviewed, two-thirds reported they were able to manage their stress levels effectively; however, one-third reported their stress levels as being high (Love et al., 2015). Student veterans who are unable to manage their stress may participate in negative coping behaviors. An example of a negative coping behavior is a high rate of drinking alcohol. Student veterans who had been deployed had higher rates of drinking alcohol with negative consequences compared to student veterans who had not been deployed (Grossbard et al., 2014). Student veterans with severe depression were also more likely to turn in assignments late, fail exams, and skip their classes (Bryan et al., 2014).

Depression is an additional type of disability a student veteran may experience after returning from combat. It is more common for women and black male veterans to experience symptoms of depression than white male veterans (Elliott, 2015). Romero, Riggs, and Ruggero (2015) interviewed 132 United States veterans and found that student veterans did not have the negative impact of avoidant coping on depressive symptoms when their family social support was high. Family support is critical as well as having peer support; however, student veterans have also reported receiving less social support from their peers, as their non-military counterparts (Whiteman et al., 2013). Whiteman et al. also explain those with higher emotional support correlated with better academic and mental health outcomes, although it was still stronger for civilian students (2013). Along with better social support (Romero et al., 2015; Whiteman et al., 2013;) Soltani, Karaminia, and Hashemian (2014) conducted a correlational
study that included 210 war veterans’ and found veterans with life satisfaction and spiritual well-being have better mental health.

**Accommodations**

Self-advocacy is an important skill for students with disabilities to have when in the postsecondary setting (Murray, Lombardi, & Kosty, 2014). While in high school, it is the responsibility of the school system to ensure the student is provided a Free and Appropriate Public Education (US Department of Education, 2015). The school system meets with teachers, parents, and administrators to discuss accommodations for the student. The student holds no responsibility. Once the student transitions to college, it is the responsibility of the student to disclose his or her disability to the appropriate office on campus and to communicate with instructors to ensure accommodations are properly implemented (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). Skinner (1998) emphasizes the condition that students must be able to communicate their strengths and weaknesses to be successful in college. In a study of 287 students with and without learning disabilities, Hen and Goroshit (2014) found students with diagnosed learning disabilities had lower academic self-efficacy levels and tend to procrastinate more. As discussed later, low self-efficacy can lead to negative academic consequences and institutional barriers.

Conyers, Mary, and Strauser (1998) used Bandura’s 1977 theory of self-efficacy to explain how a student with a disability may not have the confidence, or ability, to request an accommodation for an upcoming exam even though the student is qualified to use the accommodation. After reviewing and synthesizing the literature, Conyers et al. (1998) recommended using the four sources of efficacy information as a base to help strengthen individual’s self-efficacy. The four sources include performance accomplishments, verbal persuasion, vicarious learning, and physiological states (Bandura, 1977). In an eight-hour
training program implemented by Palmer and Roessler (2000), the four information sources were used as the intervention technique to address low self-efficacy beliefs. Palmer and Roessler had 50 students with and without disabilities, enrolled in two and four-year institutions, complete the program (2000). By using these four domains, the students with disabilities in their study were able to properly request their accommodations and were able to communicate their needs; this reduced disability staff from advocating on behalf of the student (Palmer & Roessler, 2000).

Understanding a student’s self-efficacy is important as it may deter them from requesting accommodations. This dilemma is more imperative when the student with a disability is also identified as a student veteran.

Many students with disabilities view asking an instructor for an accommodation as a negative event and also lack the self-efficacy to successfully request it (Conyers et al., 1998; Lock & Layton, 2001; Skinner, 1998). Students’ decisions to register with the university’s disability services office and/or request accommodation letters may be inhibited if students with disabilities think they will not succeed in an academic environment. Therefore, not using this extra support can jeopardize their academic performance (Conyers et al., 1998).

**Self-determination**

Saracoglu, Minden, and Wilchesky (1989) used a self-report survey to compare the self-esteem, academic adjustment, and personal emotional adjustment of 34 students with learning disabilities and 31 students without learning disabilities. Saracoglu et al. (1989) shared that although students with disabilities are motivated in striving for their goals, they did not display positive attitudes in their competence to do so. One reason for this may be due to the negative stigma that surrounds the term disability. The term disability has the inference of being not fit, weak, or unable to participate (Burnett & Segoria, 2009).
Field, Sarver, and Shaw (2003) recommend in postsecondary education, students with disabilities should have the opportunity to receive support to help build self-determination skills such as self-awareness and goal setting. Students with disabilities who encounter attitudinal barriers may be able to overcome those social interactions if they have strong self-efficacy beliefs (Conyers et al., 1998; Saracoglu et al., 1989). Milsom and Dietz (2019) explain that a student, who is able to self-advocate but refuses to do so, will not receive the support he or she needs. Conversely, a student who is willing to ask for help but does not know where to seek help will also not receive the support he or she needs (Milsom & Dietz, 2009). Help-seeking behavior for student veterans with disabilities will be discussed later in this chapter.

Chiba and Low (2007) evaluated responses from 222 students who were enrolled in a course that promoted successful transition to college for students with learning disabilities. After the evaluation, the authors found more students were able to understand their disability, benefited from having the support of peers with similar disabilities around them, and were able to effectively communicate with professors about their needed accommodations. Janiga and Costenbader (2002) surveyed disability services staff at 74 institutions in the state of New York. Their results revealed it was more difficult for students with hidden disabilities, such as learning disabilities, mental health, or attention deficit disorder, to disclose their disability because their peer or faculty member was unable to physically see the disability. Thus, it harder for faculty and peers to understand the limitations of that form of disability. In addition, Elliott (2015) provided a questionnaire to 626 student veterans. The student veterans with hidden disabilities, such as posttraumatic stress and depression, were most likely to feel like they were not judged fairly, did not fit in, or felt uncomfortable on campus.
A panel of 29 experts in special education, transition, higher education, and counseling discussed the factors that were important for students with learning disabilities to be successful in college. Concepts derived from this panel included confidence, persistence/perseverance, resilience, self-determination skills, and self-discipline/self-regulation reflect positive characteristics that could benefit students with disabilities (Milsom & Dietz, 2009). The panel shared that with potential barriers like a disability, by encompassing these five characteristics, students with learning disabilities can believe in their ability to achieve and thus can stay focused on their goals (Mislom & Dietz, 2009). Consistent with these findings, Murray et al. (2014) surveyed 200 students with disabilities to better understand adjustment profiles. Students who were lower adjusted on the survey they provided had poorer scores on self-advocacy, course self-efficacy, family support, and campus climate than both average and high adjusted students. Students with disabilities were twice as likely to be low adjusted than high adjusted (Murray et al., 2014). Therefore, of the students surveyed, those with disabilities are twice as likely to score lower in the areas of self-advocacy and course self-efficacy than their peers without disabilities.

In a recommendation to better transition to the university environment, Morningstar et al. (2010) suggested moderate to high levels of psychological empowerment, or believing you can do something, can help students with disabilities become better advocates.

Self-determination, or self-motivation, is still emerging as an area of study in postsecondary education for those with disabilities (Field et al., 2003). Morningstar et al. (2010) asked 76 participants from four-year institutions to complete a two-part online survey. They reported the students in their study who stated they had higher levels of self-determination were those who had the opportunity to build their skills related to the postsecondary environment. Self-determination skill building is necessary prior to post-secondary enrollment; however, it is
also an essential skill that should be focused on while in postsecondary education. It is suggested that focusing on self-determination could increase achievement and effectiveness across campus from both students and faculty (Field et al., 2003; Morningstar et al., 2010).

Morningstar et al. (2010) are one of the first authors to suggest self-determination skill building should begin prior to the student coming to college. Once in college, Field et al. (2003) suggested self-determination skill building to be a primary goal for postsecondary faculty and staff, especially when working with students who have learning disabilities. Palmer and Roessler (2000) had 50 students with disabilities participate in their Self-Advocacy and Conflict Resolution intervention. After completion of the program those students were able to improve their knowledge of their rights and responsibilities. The self-advocacy aspect of their intervention focused on communication skills, while the conflict resolution aspect focused on negotiation skills (Palmer & Roessler 2000). The study also found students increased their self-advocacy and conflict resolution skills and were able to better speak to their instructors and staff regarding their accommodation needs (Palmer & Roessler, 2000).

Seeking Assistance

Student veterans with disabilities may partake in avoidant coping, or not addressing the issue at hand. Galor and Hentschel (2012) explain veterans with posttraumatic stress showed significantly more avoidant coping symptoms than those who were diagnosed with depression and did not have posttraumatic stress. Once the veteran makes the decision to return to college, Whitley and Tschudi (2014) recommend having a separate student veteran orientation session so students have the opportunity to meet one another and build social groups. One task at this orientation could include introducing the student veterans to the staff in the disability services
office, thus building more relationships for the student. Most student veterans do not know about the services available to them through the disability office (Gwin et al., 2012).

Some student veterans with disabilities, such as posttraumatic stress or brain injuries, may need accommodations in the classroom, such as a separate room for testing or priority seating, so they are able to perform at the same level as their peers (Whitley & Tschudi, 2014). Whitley and Tschudi (2014) also added many student veterans have varying disabilities, and many campuses are not equipped to accommodate them. Even when campuses are able to accommodate student veterans, most student veterans found the services were difficult to access or did not meet all of their needs (Norman et al., 2015). Most veterans requesting accommodations from their professors could be students with hidden disabilities such as posttraumatic stress disorder. As Janiga and Costenbader (2002) explained, this can be difficult for the student because their disability is not physically seen by the person they are discussing it with. In a study conducted by Norman et al. (2015), the authors used self-report measures, interviews, and focus groups to gather information from 31 student veterans. The authors found that of the participating student veterans, none of them sought services for mental health counseling or accommodations through the disability services office even though just under half were screened clinically significant for posttraumatic stress disorder or depression.

Self-efficacy beliefs are consistently found to be associated with college performance for those with disabilities (Murray et al., 2014). Self-efficacy pertaining to courses and social situations are associated with adjustment profiles (Murray et al., 2014). Parks and Walker (2014) suggest that student veterans are less likely to seek help compared to other student populations groups. One reason for this is many student veterans do not see themselves as being disabled. To
some student veterans, identifying as having a disability shows a sign of weakness (Parks & Walker, 2014).

The Acceptance of Disability Scale was developed in 1969 to describe loss, coping, and personal experiences of individuals when they acquire a disability. It was later revised by Groomes and Linkowski in 2007 to incorporate more current experiences (Frain, Torres, Bishop, Sakala, Khan-Jordan, & Schoen, 2016). The Acceptance of Disability Scale – Revised (AODS-R) is a survey containing 32 four-point Likert scale responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The AODS-R was completed by 117 veterans who had been deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq. The overall disability rating for the 117 veterans was 41.2 with a standard deviation of 30.2. Through this survey, Frain et al. (2016) found veterans who used a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor were among those that needed more services when transitioning to civilian life.

Like Parks and Walker (2014) and Frain et al. (2016) also believe some veterans have a more difficult time accepting their disability due to the military placing an emphasis of being able to independently accomplish goals. After the study by Frain et al. (2016) was complete, the authors compared their findings to other types of disability acceptance studies. When comparing veterans with disabilities to individuals in a vocational rehabilitation program and those with progressive disabilities, military veterans had a much lower, or about half of a standard deviation, acceptance of their disability (Frain et al., 2016).

**Transition Theory**

Adapting to the civilian world from combat can be difficult. When transitioning to a higher education institution, student veterans need to have the ability to self-regulate (Jones, 2013). This includes understanding all of their own, diverse needs and also understanding how to
seek out support at their new institution. Studies have been conducted using Schlossberg’s transition framework to better understand transitions of veterans (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). These qualitative studies sought to understand transition experiences of student veterans from combat to higher education. Schlossberg, Waters, and Anderson (1995) state there are three phases to the transition process: moving in, moving through, and moving out. During this process, there are four different aspects that make the transition successful: situation, self, support, and strategies. Schlossberg’s transition theory refers to these four aspects as the Four S model.

Anderson and Goodman (2014) and Rodriguez-Kiino (2013) both used Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to guide their work. However, neither of these authors used the theory to explore transitions of student veterans to a college or university. Anderson and Goodman (2014) applied the transition theory to assess veterans transitioning from military to civilian life. Case study examples were then provided to show how the transition model could be applied and the unique aspects veterans bring. Rodriguez-Kiino (2013) did not use veterans as their population; however, she used Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to guide her research in understanding the experiences of students who transferred from a community college to a four-year institution. She wanted to examine non-traditional pathways to four-year degrees. Using Schlossberg as a guide, she used semi-structured interviews for eight undergraduate participants. Her findings regarding transition fit within the Four S model. Recommendations for better transitions from community college to four-year institutions included having multiple options for degree attainment, including pre-professional fieldwork, emphasizing academic counseling, and strengthening the partnership for a better pipeline between two and four-year colleges (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013).
Rumann and Hamrick (2010), Wheeler (2012), Shiavone and Gentry (2014), and Griffin and Gilbert (2015), have all used Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to frame their studies when exploring student veterans transitioning into a postsecondary setting. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) and Schiavone and Gentry (2014) both used semi-structured interviews to interview six undergraduate student veterans at large public universities. Wheeler (2012) conducted semi-structured interviews with nine student veterans who were entering the community college system for the first time. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) held 72 interviews with university administrators, faculty, and student affairs staff and 28 interviews with student veterans within three research universities, three doctoral/research universities, and two associate granting institutions. This study was part of a larger study conducted at Pennsylvania State University Center for the Study of Higher Education. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) explored the institutional aspect of the veterans’ transition and the resources that would help make that transition successful in terms of situation, self, support, and strategies. The results of these four studies are discussed according the appropriate S factor below.

Of the studies that have used the transition theory when analyzing veterans’ transition to postsecondary education, all have fit the transition experiences into the four factors provided by Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. One difference, Wheeler (2012) believes, is that there are two different phases to the transition; one phase of moving to a civilian and one phase of moving to a student. Once the student moves from civilian to student, and the student veteran can recognize that, it may make for a more successful transition (Wheeler, 2012). In addition to the four S model, Rumann and Hamrick (2010) interviewed six student veterans transitioning to college and found four themes: 1) role incongruities between military and academic life; 2) maturity, as student veterans had more motivation to complete the degree and had a clearer perspective on
what really mattered; 3) relationships, it was hard to make civilian friends; and 4) identity
renegotiation, which speaks to how veterans felt they were treated when in uniform. The
remaining chapter summarizes the transition experiences of student veterans to postsecondary
education according to the four S factors.

**Situation**

Schlossberg et al. (1995) define situation as factors such as trigger, timing, control, role
change, or having a similar previous experience. Situational factors relating to student veterans
transitioning to postsecondary education include why the veteran was returning to postsecondary
education, starting school as a non-traditional student, role changes, or concurrent stress
(Schiavone & Gentry, 2015). Finances, benefits, and allocation of transfer credits are also
considered under the situational category (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Griffin
& Gilbert 2015). Experiencing positive situations, such as interacting with positive college staff,
are also considered situational (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Lastly, an additional factor
impacting a student veteran’s situation is the way in which they were debriefed when leaving the
military, as these vary in quality and effectiveness (Ackerman et al., 2009). Ackerman et al.
(2009) interviewed 25 student veterans who transitioned from combat to a postsecondary
institution. They learned each student veteran had a different type or form of debriefing at the
end of their deployment, thus providing inconsistent experiences regarding factors such as
timing, control, and role change.

**Self**

Schlossberg et al. (1995) consider self to be factors related to personal demographic
characteristics and psychological features. The ability to understand one's’ identity as a student
veteran is critical in the transition process for student veterans transitioning after a deployment
(Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Student veterans who were able to understand who they were as a student veteran and seek any needed psychological services were more likely to have a successful transition (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). In the study by Ackerman et al. (2009), one veteran disclosed he did not seek any psychological help as it would delay him in getting home. In addition to psychological awareness, Rumann and Hamrick (2010) also add that student veterans had a heightened sense of maturity and goal commitment, which are additional psychological factors.

Self-determination and self-advocacy fall under the factor of self. As discussed earlier in this chapter, student veterans with disabilities may not want to disclose their disability status to the university and, therefore, do not advocate for themselves when in need of accommodations. Similarly, students with disabilities, including student veterans with disabilities, may be highly motivated in reaching their goals; however, some may not have the confidence to do so (Saracoglu et al., 1989).

**Support**

College can be a difficult time; having a support system available helps to make the transition for any student a little easier. During this transition, student veterans suffer dual burdens of high expectations and view there is a lack of support from the campus community (Wurster et al., 2012). Wurster et al. (2012) explains it is difficult for student veterans to navigate the campus culture as it has very few rules and does not offer awareness of the needs of student veterans. Contrarily, in a study by Gwin et al. (2012), 78.5 percent of student veterans visited a veteran’s affairs office. However, they did not seek out any additional services due to a lack of time. Student veterans returning to campus not only have to learn to become a civilian again, but
also a student, requiring them to relearn study skills and other strategies to be academically successful (Ackerman et al., 2009).

In some instances, student veterans may make the transition to postsecondary education multiple times. This could include attending a community college and then enrolling into a four-year program or having deployments while enrolled at an institution. Once the veteran returned to the institution, they shared it was more difficult to make friends with their civilian counterparts (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). These student veterans, however, did make friends with other student veterans and used the university as a support system (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Receiving support from other student veterans as well as family and non-veteran peers was a key aspect in showing less signs of posttraumatic stress and having other negative consequences on campus (Elliott, 2015). In addition, Love et al. (2015) adds that student veterans with a strong social support network also experience less stress and have fewer conflicts with others.

**Strategies**

Common strategies have been used when transitioning to postsecondary education. Schiavone and Gentry (2014) interviewed six student veterans at a large public institution. One finding from this study was that the veterans who participated shared they used sarcasm as a way to modify their status as a non-traditional student. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) add that the veterans simply wanted to seek other veterans and form a support group. While this may fall under support as well, the strategy of seeking support is why it is listed here. Student veterans who cope well with their transition are students who are able to manage their stress; the students in the study by Love et al. (2015) did this by watching television, seeking out friends, exercising, reading, or having sex.
It is important for the university to be proactive in the support strategies they have for the student veterans returning to their campus. Parks, Walker, and Smith (2015) suggest university administration should train their faculty and staff about the military experience and integrating student veterans into the campus community. Branker (2009) suggested using universal design in the classroom to eliminate barriers student veterans may experience during their transition. Having the student veteran enroll in online classes is one strategy to ease the transition (Goldberg et al., 2015). If online courses are not available, an additional support strategy used to transition successfully to a four-year institution is doing so through the pathway of the community college system (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013).

Lastly, Griffin and Gilbert (2015) suggest that institutions should have veteran resource centers available for veterans to use as they make the transition. This is a strategy provided by the institution to offer additional support to the student veteran. This idea is relatively new and institutions with centers catered to veterans are still making themselves known on the campus (Kirchner, 2015). McGovern explains appealing to the military demographic is important for higher education institutions and creating specialized programs for the veterans’ transition from the time they begin at the institution through graduation is critical (2012). Even if there is not a veteran’s center on campus, Summerlot et al. (2009) suggest using veteran student organizations to support the transition into the campus community.

**Summary of the Literature**

Student veterans with disabilities may have a more difficult time transitioning to a higher education institution than those without disabilities (Branker, 2009). Students who were able to balance the four transition factors of their transition were able to progress through the final stage of moving in as a student veteran (Wheeler, 2012). The four S factors along with the additional
four thematic findings by Rumann and Hamrick (2010) are critical when assessing the transition experiences of student veterans. Each of the studies reviewed here addressed student veterans transitioning to postsecondary education; however, none address the needs or experiences of student veterans with disabilities transitioning to a research extensive university.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the process and design of this narrative inquiry. The chapter will provide details of how I designed the study, my sample selection and how I collected my data. I will then explain how I analyzed my data and provide a statement on researcher subjectivity. I conclude the chapter with discussion on validity and reliability. The aim of this study was to answer the following research question: How do the factors of situation, self, support, and strategies shape the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transition to a research extensive university?

Study Design and Research Paradigm

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transitioned into a research extensive institution. To best understand student experiences, I chose a qualitative, narrative approach. Qualitative research seeks to understand the why and how of a problem or phenomenon. Narrative research focuses on the stories of the participants who are answering the how and why.

Rumann and Hamrick (2010), Wheeler (2012), Shiavone and Gentry (2014), and Griffin and Gilbert (2015), have all used Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1995) to frame their studies when exploring student veterans transitioning into a postsecondary setting. Similarly, I used the theory to frame my research and use semi-structured interviews to collect my data. This study is different because it specifically focused on the transition experiences of student veterans with disabilities at a large, research extensive institution.

Qualitative Research

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain qualitative researchers seek to understand how people interpret their experiences. Because the purpose of this study was to explore the
experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transition, a qualitative study was the most appropriate choice. Creswell (2007) provides key characteristics of qualitative research. First, qualitative research has multiple sources of data and themes are generated by the researcher that include all data sources (Creswell, 2007). This study gathered multiple forms of data from each participant so that I would be able to understand their transition story in multiple formats. These formats included two different semi-structured interviews and an analysis using photovoice.

Qualitative research also follows an emergent design (Creswell, 2007). This allows the researcher to be flexible within their process and not limit the study or participants due to preset constraints. Although this study falls within a theoretical framework, it is simply just that, a framework. As new data was collected, and as new themes emerged, those new data points and themes did not fit into any pre-determined themes. The experiences of student veterans with disabilities at a large research extensive institution have yet to be examined in the context of transition theory. Therefore, themes emerged as the study progressed.

When conducting qualitative research, the researcher is the primary research instrument (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research is focused on understanding phenomena and therefore, by using the human as the primary instrument, they are able to be responsive and adaptive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As participants shared stories of their transition, I was able to notice and note non-verbal communication methods and generate further analysis.

**Narrative Inquiry**

This research focuses on the stories of transition from student veterans with disabilities. Kim (2016) defines narrative as the form of knowledge that involves both telling as well as knowing. One person tells their story while another, or others, listen to it. Merriam and Tisdell
(2016) explain that stories have been at the center of humans understanding the meaning of experience. Narrative allows one person to share their experience and the others to interpret it as they will. For this study, each participant shared their story while I listened.

This study provided the opportunity for student veterans with disabilities to share their lived experiences as they transitioned to a research extensive institution. The stories told were taken at face value and were not be approached with the interpretation of suspicion (Kim, 2016); meaning, I accepted and honored what the participant shared with me. Kim explains that by using narrative analysis, my interpretation of the participants’ stories provides an understanding of the transition experiences for the reader.

Sample Selection

Qualitative research is completed to understand the how and why of a problem or phenomenon. To understand this how and why, random participants cannot be used. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select “a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). More specifically, the purposive method I chose was a criterion-based selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Specific criteria (disability, veteran), were already in mind prior to beginning sample selection. In addition, I also used snowball sampling. Using this method allowed me to find a few key participants and ask them for referrals to additional students who met the criteria of the study.

Sample Criteria

The sample criteria included student veterans with at least one disability that was acquired during their time in the military. I chose the most inclusive version of disability as I did not want to limit any potential participants due to disability type; for example, participants were not limited to students with only traumatic brain injuries or posttraumatic stress disorder. All
disabilities impact individuals differently and therefore, different individuals with the same diagnosis were all included. Fourteen total participants completed the study. I stopped seeking participants once the themes became recurrent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Maximum variation sampling or including a sample of participants who have a wide variety of demographic and social differences, was reached. This was determined after the interviews took place as the focus of the interview was on student veterans with disabilities and their transition. Through recruitment at a large, research extensive institution, it was possible to have a diverse participant pool. Participants were both male and female, ages ranged from 27-49, four of the five military branches were represented, years of service ranged from 3 to 20, and although not shared on the demographic questionnaire, at least three different ethnicities were represented.

The acquisition of the disability during time of active duty was selected because the student veteran would not have had the previous experience of knowing how the disability impacted him or her prior to their enrollment in the military. If the student veteran had a disability prior to enrolling in the military, there was a chance they may have already known about the resources available to them, such as accommodations, and may have been able to more easily identify themselves as someone with a disability. Understanding this identity, and having previous experience self-advocating, may have altered the results for this study if those experiences were shared.

The sample population came from student veterans enrolled at a research extensive institution in the Southeastern United States. The institution type is limited as I wanted to focus on institutions that have not yet been investigated. When the study was originally approved, it was to investigate only the experiences of undergraduate students as graduate students may have had previous experience transitioning to college. Eight participants reached out to me and
because I wanted a larger data set, I resubmitted to have the study include graduate participants. Overall, ten undergraduate and four graduate students participated.

Participants were limited to no more than five years separated from the military. Five years was chosen as it allowed the student veteran time to transfer to community college and then to the research extensive institution and still be included in the study. Going beyond five years from military service would have made it likely the potential participant has had other transition experiences, such as entering a career field prior to enrolling in school, which would have been outside the scope of this study. While participants’ class standing ranged from freshman to graduate student, I asked participants to base their responses on the experiences they had during their first semester at the research extensive institution.

I used recruitment emails and snowball sampling to find the greatest number of students available within the institution. The institution was chosen by convenience and is also defined as a research extensive institution by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The institution has a Student Veterans Center and a Disability Services Office, which provided an opportunity for recruitment from both offices.

**Recruitment of Participants**

To find the student sample, I used emails and a snowball sampling method. First, I emailed the Student Veteran Center (see appendix A) and the Disability Services Office (see appendix B) with a recruitment email to send to their list-serve of students. Although there is an overlap of students within these two offices, this method provided the opportunity to reach student veterans with disabilities who may not have registered with the disability services office. To maximize participation, I also engaged in snowball sampling. I asked each of my participants to refer me to another student veteran whom they believed would qualify for the study. If they
did not feel comfortable providing a name, I provided my contact information to that student to pass along. To encourage participation, participants who completed the interviews were given a $25 Amazon gift card.

**Data Collection**

When conducting qualitative research, the researcher is the primary tool for data collection (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Common data collection strategies in qualitative research include observations, interviews, and document analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I collected data from participants in two separate formats: two semi-structured interviews and an analysis through photovoice. To collect demographic data, I provided the participant with a questionnaire (see Appendix C) at the beginning of the first interview.

**Interviews**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that interviewing is a form of data collection used when we cannot observe the behavior of an individual or how an individual may interpret a phenomenon. In this study, I was seeking to understand experiences of a transition process. Transition is a process of moving in, moving through, and moving out (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Due to time constraints, and my non-military-affiliated career, I was not able to follow the student veteran from the time they acquired their disability through the time they transition into the university. To best understand this time and process, I used two interviews per participant as my primary data source.

The first interview (see Appendix D), allowed me to build a relationship with the participant. Kim (2016) explains building a relationship is important; participants are more likely to share their stories if they know why they are sharing it. I shared the background of this
research study with each participant and my affiliation, and lack thereof, with disabilities and the military. I explained that I wanted to know who they were and how they got to their current position as a student. Once the participant had this information, they signed a consent form (see Appendix E) and then completed the short questionnaire collecting demographic data. The interview was semi-structured (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were selected as I wanted to have a guide for the interview; however, I did not want to limit any additional data that could have been shared. Semi-structured interviews also allowed me to ask the participant to describe in more detail experiences that may have been too vague.

The questions were chosen for two reasons. The first was to understand who the participant was and how they got from the military to the research extensive institution. I had backup questions to ensure the participant was thinking about their transition more deeply, specifically focusing on the factors of situation, self, support, and strategies. The semi-structured interview also inquired about a typical day for that participant and what it would entail. The second reason the questions were chosen was to focus and gain an understanding of how, if at all, their disability impacted their transition to the university as a student veteran. At the end of the interview I provided each participant with a prompt. The participant had the option to not complete the prompt. The prompt requested the participant to bring in a photo, or photos, to the second interview that they felt represented their transition.

The second interview (see appendix F) asked why the participant chose the photo or photos. Analysis of photovoice is discussed later in this chapter. In addition to discussing the photo and the participants’ transition, I also asked the student what advice they had for future students in their position. Lastly, the second interview ended with a question to capture any information I may have not asked as a researcher.
Interviews were recorded and stored on two digital audio recorders with an external hard drive. The audio recordings including the participant’s stating their pseudonym to maintain anonymity. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim, as this is the best practice for analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The transcriptions were completed by an outside company and were reviewed in their entirety once complete to ensure accuracy. Once the interviews were transcribed, the audio recordings were deleted. The transcribed interviews were stored on a password protected computer. Interview transcriptions and photos were also stored on a secure, password protected online server.

**Photovoice**

Photography in research dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Photovoice is one method where the participants are asked to take photographs and then interpret and explain their photograph to the researcher (Kim, 2016). Each participant received the prompt during the first interview requesting a photo or photos to be taken that represented their transition to the university. Between the first and second interviews, the participant used their personal phone or camera to capture the image. The image was then emailed to the researcher at a secure address. All participants had access to a phone or camera to take the picture.

During the second interview, the participant described the photo they chose, explained why the photo was chosen, and provided a caption for the photo. This method allowed for the participant to voice their transition in a visual manner. Active verbs, such as transition, are hard to explain. Analysis of the photovoice allowed the student to use a visual source rather than relying solely on their own words.
Data Analysis

Data analysis is making sense out of the data. Data collection and analysis is an iterative process. Although this process is recursive and dynamic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), analysis of data is never really complete. The following paragraphs explain how I analyzed the data once it was collected.

After interviews were transcribed, they were formatted into .rtf documents and uploaded into atlas.ti. Atlas.ti is a software-based computer data analyzing system. The data was analyzed through Polkinghorne’s paradigmatic mode of analysis (Kim, 2016). Polkinghorne (as cited in Kim, 2016) suggests this analysis is possible by deriving the concepts from previous theory. The analysis will follow the Four S concept as presented by Schlossberg et al. (1995) transition theory.

During the first round of coding (Appendix G), I used a priori coding that followed the Four S framework. Previous studies had not used student veterans with disabilities as a population therefore, I did not expect all data to fit within the four categories. The second time I went through the transcripts, I used emergent coding and looked for themes within. Analyzing qualitative data is both inductive and comparative (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through constant comparison of the data, I was able to discover themes within all three points of the data sources. After the first round of a priori and emergent coding I sent initial themes, with their quotes, to the participants from their respective interview as a form of member checking to ensure I understood their story. An example of this can be seen in Appendix H. Of the fourteen participants, seven responded back stating they agreed with the themes presented.
Researcher Role and Assumptions

My role as a researcher is to best understand a problem or phenomenon and share it with my prospective audiences. As those audiences will differ, it is critical each reader in that audience understands who I am and how that may lead to biases and differing interpretation within my study. This section explains my role as a researcher and is then followed by additional reliability and validity measures that were taken to ensure the study can be generalized in the qualitative sense.

I am a white, middle-class, first-generation college educated student. I have never served in the military and, to my knowledge, I do not currently have a disability. I interact with student veterans with disabilities each semester. As a practitioner, I determined appropriate accommodations for students with documented disabilities. I also provided additional campus resources to these students to ensure they are aware of services such as the tutorial center and counseling center. Throughout the past ten years in the field, I have been able to work with students and provide them with the necessary resources available to them. It is through these experiences that I am able to pass on better, more accurate information to the new students I meet with, including student veterans.

My research interests fall in transitions from high school to college for students with learning disabilities. A key part of being successful in college is knowing the resources that are available to you when you begin to struggle. The historical landscape of the population of students I interviewed was very different than the population I would have worked with if I completed this study 15 years ago. The Americans with Disabilities Act was not enforced as strong as it is now; technology is evolving, allowing more students to participate in the
classroom alongside their peers. Although my research participants varied in terms of class and gender, they were all student veterans and they all had disabilities.

As a person without a known disability, I felt the more information a participant could share with me, the more I had a chance of understanding the experiences of future participants in the study I had yet to interview. I also tried to portray student experiences without my own personal biases.

Credibility and Dependability

Validity and reliability are terms often used in quantitative research to ensure the findings capture what is in our reality and to then ensure that those findings are trustworthy. Qualitative data cannot be generalized in a statistical sense (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). What makes the study trustworthy is the design the researcher uses. Rather than validity and reliability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) use the terms credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as a way to discuss validity and reliability.

For this study, triangulation was used as a form of credibility, which is having three or more forms of data available (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data from my participants came from a first-round interview, a second-round interview, and concluded with the photovoice option. Having these three forms of data from the participant added credibility to my findings.

Another form of credibility incorporated into this study was member-checking. After I had preliminary themes, I sent them to each of my participants to ensure I interpreted what they said correctly. If they agreed with my preliminary themes, I took no further action. None of the participants responded stating they did not agree with the preliminary findings or themes.

In addition to triangulation and member checks, I also included a researcher subjectivity statement. It is important that the reader understand my own personal assumptions and biases to
better understand how I arrived at my conclusions. Lastly, for additional purposes of credibility, findings were reviewed by a professional staff member at a research extensive university. This person is a veteran and has completed research on student veterans and transitioning to the university. This concept, known as peer review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), provides an outside viewpoint on whether the findings are probable.

For purposes of dependability, or the assurance the findings from the study can be replicated, Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain this process can be extremely difficult in the social sciences as no two human experiences may be alike. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that if the “findings are consistent with the data presented, the study can be considered dependable” (p. 252). I also kept a log of the steps I took during the data collection and data analysis process so that others may see how I reached my findings.

**Ethical Considerations**

Throughout each step of this study I took measures to ensure the study was conducted ethically. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) provide guidelines of measures that can be taken, and this section follows those guidelines. Discussing a disability can be intimidating, and therefore I told each of the participants why I wanted to hear their story and how I would collect the data. I explained to each of the participants that there was no immediate reward for sharing their story, but that I did hope to publish the data to assist incoming student veterans with disabilities. Due to the sensitive nature of the data, all participants remained anonymous and each participant was made aware of this.

The study did not begin until approved by the institutional review board at North Carolina State University. This process examined all possible risks including if a participant having a panic attack due to a mentioned trigger word. I have worked with students with
disabilities for ten years and have been professionally trained to talk to and work with students with disabilities. I know how to assess a situation if a student appears in crisis and do know the appropriate steps to take to ensure the participant gets the assistance he or she needs. For these safety and support concerns, all interviews were conducted on campus when the counseling center was open. One participant was not aware that registering with the university’s disability services office was confidential and I explained to that participant how the process worked. Another potential participant, who did not participate in the study, apologized for not being available, but did ask about the services the disability services office could provide and I provided that information. Ethical situations for consideration did not rise during the study.

**Limitations**

As with any study, there are limitations present within this study. The first is that I am not a veteran, nor am I currently disabled. Due to my status, or non-status, this may have influenced what each participant shared with me. When I first met with each participant, I shared with them my connection to the military and my connection to students with disabilities. However, because I do not share one of these two identities with the participants, they may not have been as open or as candid with me when telling their stories.

The second limitation revolves around data collection. As participants began to tell their stories of transitioning to SU, their answers were short in length and follow-up questions were asked. As the interview continued, answers tended to become more descriptive and tell a more detailed story. The second interview with the participant was to discuss the photo they chose to represent their transition; however, this interview, although descriptive, was short and to the point. When asked if there was any additional information the participant wanted to share about their transition, most participants stated, “no.” If I were to do this study again, I would re-ask
some of the same questions from the first interview to build more of a rapport before asking about the picture or asking if there was anything the participant wanted to include.

It is also important to remember that although the research is valid and reliable (as detailed in chapter three), it should not be assumed these findings are representative of all student veterans with disabilities, or all those student veterans with disabilities at large, public, research extensive institutions. Research was conducted at a large, public, research extensive institution that is considered military-friendly. A small, or small-private research extensive institution would most likely present different results as some of the campus barriers or concurrent stress factors would not be applicable. With additional time, I would like to replicate this study and interview more student veterans with disabilities at other large, public, research extensive institutions and compare their transition experiences.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This narrative study explored the experiences of 14 student veterans who acquired a disability while serving in the military and their transition to a research extensive institution. The following research question guided this study: How do the factors of situation, self, support, and strategies shape the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transition to a research extensive institution?

Schlossberg et al. (1995) transition theory was used as the framework for this study. Transition theory considers four key factors to analyze when looking at one’s transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. These four factors guided the data analysis. The data was collected through a demographic questionnaire, two semi-structured interviews, and photo voice. Through the analysis process, common themes emerged across the participants’ stories. An a priori coding process began following the Four S factors and was followed with an open coding process as described in detail in chapter three.

This chapter will first provide a brief introduction of the participants and follow with the Four S factor themes (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) provided by Schlossberg et al. (1995). The four factors fit into Polkinghorne’s paradigmatic mode of analysis (as cited in Kim, 2016), which suggests the researcher can develop concepts from a previous theory; in this study that theory is transition theory.

Participant Introductions

To best understand how the factors of situation, self, support, and strategy shaped the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transitioned to a research extensive institution, a qualitative, narrative approach was taken. Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants. Fourteen participants completed the questionnaire, two semi-
structured interviews, and the photo voice prompt. Each of the participants’ responses to the photo voice prompt is included within this chapter. Participants ranged in age, class standing, military affiliation, years of service, educational background, and disability type. This data is presented in tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3. Brief descriptions of the participants follow.

**Participant Vignettes**

**Beau:** Beau is a 41-year-old, male, college freshman. He served for 21 years with the United States Army. While serving, Beau acquired a brain injury, anxiety, and PTSD. He is currently registered with his university’s disability services office. After Beau retired from the military he moved to Maryland to work for the Environmental Protection Agency. Prior to attending SU, but after his separation from the military, Beau completed roughly 100 credit hours at a state university in Maryland. Beau was working on a farm while living in Maryland and realized how much he enjoyed the experience. He found SU’s agriculture program and decided it was the best career move for him. He moved to the area with his children.

**J. Luc:** J. Luc is a 27-year-old, male, college senior. In high school J. Luc decided he wanted to attend SU but did not know if his grades were good enough to get accepted. Then he planned on taking advanced placement courses and if they were accepted by SU, he would attend. If they were not accepted by SU, he would plan on joining the military and enroll at SU afterward. The latter happened. He served for 6 years with the United States Air Force. While serving, J. Luc acquired hearing loss and anxiety. He has found ways to compensate and is not registered with the SU’s disability services office. Prior to attending SU, and after separating from the Air Force, J. Luc completed 80 hours of coursework at a local community college.

**Jack:** Jack is a 49-year-old, male, first-generation college senior. He served for 20 years with the United States Army. While serving, Jack acquired hearing loss, orthopedic issues with
his back and knees, and a sleeping disorder. He is not registered with the university’s disability services office. Prior to enrolling at SU, but after separating from the Army, Jack completed 62 credits at a local community college. When Jack began his college journey, his son had two years of high school left and he wanted to set a good example of earning a degree. Jack spends about two hours each day traveling to and from campus. Once he is home, he prepares dinner (his wife does not like to cook), and then spends his evening studying and completing homework.

Jennifer: Jennifer is a 31-year-old, female, college senior. She served for three years with the United States Navy. While serving, Jennifer acquired depression, anxiety, orthopedic issues with her legs, and was diagnosed with a chronic illness. Jennifer is not currently registered with the university disability services office because she believes she will be treated differently if she does. Prior to joining the Navy, Jennifer completed ten credit hours at a local community college. After separating from the Navy, she completed 65 more credit hours at another local community college prior to transferring to SU.

JJ: JJ is a 36-year-old, male, first-generation, college senior. He served for 15 years with the United States Army. JJ was not sure what he wanted to do after high school. A friend of his joined the Army, and said, “you should join” And JJ shared, “So, I did. I joined in June of 2001, so just before September 11.” In the Army, JJ was part of the Army Special Forces. In that position, he spent time in little villages building schools, teaching English, teaching sewing to women, building septic systems, installing solar panels, teaching how villagers how to fend for themselves, and securing local areas. JJ explained, “you really get to see true impact, and it’s not just CNN.” While serving, JJ acquired a brain injury, hearing loss, and the loss of full use of his dominant hand. JJ is registered with SU’s disability services office. Prior to enrolling at SU, while still active with the Army, JJ completed 98 credit hours at a local community college. JJ
described his busy days as, “taking chemistry, calculus, and biology classes during lunch, and after work, like 5-10PM for about a year and a half straight while working.” He knew he wanted to go to school to become a physician assistant, so he decided on a nutrition major and accepted his offer at SU.

John: John is a 27-year-old, male, college junior. He is still active within the United States Marine Corps. John was selected as a member of the Marine Enlisted Commissioning Education Program. John described the program where, “enlisted members submit a package competitively. You get selected allowing you to go back to school to finish your degree.” Prior to beginning his coursework at SU, John completed 22 credit hours at the American Military University. John acquired anxiety, depression, and PTSD while serving and has a service animal. John lives at home with his wife and his toddler-aged son.

Marie: Marie is a 28-year-old, female, college senior. She served for nine years with the United States Army. While serving Marie acquired a depression diagnosis. She is currently not registered with the university disability services office. Once she came back from her deployment she knew she wanted to pursue her education. Prior to enrolling at SU, but after separating from the Army, Marie completed 68 hours of coursework at a local community college. Marie used to play for a rugby team, but after a concussion, she decided to leave. “A broken couple fingers, that's not a big of a deal, but a concussion is a big deal.”

Mark: Mark is a 30-year-old, male, college senior. He served for nine years with the United States Army. While serving, Mark acquired orthopedic issues with his back, knee, and shoulder. He is not registered with SU’s disability service office. Prior to enrolling at SU, but after separating from the Army, Mark completed 21 hours of coursework at a local community college. Mark shared that he grew up in a single-parent home with five other siblings. He knew
that his mom wanted to help him but could not. He joined the military to begin a career. Once he separated, he knew he wanted to pursue higher education. He applied to attend SU because he was already familiar with the area and knew the school relatively well.

Nate: Nate is a 30-year-old, male, college junior. He served for ten years with the United States Army. While serving, Nate acquired a brain injury among other issues and was medically discharged. He is currently registered with the university’s disability services office. Prior to enrolling at SU, but after separating from the Army, Nate completed 28 hours of coursework at a local community college.

Rob: Rob is a 33-year-old, male, graduate student. He served for seven years with the United States Marine Corps. While serving Rob acquired a sleep disorder and was also diagnosed with ADHD. He is registered with the SU disability services office. Prior to beginning his active duty, Rob began his undergraduate career at a state institution in Louisiana. The following year he attended boot camp and was in the student enlisted reserve. During his undergraduate career he completed one tour in Iraq. In the following four years he completed his undergraduate degree and then began active duty for the next seven years. Toward the end of his active duty time, he took two online courses. Once he was separated from the military, Rob began his master’s program at SU and is now in the first year of his doctoral program.

Scratch: Scratch is a 40-year-old, female, graduate student. Prior to her serving, she completed a bachelor’s and master’s degree at a research extensive institution in Virginia. She then served for over 18 years with the United States Navy. While serving with the Navy, she acquired a neck injury. She is not currently registered with the university’s disability service office. After separating from the Navy, she enrolled at SU to pursue a doctoral degree. Scratch wanted to go to a state school. She explained, “They had to have a good, well-known program. I
didn't just want to go to some little, tiny school. I wanted to be able to have some notoriety, I
guess, at the school, for professional and fun reasons, for school and stuff. I wanted them to have
a football team for the spirit, cause there's a lot of schools out there that don't really have a good
sports team, there's really no one to get behind for camaraderie's sake, and then affordability or
expense.”

Sheldon: Sheldon is a 43-year-old, male, college senior. He served for ten years with the
United States Army. While serving with the Army, Sheldon acquired anxiety, depression, and a
chronic illness. He is not currently registered with SU’s disability services office. Sheldon was
working through a move and other outside factors at the beginning of the semester. He stated he
plans to register with the office later in the semester. Prior to enrolling in the Army, Sheldon
completed his bachelor’s degree at SU. Once he separated, he returned to SU to complete a
second bachelor’s, one that is more in line with what he wants to pursue after graduation.
Sheldon has a wife and four young kids at home, aged 11, 9, 7, and 4.

Steve: Steve is a 34-year-old, male, graduate student. He served for eleven years with the
United States Marine Corps. Prior to his active duty commitment, Steve completed his
undergraduate degree at the United States Naval Academy. While serving, Steve acquired
orthopedic issues with his knee and back. He is not currently registered with the university’s
disability services office. He separated from the Navy less than one year ago and this is his first
semester, a summer session, at SU. He is currently enrolled in an online course to allow himself
time to get adjusted to academic work again.

Trev: Trev is a 41-year-old, male, graduate student. He served for 20 years with the
United States Army. While serving, Trev acquired hearing loss, mobility issues, vision loss,
anxiety, depression, PTSD, and a sleep disorder. Trev is not currently registered with the
disability services office. Prior to enrolling at SU, and after separating from the Army, Trev completed his associate and undergraduate degree from a local community college and a private university, respectively. Trev first started teaching at a public school and realized it was something he did not want to continue with. He then decided to pursue his master’s degree at SU so that he could teach to community college students. Trev lives at home with his wife and four dogs. He has 3 children, two of which are in college.

The demographic information discussed above is displayed in the tables below.

**Table 4.1. Demographic and Military Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Class Standing</th>
<th>Military Branch</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beau</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Luc</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JJ</td>
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<td>36</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Marine Corps</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Grad</td>
<td>Marine Corps</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scratch</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Grad</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheldon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Grad</td>
<td>Marine Corps</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trev</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Grad</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note* Participant chose pseudonym used
Table 4.2. Academic History and DSO Standing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Credits Completed</th>
<th>Prior Credits Completed At</th>
<th>Completed Credits Prior to Military</th>
<th>Registered with DSO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beau</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>Large Public</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Luc</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Local CC</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Local CC</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Local CC</td>
<td>Yes, 10</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JJ</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>Local CC</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Small Private</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Local CC</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Local CC</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Local CC</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>about 130</td>
<td>NCSU (bachelor’s)</td>
<td>About 75</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scratch</td>
<td>about 130</td>
<td>Research Extensive</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheldon</td>
<td>about 130</td>
<td>Research Extensive</td>
<td>Yes, all</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>about 130</td>
<td>Small Public</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trev</td>
<td>about 130</td>
<td>Local CC and Small Private</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note* Participant chose pseudonym used

Findings

The four themes discussed below are those that were provided by Schlossberg et al. (1995): situation, self, support, and strategies. These four themes were prominent in the stories provided by the participants. Situational themes analyze the factors that were prompted or were at the base of the transition. Situational subthemes in this study included trigger and timing of the transition, role change, previous experience, and concurrent stress factors. Themes of Self, as described by Schlossberg et al. (1995) include demographic attributes and psychological features. This factor focuses on who the individual is and what personal aspects contribute to their transition experience. Subthemes within Self included identity, sense of belonging, perception from others, age of classmates, self-efficacy, and resilience. Support themes focused
around types of support (Schlossberg et al., 1995) the participant used during their transition: institutional, close relationships, and intimate relationships. Institutional was the most common support type and subthemes that emerged were support offices on SU’s campus and governmental support though Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and the United States Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). Relationship, both close and intimate, subthemes included fellow veterans, faculty relationships, family and intimate relationships, and support from the community. The factor of Strategies was the last major theme and demonstrated actions of how the participant was moving through or has moved through their transition. Subthemes were consistent with Schlossberg et al. (1995) that included strategies that modified the situation, those that controlled the situation, and those that managed the situation. Results from each theme are presented next.

Situation

This section will provide an in-depth view of my participants’ stories. Schlossberg et al. (1995) define situation as factors such as trigger, timing, control, role change, or having a similar previous experience. Other authors (Ackerman et al., 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Schiavone & Gentry, 2015) have also included concurrent stress and how the veteran was debriefed. Because this study only asked participants to share their story from their time of enrolling at SU and forward, debriefing methods were not discussed. This section describes the situational aspects of the participants’ transition. Subthemes include trigger and timing, role change, previous experience, and concurrent stress. Trigger and timing, role change, previous experience, and concurrent stress were all themes included within the a priori coding process. Through the second round of coding, concurrent stress factors were part of the open coding process as subthemes within (such as housing and disability) emerged. Disability and previous educational
experiences are what triggered most transitions to SU. In addition, most participants transitioned to SU from a community college, limiting their role change as they went from student role to another student role; however, the change from a local community college to a research extensive institution was seen as a gain for the participants. All participants had previous educational experiences either at a local community college or at another four-year institution. Participants that attended community colleges did have more surprises, or unexpected barriers, once enrolling at SU than those who previously attended four-year colleges. Concurrent stress was the last subtheme that emerged from the data. Participants shared concerns about finances, benefits, traveling to campus, finding time to study or take care of family, and managing their disability. All of these subthemes are analyzed in detail below.

**Trigger and timing.** “It can be daunting. Kind of scary at times, too, to know that your whole life is changing. Especially if it's an involuntary separation. If you're getting out, you can prepare for that. But if you're being told you're getting out because of an injury, that's a total change in your circumstance.” This quote, as shared by JJ, highlights the significance of triggering experiences for participants. Each experience shared by participants began with the event that triggered their transition to SU. Some participants viewed the moment they were discharged by the military as their trigger point; for others, it was deciding they wanted to continue their education. Regardless of the type of trigger described, all participants shared why and when they chose to enroll at SU. For most participants this was due to disability acquisition; the participant was no longer able to perform their trained duty. The participant decided to then enroll at a community college and then transfer to SU or, for the graduate students, to come to SU directly as they had previous four-year experience.
Although Mark was discharged due to injury, he had advanced notice and was able to plan for his transition out. He explained, “I knew I was getting out because I knew I was getting medically separated from the Army. I knew that probably six months before I was getting out.” During that six-month period, Mark applied to other schools but explained the process was rushed. He shared,

Initially, I applied to the school and hadn’t heard anything back. So, I applied to [University Name] and I was actually living in [University town] at the time when I got the late acceptance letter. That was a rush, because school was starting in January and I got the letter on December 5. So, I had a few weeks to move and then complete the enrollment process.

Scratch also had an injury that triggered her transition back to education:

When I had my neck injury, it was never properly taken care of, and just slowly continued to exacerbate the situation at my work. Then I broke my knee, right as I was supposed to leave active duty. While I was on crutches and unable to affiliate with the Reserves, I decided I needed a new career. I was going to the Reserves anyway, that was a done deal, so I thought I'd go to school. I thought, “Well, I'm really involved in my own patient care because the military medicine was not cutting it.” I found a civilian provider, and he put the MRI into the computer and said, “Oh my expletive, expletive, expletive. Your knee is broken. It's not just an ACL that's torn. You've been in aggressive physical therapy for a month, so what we're gonna do is no bending, no weight bearing for four months.” So, I had a lot of time to take classes online.

Mark and Scratch both knew they would be separating from their active duty roles, and both were able to take time to decide about what they wanted to do regarding their education. Due to
registration dates at SU, Mark had a different experience than Scratch. Scratch and other participants who had prior research extensive university experience, and graduate participants shared that timing was not an issue for them and they felt prepared for the transition. As discussed later in this section, prior experience in postsecondary education factored into each participants’ transition.

Like most of the other participants, Nate was medically discharged from the military and knew he was not ready for a four-year college. He decided to pursue coursework at a local community college first. He smirked as he shared his experience on the decision to come to SU and his experience transitioning into a four-year institution:

After I separated, I came back here with my now ex-wife so she could be closer to her family. Was looking at working, looking at college trying to figure out what I wanted to do. Started at [Local Community College] cause I didn’t think I was ready for a four-year institution right out the gate. Did a year there, got some of my general ed classes knocked out, some of the stuff they told me would be needed coming up here, wasn’t exactly true, but dealt with it. Then the reason for choosing SU was the [major] program. I talked to several different people including my Voc Rehab [Vocational Rehabilitation] counselor and she highly recommended SU along with other folks I spoke with. So, I applied. I honestly didn’t think I’d get in, but I did, thank goodness, and, I mean I love it here.

Sheldon was also medically separated from the Army. He explained, “Because of my, well (points to self), I was medically retired from the Army. There were questions as to whether I could continue my MOS (military occupational specialty).” Although he did not attend a community college, he did attend SU prior to his time in the military and decided he wanted to
come back for a second bachelor’s degree. The familiarity of the institution assisted him in that decision.

Lastly, Trev was also separating from the military due to disability and had time to consider his future. He shared,

At 18 years in the service, they med boarded me for all the stuff that I had wrong with me. I was able to stay in til 20 years. In that two-year gap right before I retired, I really aggressively pursued my academic career.

He then explained how he made the decision to attend SU:

I already had earned my associate's while on active duty. I enrolled at a small private university and I made the decision that the best time I ever had in the military was when I was an instructor, platoon sergeant, teaching soldiers. I said you know what, I'll become a teacher. I think I made a decision to come to state based off of location, I would not have to move or do anything. Feel like they really nudged that the only thing they would pay for was the state school. Online programs at other state-run schools and a master’s level were typically hybrids, so you could do some online, but you would end up having to go through the school. So almost out of necessity I chose this school, and maybe in hindsight I tried to find a step to make sure that I was ... This program was right for me instead of just ... Alright, so I can go to SU, it's kind of what I wanted to do. Didn't come to the campus. Didn't really talk to anyone other than [professor name] on a few emails and was like, "I'm going to SU." And was not necessarily ready for the difference.”
Figure 4.1. Trev’s Response to the Photo Prompt

Trev captioned his photo as “Choose Wisely.” He described this photo and explains why he chose it:

It's kind of like three balls in reverse order of evolution. So, I felt like I knew something, and I didn't necessarily know stuff, or maybe the system was different, so I had to completely change what I thought felt [Small Private University name] undergraduate, and now it's not so much that it's in graduate school or that work is so much different. But it's supposed to be the same, right? So that ball is the same thing, it's just one is completely different.

Unlike the previous participants, JJ did not account his transition to SU due to his disability. He talked about the politics and bureaucracy of the war winding down and trying to figure out what he wanted to do with his future. He explained his decision,

I knew I wanted to do something that I could help still. But I wanted family, and that I could have time. So, I got an EMT and I volunteered at the local fire department and kind of fell in love with medicine.

Like Mark, his transition from to SU was very quick. JJ separated on July 14 and started courses the following August. However, unlike Mark, JJ knew of his start dates and had more time to prepare for his transition.
Timing of the trigger also played an important role in each participants transition. The following participants share how their experiences at previous institutions triggered their decisions to apply and attend SU. For instance, Beau was struggling at his previous institution and then learned about the services he could receive through the Disability Services Office (DSO). However, he disclosed, “but I was so far gone in this with my learning disability I just couldn't take anymore, so I was like, it's time for me to start my freshman year and go back home.” Beau then returned to [city name] and began classes at SU.

Other participants were at community colleges prior to enrolling at SU. Experiences from these participants demonstrate why they chose community college as an entry point and then decided to enroll at SU. For some participants, like J. Luc, it was because he had a family, a home, and he could not move right away. He decided he would complete his associate degree and then transfer to SU. J. Luc explained, “It was much easier for me to just to go community college.” Similarly, other participants chose to go to their local community college first before transferring to SU as it was a way to transition into the institution. Jennifer shared:

> When I moved back, I waited a little while and then went to community college and used my Voc Rehab to go there instead of my GI Bill where I finished my associate’s. And then, what I decided to major in, SU to me, seemed like the best school.

Jack, too, went to community college prior to SU and decided to enroll at SU due to having benefits available and wanting more from life after the military. He explained:

> I’m too young not to be doing something so, you know? I worked a year at the post office and realized that was not going to be my next career. I said, well, you know I got the GI Bill still available and some other educational benefits. I might as well take advantage of those.
Marie also transferred into SU from her local community college. Timing for her experience was related to the time when she separated from the military:

I was still in the military when I got back from deployment, that’s when I realized I really wanted to get out, so I started going back to school. I still had several years left from my contract, so I went to [local community college] and got my associate’s while I was in. And my first semester here was mostly night and online because I was still in. So, I separated right before my second term here.

One participant, Rob, did not attribute his transition to SU due to disability, nor did he talk about previous education he pursued. Rob’s experience was vastly different from the others as he separated from the military and decided to pursue education on his own, without much time to transition between experiences. He recalled:

It all happened over a very short period of time. First day in classes was probably like a couple weeks before I ended back in duty, so I was still on terminal leave, bringing a paycheck my first day of classes. So, rewind back, that was August, so rewind back to like February, January, and I started working on getting a letter for recommendation and researching schools and started applying to programs back at that point in time and ended up making my decision at about an April-May timeframe. It essentially fell to where I wasn’t gonna have much time off before starting school. I wanted to start still that first semester, not waste any time. So, a little bit less decompression time was it. Close family, girlfriend, kinda said that they were shocked I didn’t take much time for myself. Other friends, other people I knew went and hiked the Appalachian trail for like six months. One guy like went and traveled around South America backpacking, six months or a year or something.
Timing of the trigger to enroll at SU varied by participant. It was either shortly after the triggering transition event (acquisition of disability, military separation) or after the participant enrolled in community college, thus allowing more time to transition. Acquiring a disability factored more into the decisions of those participants who had prior four-year education experience and thus decided to go directly to SU. For those participants who did not have prior four-year education experience, they decided to enroll at their local community college prior to transferring to SU.

**Role change.** Role change is another aspect of the factor of situation. When examining role change in the context of this study, participants view their change in role from soldier to student. One of the biggest differences the experienced was the change in social structure. J. Luc recalled one of his first civilian events:

> And it was just a very different environment. Honestly, like being around civilians, seeing people being so different all the time was always weird. I remember when I got out of tech school or it was at the end of tech school technically, we went to Walmart and we were like, oh yeah, this is society. This is so weird. Like, look at these people. This is what normal people are like. I forgot. I thought we were normal because we were so separated for like nine, 10 months.

Mark also mentioned the social differences; however, Mark talked about the transition from soldier to civilian to student, two transitions:

> To transition completely out of this social structure of the military into being a civilian. And a student at that. So, that's a big change in a very short amount of time. It was definitely difficult. Far from impossible, but it was definitely an adjustment, I guess is the best way to put it.”
Mark was the only participant to mention the transition from soldier to civilian to student.

Other participants reflected on their transition into a student role, while talking about roles they had with the military. Scratch disclosed, “My neck injury is why I'm working on getting a degree. It's because I can't do what I'm trained to do now, this land role.” Here, disability factored into the trigger of Scratch’s interest in continuing her education; it is also the reason for her role change. Although she had time to prepare for her role change, it was still difficult for her to accept as she moved forward. Sheldon’s disability also prompted his role change. Although he was no longer in the Army, he found added benefit with the new role. He acknowledged the benefit, “I went from, ‘Okay, I no longer have an Army job,’ to now, I'm getting lifetime health benefits for myself and my family, and then also a monthly stipend. So, it's really worked out well.”

As discussed later in ‘Self’, participants had accepted the role change to student and continued to move forward. They viewed this role change as a positive event with much to gain. However, with the opportunity to gain additional experiences, participants also shared their thoughts and feelings on the change. These thoughts and feelings came from losing, essentially, a part of who they were and what they knew. Mark justified this change:

I understand what veterans go through whenever you're coming to a new place; especially if you were involuntarily separated. You're using your education benefits, but you're totally removed from what you've known for the last X amount of years. You have to just accept that you're not in the military anymore. That part of your life's gone. It's cool; that's an experience you've had, and those are great experiences, but you still have all this life in front of you and these experiences to gain.
With the change in role from soldier to student, participants reflected and shared how these changes were difficult, too. The overall role change was still talked about as a gain; however, changes in purpose, friendships, and structure were all mentioned as a loss for the participants. The transition to a student role requires changes and adjustments to the way in which one thinks and may feel in their new environment. Jack explained this reasoning, “It’s just that when you're in the military you've got a purpose. When you wake up every day you're surrounded by other folks that have a purpose, and it's the same purpose.” How participant’s felt with and moved through this loss of sense of purpose is discussed in future sections. It is again important to note that Jack is viewing his transition from soldier to student, not considering the time from soldier to civilian or civilian to student. Sense of purpose and belonging were major themes within the participants stories and are shared under the theme ‘Self’.

**Previous experience.** Previous experience in a similar transition is another aspect Schlossberg et al. (1995) factors into Situation. Each participant had some type of postsecondary education prior to attending SU. This ranged from community college to graduate degrees. Each of the participants’ experience in postsecondary education is summarized in Table 4.2 on page 59. Participants who previously attended a four-year college were not surprised by their transition to SU; essentially, their transition was what they were expecting it to be. Those participants who attended their local community college prior to attending SU found their transition to be surprising, stressful, and an additional event they need to push through. As Jennifer emphasized, “Changing from a community college to a university is a big difference.” However, through each of the stressors mentioned, like size of the institution, the participants also had positive feedback for that stressor.
One factor that was not experienced at the community college was the size of the SU campus. There is more ground to walk on and more people within the campus community. Jennifer shared her thoughts on the size of campus, “It’s bigger. Like, [local community college] is just four buildings in a row and you go to class and that’s it. Everyone said that the class sizes are gonna be so dramatic, and you're gonna freak out, and to me that wasn't a big deal.” J. Luc, however, felt the number of people on campus was a big change from his community college experience:

When I was at [local community college], like the class environment and stuff was like really easy for me. I learned a lot from the lectures and discussions with the instructors and I would hang out at their offices and discuss things with them to figure it out; and that’s more how I learn. But here, there’s so many people and it’s so noisy. I couldn’t find anywhere quiet. I don’t like a lot of noise, and the libraries like here were crowded. Even the quiet areas, it was just so many people. You’re lucky if you could find a spot. Took me forever to figure out any kind of routine here.

J. Luc reemphasized the issue with the campus population, “It’s just the number of people; nothing about the caliber of it. It’s just like the number of people and their different behaviors.”

Previous experience at the community college provided a learning environment for participants that was reflective of their local town, on a smaller scale. While most participants were less than pleased with their peers on campus, Jack found the change from small community college to large research institution reviving:

When you transfer from a community college up here… it had good parts to it. It had some parts that… I guess it just kind of awakened me to… There’s a lot of diversity when you come to a large, four-year institution. When you come to a four-year
institution, especially of this size, there’s a huge difference in personality types that you get to experience. That was kinda neat, I guess, but it was… I wasn’t expecting it. I don’t know why I wasn’t, but I wasn’t. That was just kind of a neat thing.

In addition to the population of SU, the workload was also much different than that of the participants’ local community colleges. The workload at SU was heavier than that at the local community college. Mark shared his experience:

I got my two-year degree before I got here, but it took me a while to do it just cause I was in the army, so I hadn’t actually been in a classroom with such a heavy course load. I was taking one or two classes here and there. On campus, I took 18 credit hours and then write papers and do all this stuff. That was a big difference that I had to figure out how to manage my time better. But there was definitely a difference.

Campus and class size were two aspects that came as a surprise to students who transferred from a community college, or those with community college experience. Trev did not transfer from a community college. However, the previous school he attended was very small. He illustrated a previous scene from his time at a small private university:

The private school, there were classes where there were four of us. I think I was actually in a class where I gave my senior seminar and there was only two of us left in that class, so the amount of dilution of the exchange between doctor level professors and undergrad students was really intense. So, I kind of had that as my experience for the example, what I would experience here and so I guess I judge these 20 people in one classroom group discussions based off, well at undergrad I was able to sit down in a classroom of four or five and really have good exchanges, and now those exchanges are hampered extremely. So, I don't know that it hurt or helped, but it set a high bar that really hasn't been met.
Classroom intimacy is not something that neither Trev nor any of the other participants have experienced at SU. Relationships with peers and faculty members are discussed later in ‘support’.

Sheldon was the only participant to discuss his transition that went from soldier to SU student rather than soldier to civilian to student or soldier to community college student to SU student. He was enrolling in programs prior to his separation from the military. He chose SU because he was familiar with the institution; he had completed his bachelor’s degree at SU about 20 years prior. Sheldon was returning to complete a second bachelor’s degree that had more focus in his area of interest. However, once he returned to the campus, he realized a lot had changed in the 20 years since he had been there:

Doing a lot of online forums and online registration. So that was a little bit of a challenge because of the internet aspect. I think now that I’m a veteran, I’m not as patient as I used to be, and I do prefer to have face-to-face interaction, because that helps. I think it has been good to go straight from the military back to school.

Although the campus had changed, Sheldon still saw the transition as a positive experience where opportunities could be gained. Rob was in a similar situation to Sheldon. He transitioned directly from soldier to student at SU. Although Rob had earned his bachelor’s degree prior to coming to SU, Rob was still unsure how his transition to SU would go. He met with another veteran who made almost the exact transition Rob did, into the same program at SU, and provided him with advice. Rob recalled that advice:

The first six weeks, i.e. all the way into and through your first round of tests - if you count a first midterm, second midterm, and a final, the classes follow that format, which they did that first semester - all the way through your first round of tests, about a month,
month and a half, six weeks, then it's gonna be miserable. You're gonna learn to use parts of your brain that your brain shut down a long time ago, that your brain had forgotten about. There are a few military guys in that program, and everyone goes through the same things, cause they've all been away for a while, but coming to school here is like a secondary duty after you've done your initial course.

And Rob confirmed, “That was accurate, and it was rough, going through it.”

The participants who talked about previous experiences were those who noticed the changes in community colleges to a four-year institution. Graduate students did not share any comparisons in previous education experience. It is important to remember that the participants, when discussing their previous experiences as noted, were talking about their transition to SU from community college because they had similar transition experiences as they went from soldier (to civilian) to student in the community college. While graduate students still have the experience of education, their experiences of soldier to student came with the background of what a four-year institution was like.

**Concurrent stress.** During the transition period, Schlossberg et al. (1995) also consider the additional stress factors individuals may experience during their transition. Depending on the stress factor, the transition experience can be altered or viewed differently by the participant.

If you're going to school full-time, it's really hard financially to figure out where I'm gonna live, how I'm gonna eat, pay bills, do all this stuff. And then you have grown-up bills now. Not like, I just got out of high school. Now I'm going to college. It's more like, I had 10 years of living, and now I don't have a career anymore. That was a big stressor as far as what I was gonna do, but timing worked out for me cause I was able to get a severance, which softened the blow. Then also, soon as I started school, my VA benefits
kicked in. So, I got pretty lucky with that. Even then, there were sometimes it was still pretty stressful. Money was definitely a big issue. (Mark, Interview)

Participants within this study described their stress factors that were financial in nature including acquisition of benefits. In addition, three other factors were found during the open coding process: location of housing, finding time to study or take care of family, and disability. Concurrent stress factors played a role in each of the participants’ transitions to SU. This subtheme is broken down into four smaller subthemes to better understand the types of stress participants faced: financial aid and benefits, location of housing, finding time to study or take care of family, and disability.

**Financial and benefits.** Finances were brought up in all 14 participants’ stories. Whether the participant knew where their funding was coming from, or they did not know where to start, finances were on the minds of participants as they made their transition to SU. Most of the financial concern came from not knowing how military education benefits worked, such as the Post 9/11 GI Bill and Vocational Rehabilitation. At times when participants did know what benefit they were needing to use, it took additional time to understand the process. JJ explained,

> Trying to figure out how the whole VA Chapter thing worked and trying to get my benefits set up; I’ve been working on that since November, and it’s been approved, but I’m still under GI Bill instead of Voc Rehab. That’s still been quite the obstacle.

Sheldon shared a similar experience:

> I didn't get my first pay information until last week. I went from December 20th, my last day in the Army, medically retired December 20th, and it was February 20th when I found out my pay information. I think that was kind of the biggest challenge, especially
with kids and a family. So, your pay, and housing, transitions, and estimated income, but no proof of income, so to speak.

To assist with this, Sheldon was able to reach out to the Veteran’s office on campus to help with a portion of the paperwork. He acknowledged their assistance, “I was in Georgia and would have to pay out-of-state. The student veterans’ office was extremely helpful, and they gave me some forms to complete so I would have in-state tuition status.”

John is still active duty and was not expecting to have to pay any educational expenses up front. He explained what his stressful financial situation at that time was:

Chapter 30 I think I'm taking right now. So that is a little different. No one was really explaining it to me, in a way that really made sense. So, I kind of had to figure it out on the fly. Then on the fly you are figuring out how to submit a VA claim, the form or certification form so that that gets approved. No one told me until middle of the semester almost. After the first go through about calling in wave and getting approved every month. I thought the benefit was going to come in and I was like, "Where's my money at?" I had to pay out of pocket for the first semester. So, no one explained to me that I had to pay for some expenses out of pocket up front. And then when I received the VA, would be towards the end ... two semesters. Which for me wasn't a big deal because I am really good at finances, so I was able to cover that cost but the following spring, I get the money, I pay the school and now it just flows whatever happens. But they didn't give me money upfront, I had to pay the school.

Financial stressors were a factor for all participants. While the stories here offer insight on the benefits the participants were using, other financial impacts came regarding enrollment at the university, and as discussed earlier, the timing in which the veteran transitioned to SU.
**Location of housing.** Housing and location of residence was the second most common theme participants discussed when talking about other stressors during their transition. Over half of the participants shared factors around housing: housing was not available, they did not have time to find housing, or their benefits had not come in yet, so they could not afford housing. JJ moved from a large home to a much smaller apartment. He explained, “The biggest obstacle is downsizing, selling two houses over the summer before I moved.” John summarized the stress factors of moving during the transition:

For a military guy, especially active duty, you have to figure out where you are going to live, but say you are going to a school that you really want to go to and you've been there. And know you have to house hunt and you have to figure out where to live, where not to live on top of transitioning.

For those participants who spoke on housing, they shared that finding housing was stressful, especially for those participants who had a family to look after as well. Due to situations like this, some participants decided to stay close to their hometown and commute instead, which created an additional burden.

Participants shared stories of early wake up calls to be on the road before the sun rose to make it to class, followed by classes all day, and then returning home after the sun set. Nate shared, “I spent a lot of time on the road that first semester.” Fortunately for Nate, he was able to move closer to campus his second semester. After a rough first semester, J. Luc also made the move closer to campus for his second semester and forward. He recalled the stressful, first semester commute:

I still lived in [small local town] for the first month, so that was difficult. I got off to a bad start that semester, because I was an hour one way and then luck if it was an hour one
way and then at least an hour and a half the other way with traffic and stuff. I had no time for studying and being exhausted from driving three hours a day and spending like eight hours on campus running around because I had to go back and forth between sides, between every class and I had four classes. So, it would take about an hour and a half just to drop my wife off, and then I had to come back over here. That’d be another 15 minutes, 20 minutes. Then I had to park on [secondary campus], take the bus over here, do my calculus class and then after that I have to take the bus back over to [secondary campus], do my circuits class, then come back over and like, whatever it was. I don’t even remember. It was like my intro to engineering or something class over here and then go back over there for my programming class. So, it was back and forth all day. In the evening, I needed to study but I couldn't really study but I would try and be up for a while and I needed to make dinner, or my wife would have to make dinner.

After the first semester, J. Luc sold his home and he and his wife moved closer to SU.

Unfortunately, for some participants like Jack, moving was not an option. He and his family settled in their hometown, and he had children in school. So, he made a 40-mile commute each way every day of the week. Jack described his morning routine:

I would get up ... and I rode the bus here. I would get up in the morning. I'd leave my house at about six o'clock, because you never knew how traffic was gonna be. I'd get over at [large parking lot] and whatever time I got there, I'd get over there, and I'd wait for the bus. I would usually get on the bus, if traffic was fine, I'd get on the bus around I think it was 7:15, 7:30, or so, something like that, and ride to campus. Usually, I'd be on campus, and ready to be in a classroom at around eight o'clock.
Some participants did not have a lot of time between when they were separated from the military and when they were starting their coursework. Sheldon was one of those participants. Even though he was familiar with the area and had family close by, finding a home was stressful because he also had a family to be mindful of. He shared,

> I think the housing aspect is always difficult, but it played a major role. You know, where would we live? And because SU has no ... How to say that? They don't have a very good family housing for students. That was a challenge.

Sheldon then offered a recommendation for SU:

> And [housing is] not really something that SU provides. I mean, they provide the student health services, they provide counseling, but as far as money, and I think it would be cool to have some type of transition housing or some type of grant to help students. I mean, because if someone were to get out of the military in the middle of March, they have to either wait until summer or until fall to take classes again, so what do they do between now and then?

**Finding time to study or take care of family.** As just mentioned, the time it took to travel to campus and back home cut in on time at home with family or significant others. Finding time was the third subtheme within concurrent stress. Half of the participants shared experiences of feeling as though they needed more time; it was hard to manage coursework along with other competing priorities. For those participants making the long commute, it was difficult finding time to study, even more so for those with a partner or family at home. For participants who lived closer to campus, and had a family, finding the time to take care of family was a concurrent stress factor.
Beau shared that his typical day revolves around getting his daughter ready in the morning and on the bus, before he makes the drive into school. Once he is home in the evening, his focus is back on his kids; he uses his time between classes to study and complete school work. Beau shared, “I have breaks between my classes to go to the library and study and go to my next class. Then wrap up, go home, study before the kids get home and work on their homework.” John did not have kids at home but had a partner and was expecting a baby in the coming months. Like John, participants with partners and families placed those members as a higher priority than their coursework. Therefore, finding time to study was an additional stress factor. John explained:

I would go home and attempt to study as much as I can, but obviously taking care of adult things, or just life. Studying and doing all that and getting ready to have a baby at the time. And trying to make sure the little things that my wife wanted to do were taken care of. Because you know, happy wife, happy life kinda deal. So, baby showers and those kind of things. I would probably go to bed around 10:00 to 11:00 and then do it again.

If the participant was single, finding time to study was also stressful as other priorities, such as working, filled their schedules. Here, JJ explains the stress of finding time to study, in addition to work, and making the transition to a four-year institution:

The first semester I worked also, not that I needed to, I've just been working since I was seventeen, sixteen? So, I just felt like it was part of it. Definitely the load I was taking, and then working so much, and changing from a community college to a university is a big difference. And that first semester I would go to work before or go to work after class and try to squeeze in study time.
Those participants with families and significant others found it more difficult to find time to study. Additional participants who were living closer to campus, without supporting a family at home, did not mention study time as a stress factor in their transition.

**Disability.** The last subtheme that emerged from the theme concurrent stress was disability. Although the participants’ disability factored into all S factors, and into the subthemes, this section shows how the disability specifically added stress to the participants’ transitions. With the exception of one participant, Steve, all participants shared experiences that illustrated how their disability caused additional stress when transitioning to SU. Additional stress was caused by loss of concentration or the inability to focus, coping with pain, and adjusting to academic life with a disability.

J. Luc recalled his first semester and the additional stress of the anxiety and pain he experienced and how that impacted his transition:

That first semester I had a lot of anxiety, I guess. It's just so stressful that it made it harder to cope. And then pain. I was walking a lot. I had to start wearing tennis shoes. I used to never wear tennis shoes. With my back, I was in a lot of pain from that all the time, which made the anxiety worse and all that stuff with all the back pain and leg pain. So, I guess a little bit with that, yeah. It just made it more difficult to focus and get by on it because I already didn't have much time, like nowhere near what I needed to, and then when I did have time I'd be stressed out and not able to focus and in a lot of pain, which makes it harder to focus. So, it's just really hard to like focus on the work kind of thing.

The inability to focus and concentrate in different situations was discussed by all participants. Mental health related disabilities made it difficult to concentrate when studying. Disabilities
associated with pain and mobility impairments made it difficult to concentrate when the participant had a flare-up or overused the impaired body part.

JJ talked about the additional stress due to his acquired physical disabilities. “I have a four out of ten headache I’ve had for six years, from the thirteen concussions, three TBI’s [traumatic brain injuries], so… three plates, sixteen screws in my head, just, I don’t know… it wears you down.” Rob also shared about stress and the wear it can impose on veterans transitioning to school:

And I wanted to not have idle hands, to be productive right away but it was still tough. Because residual stress kind of builds up over the long-term period of time. There's a good book called On Killing where they kinda talk about this kind of thing where - and I personally think it didn't always necessarily have to do with combat - I think any time you're in a stressful environment here, at school, that you and me both know about. It starts to - stress kinda like compiles over time, and then you don't have like a break from it. It's not like the kind of thing where for like a long day of exercising or maybe do other short term combat related things, like something that goes on for a couple days cause you're busy doing something. But it's like a longer-term thing than that where you kinda have to take a lot of time to yourself. So, you start that process whenever you get back from duty, especially if you're very busy. Then it's just like this long, slow-going process and it's ... It just started to occur when school is quickly ramping up at the same time, especially with a math intensive major, when I haven't sat in a classroom for seven years. I knew that I read slowly and took a little longer to do things, but I had all the relearning math stuff to deal with on top of the usual hiccup with getting things done and that kind of thing.
Regardless if the disability is physical, mental, or learning related, disabilities can add an additional stress to the transition.

**Summary of concurrent stress.** This section explained the thematic concurrent stressors participants discussed as they made their transition to SU. Additional stress for participants came from finances and benefits, time to travel to SU and housing, finding time to study due to family or other priorities, and disability.

**Situation Summary.** The situation factor of Schlossberg et al. (1995) transition theory focuses on factors that impact one’s transition. These are factors that may vary from participant to participant yet begin to shape the transition experience. Four main themes emerged from participants: trigger and timing of the transition, role change, previous experience, and concurrent stress, with four subthemes emerging via open coding when analyzing concurrent stress factors. Each of these factors were previously recognized by Schlossberg et al. (1995); however, in the participants stories, disability had impacted the four themes. The next section illustrates how the demographic and psychological health shapes the transition to a research extensive institution as a student veteran with a disability.

**Self**

Nothing I experienced over there made it worth having half my tuition paid for. I would rather be thousands and thousands of dollars into debt than have to experience that.

(Marie, Interview)

Marie describes the impact of her experience in the military. Schlossberg et al. (1995) describes self as demographic characteristics and psychological features of the individual. Subthemes emerged from a priori and open coding processes. A priori codes revealed one subtheme regarding demographic characteristics (age) and a variety of subthemes regarding
psychological features. Due to the variety of the psychological feature subtheme, the open coding process was employed and revealed five subthemes: identity, sense of belonging, perception from others, self-efficacy, and resilience. Participants discussed their disability and how they identify, or do not identify, as a veteran with a disability, their sense of belonging on campus, how they think others perceive them, age and maturity of their classmates, and how one’s resiliency and self-efficacy shaped their transition to SU. Participants military affiliation was displayed in Table 4.1; participant’s diagnosed disabilities are displayed below in Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3. Participant Disclosed Disability Diagnoses**

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*Note* Participant chose pseudonym used
Anx (Anxiety); TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury); CI (Chronic Illness); Dep (Depression); PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder); ADHD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)

**Identity.** Identity is a broad term for a participant to describe who they are. All participants interviewed disclosed on their questionnaire their identities as students, veterans, and persons with disabilities. Varying identities involved their gender, age, marital status, student
status, disability type, race, and other factors. This section will share the personal reflections of the participants and their identity as a student veteran with a disability. The impact of disability on the student is discussed throughout this section. Participants share their experiences of pain, worry, loss of concentration, memory, and other disability-related limitations. All participants disclosed they acquired and were diagnosed with at least one disability that was military-related; however, one participant did not identify as having a disability (Sheldon) and two participants did not identify as being disabled (JJ, Steve).

Even with 100% disability status from the VA, the surgeries he shared in the last section, and knowing the barriers he faced, JJ disclosed, “I don’t identify myself as being disabled.” He explained:

Yes, I'm 100% disabled, so I get paid well, which is fortunate for me. I feel bad sometimes about it. I didn’t know my IQ before all this, but...[laughter] the amount of damage is definitely... may impact some anxiety stuff I've had to work through, I don't know, I don't think I had anxiety that much before. It's not PTSD anxiety, it's just general anxiety, so I have to kind of over plan or let go to kind of control some of that.

Similarly, a few participants had not fully accepted their identity as someone with a disability. Sheldon explains his recent acceptance as someone with a disability and reasons with himself as to why it is okay to have this label.

But there's certain badges that I wear. I have a disability badge. It'll open some doors, and of course, it'll close some. And to be honest with you, it’s not that... I disagree with the diagnosis. It’s not that I'm still wrestling with it, because I've actually just been given a label. So, my disability is invisible. It was kind of one of those things where I don't want the spotlight shown on me. And so, I'm retired. I'm medically retired, but no one knows
why I'm medically retired. So, it's not a noticeable thing. I mean, my wife knows, her parents know, a very few people know that I'm considered medically disabled.

He then further shared how his role in the military shaped his current experiences:

Because my experience with the intensive outpatient program was not a group therapy, and I didn't tell you what my MOS (military occupational specialty) was, but I served as the chaplain, so I dealt with a lot of counseling and a lot of hearing people's stories. So, I would consider that I have what's called Compassion Fatigue. I've heard so many stories and the military crushes people and crushes families. As a chaplain, I was supposed to give them different things and help put them back together, so I think working with disabled people or hearing their stories right now, I'm just too raw. I'm still too close to it.

An acquired disability shaped the new identity of all the participants. They have identified as someone with mobility impairments, brain injuries, or mental health impairments.

As a person with a disability, limitations caused by the disability shaped daily experiences for the participant. Mobility pain impacted some participants. Scratch described her experiences on campus:

I have a neck injury that rears its ugly head to the point of almost being immobile, periodically. Then I feel great, and then I probably go out and do a tiny bit too much, and it comes back. But I'm always in some state of in between. I choose certain parts of the classroom to sit in, because I know it's easier for me to look right, than it is to the left. Amphitheater, rounded classrooms, I can find a place usually that's better for me. I've been carrying my laptop in a bag about the size of a tote bag, and my body can't carry that routinely. Getting on and off the bus carrying it. It's not that the bus is the problem, it's the twisting, and the turning, and the sitting, and the standing.
Learning to adapt to the classroom to accommodate a disability limitation can be challenging. This adaptation can be more challenging when the limitation or symptom is unpredictable.

Mark describes the pain he goes through and how it impacts his classroom experience:

Some days are better than most, but there are some days where I wouldn't say I'm in this crazy amount of pain, but it's definitely pain enough to be uncomfortable. It causes me to shift around a bit and then sometimes I can't concentrate on what I'm supposed to be doing, or I get distracted because I'm trying to get comfortable enough to relieve the pain. Especially if I'm sitting in a class that's an hour and 10 minutes, and 20 minutes in, my back starts hurting. It definitely can be distracting academically at times.

Participants shared how their physical disabilities were wide ranging impacted each individual differently and at unpredictable times. Similarly, varying experiences for those with mental health disabilities where also discussed.

Loss of concentration and focus was mainly noticed in the classroom and when students were studying. Jennifer explained how her mental health has impacted her experiences:

My grades. You don't always, like a grade isn't reflective of ... I know I'm a straight A student because I know I can do it, but my test anxiety and being around all these people, and I go in and I come out with a C is not reflective of who I am. Sometimes, I mean, most people have difficulties financially, whereas financially I'm straight, but mentally and physically my door is shut. Like it's hard to progress, even though school is all I'm doing right now. It's still hard to just focus.

Participants shared the other concurrent stressors they had as they transitioned such as housing, finances, finding time to study, and taking care of their family (if they had one). Participants also included dealing with limitations of their disability as a stressor. When that
disability is mental health related, the outcome can range from a loss of concentration to suicide. John connected stress and mental health and shared, “Alongside the finances and all that, because one of the biggest reasons for suicide is finances and break-ups. You know, so if they are dealing with financial stressors on top of PTSD or depression, it's a recipe for disaster.” Marie also disclosed, “Yeah, a lot of veterans have PTSD, or they know people, I know four people off the top of my head, who've taken their own life that I was overseas with.”

Rob was lucky enough to have a friend of a friend who shared his transition experience and it prepared him for the transition to SU. Rob relayed this advice and how it shaped his experience:

Before I got out, or when I was first getting out, I remember talking to a friend of mine who was still in, and he said his buddy told him ... He said, ‘It takes a full year.’ Yeah, maybe I was out about a month or so, because he said, ‘My friend, so and so said, it takes about a full year for your brain to fully decompress, and for old stress to go away, and any kind of accumulated stress.’ Finding a new identity for yourself ... It takes a while to do all that. I definitely remember that it was kind of like, ‘Who am I now? What am I now?’

Rob quickly took on his identity as a student. This was due to a quick transition from the military back to the classroom, with preparation from a friend. When asked if he would give that same advice to another incoming student, he agreed he would; however, he did modify his position:

Don't let the disability define you. Don't let being a veteran define you. If you wanted those things to define you, then you would have no business going to school. If you're coming to school, you're obviously interested in finding another way to define you, or maybe you're hopeful that something will drop itself into your lap, while you're here.
Maybe you're struggling with those things defining you, and you're kind of grasping at straws, hoping for something. I'd say, don't let those things define you. Don't use your disability or your veteran status as a crutch.

Other participants had a slightly more difficult time transitioning to identify with their peers.

Group work was one area in particular that continued to spark feedback among participants. Participants felt as though the teamwork mentality was not the same as what they were used to in the military. “You develop this bubble, and you notice everybody doesn't have the same experience as you,” Mark shared. Marie described it as a barrier. She recalled:

I think that and the military experience really contributed to a barrier, the way of thinking, especially in group work. I don't procrastinate; I like to get things done. I have a pretty set schedule for the weekday. I don't do a lot. I wake up, go to the gym, go to class, and I try to get things done. That way I don't have that sort of looming over me and I can enjoy my weekend. And a lot of people don't do that. Past group assignment I had, there was one girl who didn't contribute at all to the group so that put up more pressure on the rest of us to do a substantial amount of work, and I think that's fairly common amongst the younger people I've worked with, like freshman and sophomore. So, that was really frustrating. And there's no enforcement. At least in the military, they're like, ‘If you don't do your job, there's consequences.’ Whereas the consequences here, somebody else has to pick up after somebody else kinda deal.

While not all participants viewed the mentality as a barrier, they did all agree that teamwork looked different in the classroom from what they were used to. Scratch confirmed this and explained:
You cannot take the initiative to take care of things because other people feel like you’re stepping on them. So, being part of a team in the civilian world, especially in school, everyone has a job and if you do anything about their job, you're taking their job from them. So, it's no longer the team environment we're used to.

Mentality differences between those with military experience and traditional college students led to different approaches in completing teamwork.

In some instances, students felt their identity as a student veteran with a disability was completely different than that of their peers and led to differences in the classroom environment, too. This led to not fully participating in classroom discussions. Trev vividly remembered an incident in one of his classes and shared:

I don't know that other people in my age group who hadn't experienced the things I've experienced would have the same feelings I do. Some of the classes where we do discuss military tactics, wars, soldiers’ lives, it does ... I have to sometimes leave the classroom because my experiences which have led to my disabilities, involved people making really big sacrifices for everyone. A lot of times when they're talking about these things, we talked about Katrina yesterday. Well, my battalion that I was in for ten years, was part of the 82nd Airborne that went down there to rescue them. Everyone's being supercritical and like oh the military was racist. Those are my buddies. They're not racist. They just don't understand. They just lost a bunch of guys in Iraq six months prior, then they got sent down to Katrina. I did all this stuff. So, when they're talking about it, I don't ever want to add my piece to the conversation. Because I don't think anyone would value it. The fact that I have a disability because of it only ... and my buddy actually died a few
times coming back from Iraq. He came back alive. I just don't think that the gravity of a lot of these things that they're talking about really sinks in.

Participants felt that identifying as a veteran or someone with a disability may make them stand out. Participants shared they did not like disclosing their veteran status in some situations because they felt like they had to talk more about it or that others would perceive them differently. Marie confessed

One of the things that I'm bothered by is when professors do ask to introduce ourselves, I think that's important. A lot of the times I mention that I was in the military, then they ask me about it. And that's frustrating, so I stopped saying that.

Other participants shared they did not want to disclose their disability status. “I understand the need for the extra help. I guess when I started here, I was a little too prideful to ask, which hurt me in the long run. I'm retaking classes that I shouldn't be,” said Nate. Participants had varying opinions on their identity as a student veteran with a disability from denial to full advocate.

When thinking about other student veterans with disabilities, Marie recommended:

Don’t be ashamed of your disability, whatever it is. Whether it be physical, mental or a combination, just realize it's not who you are, it's just a part of who you are, and take advantage of the resources available to you. And if you don't know what they are, ask.

Sharing different identity aspects was viewed differently by participants; however, overall, participants were able to see their identities in a positive way as they transitioned to SU.
Figure 4.2. Sheldon’s Response to the Photo Prompt

Sheldon illustrates his positive outlook through the photo above. He describes the photo:

That photo illustrates the transition from military life to civilian, and it shows our van with a U-Haul, with some household goods being taken in the last day in the Army. So, we drove from there ... Maybe we drove back for one day, I'll have to ask my wife. It just a part of your life, you know, being able to pack up and go.

If the picture were to be captioned, Sheldon stated he would caption it as, “Disabilities enable you to go places.”

Sheldon captures the positive outlook participants shared through their experiences. Whether it was a change in role, coming to a new town, or working through other situations, participants were able to keep focused on their end goal of degree completion. Steve was excited to transition to SU because he was looking forward to the area he would be studying:

I'm very excited to be in school working on this kind of stuff now, and so it's a good transition for me from the military, where a lot of what I was doing was dealing with knuckleheads that didn't want to do what they were told or doing stuff more in the, like, physical work, kind of doing things from here to there sort of level of thinking. So, you know, to focus on something that uses my brain sort of the way it was made, that's rewarding for me.
In summary, participants varied on how they identified themselves and had varying transition experiences related to those identities.

**Sense of belonging.** Sense of belonging is a basic psychological human need. As participants made their transition to SU, they described the thought, or emotional, process of transitioning to another group or identity as a student. As this process continued, there were feelings of self-doubt and the fear of failure ahead. Reflecting back on high school, Nate described his concerns coming to SU:

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Part of it was I was kinda just out of practice as far as studying, test taking, and all of that and I'm still out of practice. I don't think I'm nearly as good of a test taker as I was before, but I didn't necessarily have the greatest GPA in high school. I think I was 2.6, 2.7, somewhere along there and, for like coming out, college was never an option for me. So, I kinda carried that mentality through.
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In addition to thoughts of self-doubt or failure, in some instances anxiety made these feelings more prominent and put added pressure on the participant to be successful. Jennifer explained:

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It's like I was completely lost, and I felt like I didn't know anything. My anxiety did get worse coming here, not for the amount of people here, but just, I think my own fear of failure and the pressure. Like, I'm already so far behind because the first 10 years, what I should have been doing, I wasn't in school. So now, I'm like, "I have to get it done right away, right away."
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Nate described his fear of failure coming from his experience in high school and not being a top student. Jennifer added how anxiety can make feelings of failure stronger. These fears and added anxiety may come from experience in the military.
John is still active in the military and clearly illustrated where his feelings of self-doubt come from:

Being that I'm in, it's more, I feel like maybe it's just me. Maybe it's wrong, because this is when I want to break this from happening. We knew there was a level of criticism and you are always being evaluated, and it's all about who can get the job done. If there's any doubt ... I was infantry for however long in my career. I'm still infantry now but I don't do it, obviously I'm in school. But if you're not good enough or there's any doubt in that individual, well you're not the right guy for the job, right? We are going to pick the next guy. So, me dealing with personal issues and, am I even good enough? Is there a future in this? Is it going to be that way? I can see it being very easy for someone to go down a road that we try to prevent all the time in regard to their lives.

As John was the only participant still active, he was able to correlate his feelings with his current position in the military and as a student. Additional participants shared their thoughts about being in the military and having a sense of purpose. Jack shared:

One of the things that soldiers tend to miss when they get out of the service is they miss a lot of camaraderie, the feeling of belonging to something. Trying to plug yourself into something where you have a sense of purpose and have a sense of belonging to, whether it's a veteran’s group or anything else, I think that has a lot to do with how well folks survive and deal once they get out of the military.

Relating sense of purpose and the camaraderie veterans share, these feelings can quickly reside and turn into feelings of self-doubt as student veterans with disabilities make the transition to a research extensive institution.
Perception from others. Another theme that emerged from participants was how students, faculty, and staff may perceive them (either as a veteran, as someone with a disability, or both). Veteran status, as well as most of the disabilities acquired by participants, are not able to be seen and therefore, unless disclosed, other students do not know about either identity. Scratch revealed that the invisible status can be difficult, “I almost think I'm defensive about it. Like, ‘No, no, no. This is real. I'm not just lazy. I've got a real injury.’” Veteran status is also invisible unless disclosed, and some student veterans may not disclose their veteran status due to the perceived thoughts of their peers. JJ reasoned:

I think being, not like an alpha male but more like a leader, aggressive, male in the first place, and being older, those are all huge obstacles to overcome in the first year of being at SU. And just being in the military, even though SU is very military friendly, it's still a lot of young people have negative connotations toward the military, and it's very misunderstood. They think everyone is like a fighter and killer, and it's just not that way. So, it was me kind of changing that perspective and then adapting to a new environment and a new work or student status.

Trev added to that perspective and explained that his peers could not relate:

I typically don't mention that I am a soldier or post-military in any of the classrooms. It's not that I feel that the teacher or the students would have anything to say, I mean it typically does come out. But I don't wear it like a badge of honor because I don't know that anyone would even understand what it really means.

Student veterans are not sure how their peers may feel about the military and, therefore, will sometimes keep that identity or experience to themselves.
Some participants shared they are more reserved in their classes because they do not know what their peers will think of them, or their responses. Having a disability, such as anxiety, can add to the stress of how peers may perceive their classmate. Jennifer explained how her anxiety prevents her from participating in class:

I think part of my anxiety part goes where I'll start rambling on obviously, and then I think lot of the students will just think, ‘Oh, she's a know-it-all, or she... Which I don't particularly care what they think because I'm not here for them, but at the same time, it's like, I feel like I'm always the one in class that ... I always sit in the front row because that's where I learn the best, and so I never notice the people behind me and so, I feel like they're always talking about me like, ‘Why does she always answer? Why does she always speak up? Why does she always say something?’ And so, sometimes I hold back just so I don't seem so aggressive.

Along with perception from peers, John shared how one of his instructors may have perceived him being in a military course.

I think even to the fact that my first semester using DSO, I didn't register with my naval science class because the captain is teaching it. And my mind was like, I don't want him to question my abilities or write an evaluation on me and jeopardize what my position is, or whatever it is. So, I was like, I'm just going to suck it up and take the exam this time at the normal time in the classroom, and then I'll utilize it for my other classes. Is that wrong? Yes. Should it be that way? No. But that's just kind of the culture. I'm not going to change a 35-year captain's mind. You know how he feels about situations.
John is still active in the military and so the perception from faculty members was different than that of the other participants. Most participants shared with their faculty members they were former military, and this is discussed later in ‘Support’.

John continued to talk about why he does disclose his disability status and negative stigma that still surrounds the term disability:

You shouldn't label somebody one way and then to hold them to that. Obviously, there's certain things that need to be adjusted depending on the criteria met by individuals with certain disabilities. But you shouldn't say, automatically push them to the side because you have that disability and the fact that I did get accepted into this program with the disabilities, the fact that it's very hard, kind of prestigious and the fact that I have a service dog. You know what I mean? No one really knows that I even have a disability, I don't even talk about it really. I think the other day I mentioned it to one of my peers and he was like, ‘Really? For what?’ And I was like, ‘Just things that I had going on earlier.’ I don't want to really, I don't like to talk about it too much. Because there still is that stigma there a lot of times.

He further explained how he hopes to change this thought process for other student veterans with disabilities coming back to school:

At first it was hard. Obviously, there's a stigma and there's a level of pride and there's a level of, you don't talk about it. At first, it was tough, I'd have to like, Oh, so the how is it that when you go to these places to get help, how is that going to impact your marks for your jobs? We do like reporting and evaluations. How's that going to impact that? And I'd be like, hopefully it doesn't at all, because me going for help for what I'm dealing with, doesn't impact my proficiency and conduct and the work I'm providing. If the good work
is good work, let me keep doing what I need to do on the side. That's not your business.
It's definitely hard but that's part of the reason why I decided to get into psychology, and
why I want to get into clinical psychology and work with military and veterans, because
it shouldn't be that way.

Perceived perception from peers and sometimes faculty members may stop a student
from sharing their veteran or disability status, or both. This can be attributed to not knowing how
peers or faculty may feel about the military or how disabilities impact those around them.

**Age of classmates.** Age of the participant was one demographic component that was
found to be a factor in the transition to a research extensive institution. Thirteen of fourteen
participants discussed an aspect of the age gap and how they could feel the generational
differences themselves and traditional-aged students, how life experiences separated them from
classmates, yet helped relate to instructors, and described the differences in maturity. Marie
described it as entering a different culture, “How difficult it was especially being older. How
difficult it was sort of assimilating into a culture that is a lot different and a lot younger. I think
the age difference also exacerbated the difference.”

Participants that enrolled in SU without attending community college between their
transition from the military discussed the day-to-day scenes of a college campus and the surprise
it was to some of them. Rob described his view coming back to campus:

I guess while I was on active duty in a very military town, I guess you hear things on the
Internet about the younger generation. And then you get to come and see them first hand,
but there was nothing ... I kind of saw what I expected, but I got to see, so this is what it's
like being around these folks instead of just hearing about it online. People walking
around with headphones crossing the street, walking across the street without looking
cause they're on their headphones or looking down at their phone and it doesn't look very safe. So, I got to witness that first hand.

Differences in age also made it difficult for participants to make friends in their classes. Some participants had difficulty finding study partners. JJ explained he assumed his age was making it difficult to find a study partner, “And I'm a science major, so it's like 98% females, so young females studying with a weird old man just seemed odd.” With the difference in age, participants also shared there was a difference in life experiences. Mark stated,

It was a mix of feeling like I had more experience. As far as the life experience, I definitely felt like my peers ... Because some of them were 10 years younger than me, they would be stressed about things that I wouldn't really be stressed about.”

Factors that were perceived to be stressful by non-veteran, traditional-aged peers, were making friends, building intimate relationships, and going to social events.

Class contributions were discussed differently among participants. Some participants thought the age difference made it easier to follow along in class, as they were able to follow the instructor and understand their viewpoint more clearly. Jennifer explained:

I think just having life experience, period, and being older, made it may be easier to be a student because when the instructors that are actual professors, they're a little older, so I can relate to what they're saying more, or I can input more into the class. Or, I can contribute examples for people that don't get it. Like, I wanna help people understand the material. Like, if I understand the material and they don't get it, I can think of different ways to help them.

Other participants felt the age difference in the class impacted the course discussion of the material being discussed. Traditional-aged peers did not have the life experiences of the
participants and therefore, participants believed peers could not fully understand the material being discussed. Trev reasoned:

I typically don't talk to any of the kids in my history classes or anyone that's in my other major classes. I just find that there's a gap between what they're experiencing, what their motivations are for being here, and what I've experienced and what my motivations are for being here. Let's say in the history class, a lot of it's like marginalized groups, groups that have been oppressed, and I say a lot, I mean like 95% of the studies. I don't care what the class is, that's what you're gonna look at, the other 5%. It's the things that moved to make those people oppressed. I see these kids just not questioning anything. They're here for a grade. They're here to squeeze by…They don't see a reason to say, well, I don't necessarily disagree. They're all, don't know what to tell you. If the professor says something that may be even slightly political or social or economic that these whatever are bad, this president was good, and this one's not so great. Oh, yup, quick to acknowledge and accept and just formulate their own opinions and not put anything into context like well, why was that person that. What is your reasoning and rationale behind that? They don't care. They just want to make sure that they don't make a bad impression. I on the other hand, am a little confrontational. I question a lot of the things. So, that kind of keeps me separate from the rest of the class.

Life experience and maturity of classmates shapes the transition experiences participants have at a research extensive institution. Some find the age gap helpful, while some find it deterring.

One last aspect that was discussed regarding age was the services offered on campus. As non-traditional students, participants transitioning to SU look for services not only for themselves but for their family as well. J. Luc shared some of his discouragement:
I’m not like surprised or shocked, but one of the issues that we still kind of deal with, like just being an older married student, it's very not inclusive of like family-ness. Like just bringing my wife here, it's like a huge hassle even though it's having lunch or something like that, and you know, like in the military when your spouse, they get all of the benefits you get, so they can be with you and be a part of you, go to the gym with you, do stuff like that? Like she can't go to the gym here with me and do stuff like that.

Participants who live near the campus wished for more services available for their family members. These are later discussed in the theme ‘Support’.

**Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy is an individual’s ability to believe whether or not they can complete a task successfully (Bandura, 1977). Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to complete their end goal, where individuals with low self-efficacy are more likely to quit or not complete the goal. Participants in this study showed both high and low levels of self-efficacy.

For example, Scratch explained her way of thinking through her transition to SU was like the train in “The Little Engine That Could”: “I think I can, I think I can, I know I could, I know I could, I think I can, I think I can.” This shows a high level of self-efficacy. At other times, participants, Sheldon for this example, showed lower levels of self-efficacy, “Okay, am I doing the right thing?” This was in reference to the grade he received on his first chemistry exam at SU. However, even with some doubt, Sheldon was able to realize it was going to be a process and was excited about moving through it.

For individuals with high self-efficacy it is possible for self-doubt to arise. Nate shared his worries of not belonging at SU due to a lower high school GPA. Once Nate was at SU he did not know if he was going to be successful. In addition to his lower high school performance and the transition to SU, Nate was also transitioning with disabilities. He believed he could pass his
courses without using any assistance; however, after a few weeks of struggling, a counselor recommended the change:

   It hurt in the beginning cause it was back to that pride thing, ‘I can do this on my own. I don't need help.’ I mean, it's the same idea as going to sick call in the morning or something like that, where you're hurt or you're actually sick to the point you shouldn't be exercising but it seems as kind of a weakness, even though they're trying to get away from that stigma. It's still there. Even if it's unspoken. So, you ... you don't get the help you need necessarily. It took some urging from several different people to do it. My Voc Rehab counselor was the last one that said go see you guys [Disability Services Office staff] and come back otherwise I'm not signing off on your paperwork.

Nate used the services and resources (discussed later) at the university and was able to begin excelling in his coursework. Nate did share that had he known about the services and resources from the beginning, he still would not have used them because he wanted to try it on his own. He stated, “I might have considered it. I might have done a little more research. But probably with the headspace I was in, I probably wouldn’t have.”

   Once using services and resources available, Nate began to excel and became a self-advocate. Although it was not easy for him to reach this point, he has continued to push through to reach his goals.
Figure 4.3. Nate’s Response to the Photo Prompt

If this photo were captioned, Nate stated he would caption it with the following phrase: “Fight for yourself. Fight for what you have access to. Don't take no for an answer. Be your own advocate.” Nate explained the reason he chose this phrase:

The reason I chose it is not necessarily because of SU itself, but because of the things that I've gone through since I've been here. It seems like it's been a constant fight, constant kinda trying to keep thinking about things balanced, and struggling, and some of the personal things I went through. It's been that fight. So, it's kind of become my mantra, just fight on, keep pushing.

Nate had self-doubt at the beginning. He faced obstacles during his transition and still faces obstacles now. However, Nate also knows of the resources available and is able to advocate for himself. He believes he can be successful and is able to execute a plan to see that success through.

Participants shared how disabilities can shape how one believes in their ability to be successful. Nate had some self-doubt due to his performance in high school along with acquiring disabilities. John also explained how his disabilities have created self-doubt within him:

I would say the negative effects are some of the things like the PTSD and the depression obviously are a hindrance in the fact that I'm going to wake up and be like, ‘Do I even
need to be here? Am I going to be good enough to graduate?’ That low test grade, that definitely hit me hard. I was like, ‘Man do I have what it takes? Do I see a future in this?’

You know, those kind of things come in, they creep in. And those obviously play a huge factor into the product and the outcome of what you are putting in.

Depending on the type of disability, it may be difficult to see the completion of a goal in the future. Marie explains, “finding that motivation, sorry, especially with a mental disorder. It's just really hard to push yourself to do the best you can especially when it's hard to get out of bed sometimes.” Marie still has a high level of self-efficacy. She knows she is able to complete her coursework; she does not know how it will get done.

**Resilience.** Resilience was the last major subtheme that emerged under the factor of ‘Self’. Resilience is separated from self-efficacy, as self-efficacy is more of the belief one can be successful, whereas resilience is the act of working toward a goal. Regardless of current stressors the participant faced, or how difficult the transition seemed at the time, each participant spoke about psychological factors instilled within them that pushed them through. Each participant spoke about the mindset to adapt and keep going; how to get to your end goal. Steve shared, “I've learned how to work with people and how to work hard and be professional and get things done on time.” Beau added,

As a veteran, we know that we have a time schedule. We need to complete this, and we do everything we can to complete it. It's that responsibility of making sure that is already instilled into us. We have priorities.

As someone with a disability, there may be additional barriers in the way, or completing tasks may take longer. Rob explained a common scenario he faced his first semester at SU:
Next thing you know - not in all cases but in a couple, especially that first semester - there were a couple instances where it was like one in the morning by the end. It dragged on five at night until one in the morning where I just push, push, push. I remember spending a lot of sunny afternoons still working through all my problems and stuff. I remember trying to get ahead. I was working on things earlier, but it would still take me a long time, and I'd have to work almost all the way up to the deadline day. Definitely not a do-it-on-the-day-of person because I know I work too slowly to be able to do that.

Regarding time spent on coursework, J. Luc had some of the same time issues that Rob faced. He provided the following picture and description:

![Figure 4.4. J. Luc’s Response to the Photo Prompt](image)

If J. Luc were to caption the photo he would do so with the phrase: “A snowball of learning: You have to do this, to do that.” He describes why he chose that picture:

That screenshot kinda of symbolizes a lot of that because one of the big things was everything was almost in a different language, and then in two of my classes, I really had to actually learn a different language. So, I had to learn how to program and how like binary and everything works when I'd never dealt with that before. So that was a totally new thing, and it was really hard and really stressful. And I spent hours and hours working on it, but I also really loved it like the assembly code. I'm still really into it. I'd
like to do some more of that, but it was a ton of my time whenever I was here. I was here 'til like midnight a few times, working on that in the library with a group trying to figure out how the code works and everything.

Like Rob and other participants, regardless of the task at hand, J. Luc took the time necessary to learn new material and keep working towards his goals. In addition to captioning resilience over time, some participants explained their resilience was through adaptability.

Jack deals with pain and hearing loss on a daily basis. When talking about how he progresses through his coursework, he explained that he adjusts and adapts to continue moving forward. He shared how his background as an infantryman taught him how to do this:

Just the career field that I was in when I was in the military, I was an infantryman. A lot of times, as an infantryman, you're just kind of taught that if there's pain, you just deal with it. If there's a physical difficulty, you just deal with it. Knees and back, you just suck it up and drive on with those. Knee pain, back pain, you just deal with it. It might have kept me awake in classes a little bit more sometimes maybe, but that was probably the biggest one for me. I think maybe it does, just in the fact that I don't necessarily expect people to have to bend their actions to my disability. I think it's more up to me to learn to cope with them. I don't expect, when I go to somebody like a German instructor ... on that first day of class, I don't expect them to have to speak louder just for me. I understand it's up to me to kind of adapt to the situation, like sitting closer to the front, that kind of thing. I think it's more my requirement. This may sound bad, and I really don't mean it that way, but the only other time that my hearing would be a problem was when I had instructors that had heavy accents. They were good instructors, they were good people, it's just I would physically have a hard time understanding sometimes, just because it's muffled.
Other than that, no, not really. Even in the civilian world, you just gotta learn to deal with it. If I'm out on the street, and somebody has a heavy accent, I just kinda deal with it. I have to adjust to that. That's the only way I can get by. I just have to adjust to it myself.

Participants shared how their disabilities impact them on a daily basis. They shared how they must learn to manage their disability, so they can successfully continue. JJ shared how his view on disability has helped to move him forward:

Having, like I said, a four out of ten headache all the time, so that's difficult, but... And then just some physical stuff, learning to adapt to typing so much, writing so much, cause this whole thumb doesn't work well, I tore this whole ligament coming through. So just learning to adapt to little things. Not to say anything about anyone who is disabled, but I feel that if you focus on a disability as something that's holding you back, then it's... I mean you can make yourself sick by thinking you're sick. So, if you empower yourself as not disabled, but empowered, and so, from what I experienced as a veteran, I have great organizational skills, and personal skills. I've seen and experienced more culture than most people I guess will ever, so, it's really helped me to be a better student and a better American, I think. But I don't see it as disability, as helping, but as a veteran definitely, as a leader, as organizational skills.

Disability is an additional aspect that participants had to factor when transitioning to SU. Scratch viewed her mindset as a positive motivator. She stated,

It [my mindset] being a positive thing, when my neck is really acting up and it brings me to tears, I'm like, ‘But I'm a warrior. I can't be crying.’ It's so frustrating. I suspect it's kind of a negative too.
The mindset of pushing forward and focusing on the goal helped participants adapt with their acquired disability and make their transition to the university.

Being resilient does not mean participants were focused on positive outcomes; it means they were able to keep pushing forward toward their goal regardless of the barriers in their intended path. During Jennifer’s first semester at SU, her disability impacted her performance and she took a medical withdrawal. She reasoned, “I came back the very next semester because I got what I needed to get done. I probably should have stayed out one more semester for medical reasons, but I wanted to get back in.”

Figure 4.5. Jennifer’s Response to the Photo Prompt

If her photo was captioned, Jennifer stated she would use the phrase, “No door is ever permanently shut. There's always a possibility, you just have to find your light.” Jennifer explains why she chose this photo:

I chose a door that was almost closed but was cracked open enough and you can see a light beaming all the way around the door perimeter. And to me I chose it because it seems like the door's always shut, and this is gonna stop you from progressing, but the
door is open and you can see the light at the end of the tunnel kind of thing. But it's not as easy to get there and you have to kind of go through cracks and it's harder to travel to where you wanna go or it's harder to do anything. It's not just an open door. Sometimes, I mean, most people have difficulties financially, whereas financially I'm straight, but mentally and physically my door is shut. Like it's hard to progress, even though school is all I'm doing right now. It's still hard to just focus.

Mental health related disabilities were disclosed by half the participants of this study. Marie describes how mental health can impact concentration and ability to study, or focus in class and how she works through it:

It's been really difficult, and I still struggle with it now, even though I'm getting treatment. It makes it hard to study, to focus, to concentrate. Some days, things feel kinda surreal, like you're detached from things, so then I'll be in a lecture thinking, ‘What the heck did we just talk about?’ I mean, that happened just the other week. I was burnt out. Summer classes, you meet every day a week, labs twice a week for three hours, so I was just exhausted from that. Also, struggling with the disability and I left lecture one day and I was like, ‘What the heck did we even talk about?’ And it's really hard. It's not so much playing on my phone or anything, I was trying to pay attention, but it just kinda bounced off. So that's been the hardest part and it makes it really hard studying sometimes.

Especially, I prefer studying alone or quietly in groups, but sometimes it's when I'm alone it's just really hard to focus and push away all the other things that are stressors. So same thing with exams, it's kind of like a self-doubt. It's like, ‘Okay. I have to just breathe. Look at this paper for five minutes and then I can start’ kind of thing.
Marie described her picture:

It's part of the construction site on campus and I took it in black and white because, one, just transitioning to university or anywhere like the military, is hard work, it's a lot of work. And a lot of times it doesn't make sense, like the construction they're doing here. And yeah, the black and white is because it's really hard to see ‘The bright side,’ or like the kind of finished product that you're aiming for. Pretty similar to here, so I think it’s analogous.

In summarizing her thoughts on mental health and her transition to SU, Marie stated she would caption her photo, "Getting to where you wanna be is a lot of hard work and it's really hard to see the end when you feel like everything is chaotic, but it does get better."

Resilience has moved participants through their transition into a research extensive institution. Student veterans in this study have endured difficult tasks and situations in their lives prior to coming to SU. By having a resilient mindset, participants are not only able to move through their transition, but also use that experience to help others. Reflecting on the stigma associated with mental health, and coming in as a veteran with a mental health diagnosis, John shared:
It's definitely hard but that's part of the reason why I decided to get into psychology, and why I want to get into clinical psychology and work with military and veterans, because it shouldn't be that way. And the more I learn, the more I learned on my own before I even came to this school, which is to read. Just to read about it and it shouldn't be that way.

Continuing on about his transition to SU, he concluded with:

The transition’s tough, but it’s not the toughest thing a veteran’s done. It's not that hard. When I look at it, I always get caught up in the day to day and this really stings, but then I also tell myself I'm lucky to be able to try anything. I could be getting rained on. I could be zipped in a bag. I could be deployed.

Regardless of the disability type, or the barrier faced during the transition, having a resilient mindset has led to student veterans with disabilities pushing through difficult course situations, learning how to cope with limitations, and finding ways to help others from their own experiences. With every participant having something to say about the ability to move on and push forward, it is clear student veterans with disabilities are a resilient group of students. To conclude, Nate provides his reflection on his transition as a student, as a veteran and as someone with a disability, “As a student, academically, it's made it difficult. I mean, it's not gonna stop me. I'm going to make my goal. I'm going to be a teacher.”

Support

For me, most of my time was spent at Fort Bragg, so I pretty much had moved there. All my friends were there, so on and so forth. Whenever I knew that I was leaving there, my whole social circle just ... I wouldn't say went away, but I was removed from it. (Mark, Interview)
Schlossberg et al. (1995) defines support as the different types, functions, or measurements an individual utilizes to aid them in moving through their transition. Types of support can be institutional, such as organized systems in place, close relationships such as family or friends, or intimate relationships. Functions of support are those that provide affect, affirmation, and feedback. The measurement of support is not how much support is given, but how dependent that support system is: stable, role-dependent, or changing. During the coding process, a priori themes included: institutional, family, friends, intimate, and community. After the a priori coding process was complete, open coding was employed and revealed subthemes within the institutional category. Institutional subthemes from the open coding process included: the disability services office, military resource center, other university offices, the Veteran’s Administration, and Vocational Rehabilitation. This section will analyze institutional support, close relationships such as family and friends, and lastly, support from the community.

**Institutional.** This section will primarily cover the institutional support offered by Southeastern University including their disability office, military resource center, support from other veterans, faculty members, classmates, and other university offices. The section will then discuss institutional support from the Veteran’s Administration (VA) and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR).

**Disability services.** Six participants were registered with SU’s Disability Services Office (DSO), as shown in Table 4.3 (page 88). All six registered participants found it to be one of their biggest support systems at SU. Participants discussed not knowing about the office or what it could do, but once they connect with the office, they shared how helpful it has been in reaching their academic goals. All six participants shared how testing and class accommodations have
helped to remove barriers in the classroom. For the eight participants not registered, negative stigma or not needing accommodations is what prevented the participant from registering.

As participants made the transition to SU, they did not know about the DSO or, if they heard of it, did not know what purpose it served. When talking about how they found out about the services of the DSO, participants shared they learned from advisors, faculty members, and other classmates. John shared:

A freshman, I noticed, he wasn't showing up for the exam and I was like, ‘What are you doing?’ He's like, ‘Oh I have DSO.’ And I was like, ‘Well what is that?’ And he said, ‘Well if you have this, they can accommodate a lot of things that you do.’

Similarly, Nate was struggling in his courses and told his VR counselor about it. She was the one to refer him to the DSO. He explained:

I didn't know about DSO starting out. No one talked to me about it, no one worked with me, or even told me to go talk to you guys [disability services office] until my first meeting. I was struggling, was feeling rushed in every test, and I was frustrated with myself cause things kinda weren't coming as quickly to me as they were before. So, she recommended me going and talk to you guys.

However, even after referrals, some participants decided not to register with the office. They shared they did not think they needed the services or felt there was a negative stigma attached if they registered. Jennifer disclosed:

Because I had to medically withdraw from the first semester here, I did get to know the advising staff a little better and they made me feel comfortable enough to say what was going on. And, they advised me to come to the disability services for my anxiety and all of that. I still haven't just because I feel like it, for some reason, will show up later, and I
don't want future employers to be like, ‘Oh, I see you got help for anxiety.’ And, I don't want them to not consider me for that.

Although registering with the DSO is a confidential process and can only be shared with individuals the student chooses, some participants thought it could be held against them later on.

For participants who chose to register and use their accommodations, they found them to be an integral part of their academic pursuit. John described a standard classroom with 50 students and how it would impact him when testing, “I'd start keeping track of people and counting people and who's leaving and who's coming so that started distracting me from taking my exam.” Similarly, with participants who have anxiety and other concentration problems, extra time on exams is a common accommodation. Rob shares how it has supported him:

And I would have enough time. I also have a de-stressing thing where I can slow down and think about the problem and I'm not worried about the time, thinking about the time ticking by. And I use up all of my time probably about 80 or 90% of the tests. I use up every minute and every minute helps. I don't finish the test and spend the first half and the second half going over the problems, but I'm actually working through the problems up until about ten minutes before the required time.

Extra test time was the most commonly used accommodation among participants. Other accommodations included priority registration, separate testing area, use of computer, and the ability to record lectures. Participants that used accommodations shared that most of their peers never noticed their use, and when they did, found it to be interesting. Nate said, “Peers don't seem to have an issue with it. They think it's a cool idea that I'm getting help like that.”

Overall, participants were happy with the support that the DSO had offered them. Beau affirmed with confidence:
I was shocked when they helped me transition comfortably here and not triggering any of my signs. I wish I had this at the [northern state university]. Maybe I would have completed my degree there. I was 19 hours away from completing it. DSO. That's ...

They paved the way for me. They set out the plan. The teachers and instructors and professors are there, abiding by, making sure that it's being done, being accommodated.

That's all I used. That's all I needed to use.

In addition, participants who did use accommodations and services through the DSO, agreed they would recommend the office to other student veterans with disabilities transitioning in. Trev acknowledged:

I would probably encourage any new veteran with a disability to make a priority to go to the disability services office first, before class starts, and just get themselves registered and see for themselves what they have to offer instead of waiting like I did.

The accommodations and services offered through the DSO provided a support system for participants to use to help equalize the limitations they faced. Although there is still a negative stigma associated with the term “disability,” participants who did use the resource found it to be helpful and were able to continue moving toward their goals without worrying about an inaccessible environment.

Military resource center. The Military Resource Center (MRC) was the second office on campus where participants found support. For most participants, when seeking support for veterans, the MRC was the first place they looked. Whether it was trying to find answers to registration and financial aid questions, or looking for a support group, the MRC was able to provide the support needed to participants transitioning to SU. Jack exclaimed, “My first
introduction to any veteran anything is [name of VA Certifying Official in MRC]. He's just fantastic.”

When participants were having difficulty with financial aid and benefits, they turned to the MRC. Scratch described her difficulties:

I decided that somehow, I should get connected to the Student Veterans something. There's gotta be someone out there that can help me get some information, cause I tried every avenue I thought possible. I went through [VA Certifying Official], and I tell him just about every time I see him, or any time there's a lecture or anything, ‘If it wasn't for him, I probably wouldn't be a student here.’ He was able to tell me approximately what the costs were, what kind of dates to expect things by, how long it takes for thing. He's professional, but he's pretty real about, ‘It's gonna take a while,’ or, ‘No, that's out-of-pocket and then reclaim.’ Or something. Yeah, was like my one point of contact to the school. When I came to visit the school, I stopped in to see him. When I came back, and I got accepted, I stopped in to see him. I just keep going back cause he's got all the answers. I hope he doesn't leave.

Staff at the MRC assisted students with their registration and benefit information, sometimes finding additional funding for students that the student did not know existed. Mark shared:

I didn't know I was missing out on financial aid stuff cause I didn't think that I could qualify for it, because I was like, ‘Well, the VA's paying for my education. I don't really need financial aid.” Which that was stupid I didn't take advantage of it. But I was able to get back pay for my financial aid because I just stopped in and talked to somebody. It was like, “No, you qualify. This is what you need to do. These are the people you need to talk to. Let me know if you need any help.”
Participants found the MRC to be supportive financially. Once they had their finances set they had the opportunity to learn about the other services provided.

Participants who used the MRC felt they built valuable relationships with the staff and other veterans. They found it to be a place where they were understood. Scratch described her connection:

For nothing more than if you thought of it as a fraternity, just camaraderie, and support, and peers, and whether you're getting out of enlisted work, and you're … the common undergraduate age group, or you're getting out and you're going back at 40. But there's a peer of people that understand the way you function, and it's not rank, and it's not job-related, it's just an understanding of we just think differently.

In addition to logistical matters, the MRC was able to provide social support for student veterans as well. Nate summarized, “It's like, once you come here and once you graduate, it's like you're always a member of this giant family you're building.”

*Other university resources.* Other university resources was the last subtheme that emerged from participants’ stories under institutional university resources. Veterans found other support systems through the university. Although not all of them were discussed when each participant shared their story, the following departments were discussed by at least two participants as a form of support: Financial Aid, Housing, Student Health, and the Counseling Center. In addition to the departments on campus that offered support to participants, there was one program that was talked about among them in particular, Green Zone. Green Zone is a training program for faculty and staff to learn about the potential issue’s active duty students, student veterans, and their families may face on campus. Half of the participants discussed the
program and its benefit, while others were not aware it existed until they saw a staff or faculty member with the placard. Sheldon explained:

Maybe it's because I just don't pay attention. But there are ... And you probably know about this, but you'll see the stickers, called the green zone. And I didn't hear about that until I saw them. I think that it's a program that should be emphasized a little bit more. Marie was another participant who did not know the program existed and recommended that a program like that be introduced to SU faculty and staff. Maria and other participants who did not know the program existed were informed at the end of their interviews.

**Other institutional support.** In addition to institutional support from the university, participants found Vocational Rehabilitation (VR or Voc Rehab) and the United States Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) to be supportive in their transition. VR is a federally funded program that assists people with disabilities in finding employment and with school costs for future employment. The VA provides health and other educational benefits for veterans and their families. All fourteen participants shared they were using health or educational benefits provided through the VA or VR. While these systems are in place to provide support, participants shared the organizations can be frustrating to the veterans using their services. Jennifer said, “I've actually changed Voc Rehab counselors. I think I'm on my third or fourth one. They keep changing. And, they just submit the paperwork and that's it. I don't really hear from them for any other time.” Most participants already understood how the process worked, or the lack of an efficient process that existed. JJ explained:

Voc Rehab is, just the VA in general is a broken system. I mean, if you've ever been in the DMV, any state-run system or federal run system is just inefficient. If it was a Fortune 500 it'd be fired or go under! [laughter] But, I've actually seen some great
personal interactions with people they know, and shooting emails, "Hey, can you do this? Hey, will you do this? Why isn't this done yet?" So, I really, I give them the utmost praise and respect, they really have done outstanding job working through all of it. Through the VA there's a dozen programs where there is counseling, or medical, or dogs, anything that you need, there really is something out there for it.

Both agencies are able to provide support to student veterans with disabilities transitioning into the university.

Participants viewed both agencies as slow and lacking in efficiency. This led to delays in benefits and treatments. With her disability, Marie is on a waitlist for therapy with the VA. She knows the waitlist is long and wishes there was more that could be done. She recommended:

I think it would be really neat, I don't know if the campus does, but if they work through the VA to help see veteran students or they have people because the VA is understaffed and underfunded. I know there's a counseling center here, but I don't know how that works as far as getting in for more than one or two appointments. I think that would've been something beneficial I would've sought out, but other than that, I haven't talked to anybody or used any services this year.

Regardless of the efficiency, participants were appreciative of the benefits that were provided to them.

Most participants found support from these agencies in monetary form; educational benefits and health care benefits. Mark stated, “Then also, soon as I started school, my VA benefits kicked in. So, I got pretty lucky with that.” In addition to the benefits provided by both agencies, VR helps to advocate for persons with disabilities. Nate’s interaction with his VR counselor is shared again:
It hurt in the beginning cause it was back to that pride thing, ‘I can do this on my own. I don't need help.’ I mean, it's the same idea as going to sick call in the morning or something like that, where you're hurt or you're actually sick to the point you shouldn't be exercising but it seems as kind of a weakness, even though they're trying to get away from that stigma. It's still there. Even if it's unspoken. So, you ... you don't get the help you need necessarily. It took some urging from several different people to do it. My Voc Rehab counselor was the last one that said go see you guys [Disability Services Office staff] and come back otherwise I'm not signing off on your paperwork.

In addition to self-efficacy, this quote shows if the VR counselor did stress to Nate that he was requiring him use the services provided by the DSO he would not be using the accommodations he currently has and may not have been as successful during his first semester at SU.

Participants did not feel the one-on-one support was as good as it needed to be and felt the agencies need to improve their process. Both VR and VA provided support to all participants, most of that support in the form of a monetary benefit.

**Fellow veterans.** The most common support theme that arose from other individuals, rather than an office or organization, was support from other veterans participants met. Having the ability to talk with other veterans provided participants with a sense of community. Participants shared that meeting other veterans on campus gave them not only a sense of belonging, but also a shared connection that they were unable to make with their other peers. Sheldon told of his connection, “I just bumped into someone here a few months ago, and we're in the same class, so that's something that's difficult to replace, the camaraderie or the sense of brotherhood or connection in the military.”
It took some participants longer than others to meet other veterans on campus. Mark shared that it took him about two years, but he has since made friends. He explained, “I’ve definitely made some friends that have lasted throughout. My social circle in the army has definitely expanded, and there's people I can talk to.” For some participants, like Rob, they met a fellow veteran right away and it helped to build a connection. Rob described how knowing a veteran coming in helped to support him:

I met this other guy who is a veteran and the one who walked my same shoes, seven years, got out, master's, went through the PhD, he’s probably been the biggest help. One, so I looked up to him, and he told me that they have an office that's full of ... they have some non-veterans, but they also have a pretty prevalent, probably two-thirds of the office is veteran use, it’s just set up that way. We could reach out and help each other out. Cause everyone will deal with similar types of struggles and everything. So, it's not about being exclusive or anything, cause we actually had several people, international students from India and Saudi Arabia and South America. Probably about half to two thirds were all veterans. So, you reach left, you reach right, you know, for having to be stressed about. We can relate to what it's like to have a math related degree and then step away for seven years and then coming back and that kind of thing.

The support from fellow veterans, knowing they had the same general understanding of going from military back to an academic institution, was helpful for participants’ transitions to SU.

**Faculty.** Support from faculty members was common among participants. Faculty showed support when first connecting with the student prior to their enrollment, during their course, and as a resource for accommodations. All participants had interactions with faculty members that were mostly positive.
Steve was one of the participants who connected with the head of their department prior to enrolling. He was not sure if he was ready to return to school; however, he began researching programs and did prework to ensure it was what he wanted to do.

[Professor], she's the graduate program director here. Trying to find out if I would be able to work on a master's degree in specialized science field. That's what I wanted to do. I'd taken a couple classes in the program online, engineering online and did well in those, so I ended up being admitted and started summer of 2018. She's very responsive and helpful and pointing me in the right direction I needed to go to make myself eligible.

During the transition to SU, he had support from program faculty that he felt was part of his successful transition. Steve has not yet finished his first semester at SU, but feels he is doing very well.

Other participants shared how their instructor was the first person to notify them of the Disability Services Office (DSO). Rob explained:

So, a professor, my first semester here, said that she'd saw the grade that I'd gotten, and she knows how well I did in the homework assignments, and I probably took more time than everyone else in the homework assignments, but I would still finish it, do well, and be able to understand the problem and not just write something down. And she said, ‘Yeah, I watch you in class.’ She said, ‘And I watch the gears turning. You ask a question and I answer the question for you.’ She said, ‘I can see it dissolving. It just takes longer than everyone else.’ She said, ‘But I could see it sink in slowly over time.’ So, she suggested that I go get registered with the DSO.

Prior to joining the military, participants did not have a disability, and therefore would not need to know what the accommodation process was or why it was in place. For participants who did
not want to register with the DSO due to stigma, pride, or other reasons, having support from the faculty member suggesting they register was essential to their academic success.

Faculty supported all participants with formal and informal accommodation. Formal accommodations were those that came from the DSO, whereas informal may be something the participant talked with the instructor about without having documentation from the DSO. John described how he interacted with faculty members regarding accommodations:

A lot of my teachers, professors, I talk to them. At first, you're like if I admit I have a problem to them, and you're like I don't know you, but they're more than willing to be like, ‘Hey.’ Even if it's like DSO is another part to deal with sometimes, but they're like, ‘Hey, let's not worry about that. Just come talk to me and we'll take care of it.’ I'll go to my teacher's office and I'll take the exams and we'll just talk for 30 minutes before they take the exam. It's just ... they're willing to help, so didn't think of it as it's gonna stop you. Accept it and own it and live through it. It's your story. It's good.

When in the process of implementing accommodations, those participants with accommodations thought their faculty were supportive. Most participants found the process as a way to connect with their faculty and build connections. Beau described how the accommodation process helped him transition to SU:

You send out the letters to the teachers explaining. Then it's like, oh, I didn't know you were in the military. That's where the relationships start coming and just checking on me and stuff like that. That's where it all started. I was in a shell. I was in my bubble. Now, to talk about the military helped me come out and talk to some of the students.
Participants found that when they talked with their faculty about their background as a veteran with a disability, faculty were understanding and able to support them more than they thought possible.

Only one participant told of a negative interaction with a faculty member. Scratch shared her story:

I was sitting in the lobby, and he walked in to the lobby and said ‘Commander.’ And I looked over. Of course, a lot of people call me by my rank instead of, but not in this environment. And I looked over, he said ‘or Scratch, whichever you prefer.’ And I said, “Oh, I'm a student here. We'll use a first name.” And so, then in his office he kept saying over and over, ‘You're not dedicated. If you're going to keep going to the military and keep doing reserve work, there's no way you can be a dedicated student.’ Constantly. It wasn't like five times in an hour, it was like 15 times. ‘I don't think you're a dedicated student. There's no way you can be.’ I think they don't know how to handle us. Not in total, but I think that there are some professors that are used to dealing with the 22-year-old or 25-year-old student that has a certain level of experience and that they know more than them in every aspect of life for a good majority because they're probably twice their age. When you start getting veterans in who have usually a minimum of a four-year commitment after college, then you have late 20s early 30s coming, but I think they just don't really know which direction to approach you. So, that will stay with me but now it’s a joke.

Although Scratch had a negative interaction with one instructor, she moved past it and continued through the program. Due to the way her program was run, she did not have a faculty contact.
from the beginning to reach out to when a question or concern arose. It is possible had she had
another faculty contact, she would have been able to discuss that incident with them.

In summary, participants found their faculty members to be helpful and supportive. One
of the most common recommendations that came from participants was to reach out to faculty
and staff at the university. Jennifer recommended:

It's a great school, and they care about what you have to go through. And I'm learning
that more now, and I haven't used all the resources that are available to me, which I wish
I would have when I first transitioned. So, don't be scared to reach out. It's not gonna
harm you in the end. Like, I'm real defensive and so I know a lot of people are, especially
opening up to weaknesses that people have. So, don't be scared to ask for help or talk to
your professors or teachers or even the grad students that teach, cause every student goes
through a bunch of crap. And you will be surprised what people are willing to help you
with.

Participants who reached out and/or built a relationship with a faculty member had positive
feedback about the university and its support.

**Family or intimate.** Family and intimate relationships were a common support system
for student veterans with disabilities. All participants disclosed their family or an intimate partner
as a form of support when making their transition to SU. Some participants wanted to remain
close to their family as they began coursework; others relied on family members to do extra work
around the house, and some relied on the emotional support family or their partner brought them.

Participants shared they relied on those they loved for support during their transition or
used that support system as motivation to continue moving forward with their degree. Jennifer
disclosed, “My dad passed away when I was younger, and so it's just my mom, my sister, myself,
and they just want me to succeed.” Other participants such as J. Luc and Steve chose SU because they had family in the area. J. Luc added, “My wife already worked near here. We already lived near here and her parents and my parents are near here.” Knowing their support system was nearby, made the decision easier to attend SU.

Participants shared how their partner played a role in their support system as they transitioned to SU. Rob explained that his girlfriend was understanding of him putting school and the gym ahead of her, allowing him to focus on becoming a student again. Trev shared his wife “has to take care of me a lot,” as she is usually preparing dinners and taking care of household duties while he was in class. Along with the day-to-day support each partner provided the participant, a deeper level of commitment was also involved. John described a darker time period from a few years back:

But for a while, when my wife and I first got married it was hard for her to deal with, what I was dealing with. Because of me, because I didn't talk about it and then randomly it got really bad. And she was scared to sleep without the lights on with me and I needed to get help.

John ended up getting treatment and now has a service animal.
Figure 4.7. John’s Response to the Photo Prompt

When asked to provide an image of something John felt represented his transition to SU, John provided a picture of his service animal. He described why he chose that picture:

The photo because that's my girl, my dog. She's helped me through a lot, through everything, and then when we got here, when we finally officially started her training, and then was right when I first started my first semester here. And through that the only person that I would talk to or anything or vent to was my dog. And we would go out and it would make me feel better. Because she would just listen and relax and then I was all of a sudden done and it was like, let's go throw a ball. Life shouldn't be too complicated. Let's focus on what we need to focus on and we can get over it. She's been the saving grace, definitely helped me get through a lot.

If the picture were to be captioned, John provided the following statements:

Nothing can stop you. Just if you wanna do it, you can do it regardless of what situation you're in. A lot of guys, they put a stigma on or there's a stigma associated with mental health issues or whatever it may be, and then it has handicapped themselves, and it's like well, I'm kinda, my memory is jacked up, I can't go to school or I don't think I can focus
enough or I can't be around people or I can't with the younger generation or it's not my cohort so I can't associate or connect with them. It's all false. You can do it regardless of what situation you're in.

**Community.** Resources in the community were not a common support system discussed; however, there were five participants who shared they found support within their communities. Steve shared he found support through his church, while Marie found support on her rugby team. As the oldest participant of the study, Jack found support within his local Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) chapter:

> I am active with my local VFW. If you get involved in things, then you're bound to find folks that have been in your situation, especially doing things like the VFW. For me, there's folks there that have been to college before, they've been in the military. They know some of the dos, and some of the don'ts, and what to look for, those kinds of things. They're very beneficial, I think. It's just that when you're in the military you've got a purpose. When you wake up every day you're surrounded by other folks that have a purpose, and it's the same purpose, plus you have just that camaraderie and all. When you get out of the service it's not necessarily there. Well, it is there, you just have to look for it, whether it's veteran's groups like the VFW or the DAV or American Legion.

The VFW and other local community organizations can provide support for students transitioning into the university. Jack has lived an hour away from campus from the beginning and for him, it is easier to use the support network that he is closest to.

**Support summary.** In summary, participants most commonly discussed institutional systems to support their transition to SU. The DSO and MRC were the most common, but other resources used were financial aid, housing, student health, and the counseling center. Participants
also used more personal support systems such as connecting with other veterans and faculty members or reaching out to veterans in their community. Overall, one theme was very apparent, and it was to seek out resources when needed. Nate emphasized:

Don't be afraid to ask. I didn't even know about DSO at first, even when I found out, I thought, oh, that's not for me. I don't need that help. But then it ended up I got pushed to you guys [Disability Services Office]. It shouldn't have taken that long. I should have come to you guys [Disability Services Office] when I started. So, don't be afraid to ask for the extra. Don't be afraid to go looking for what's available to you.

**Strategies**

The last factor of Schlossberg et al. (1995) transition theory is strategies. There are strategies an individual may use to modify the situation they are experiencing. The situation cannot be changed, and therefore, they must do something to change the current impact to themselves. There are strategies that control the situation. The individual may question: Can the situation be changed in any way? If not, can I look at the situation differently to move through this transition? If the situation cannot be controlled or modified there are strategies that can be used to manage the aftermath. A priori coding was used throughout the coding process and no additional subthemes were found. The following section includes strategies the participants used to modify, control, or manage a situation during their transition.

**Modify.** Strategies used by participants to modify their situation ranged from self-reflection to accommodations provided by the university. Self-reflection and similar coping strategies allowed the participant to change their mindset and remove them from the current stress at hand so they could focus on it later. Due to time or a lack of knowledge of resources, participants relied on their own techniques. J. Luc said, “I couldn't like do anything to relax or go
out and go anywhere or anything like that or workout. I just had to like self-reflect and try and cope through it kind of thing.”

![Image of cows grazing]

**Figure 4.8. Beau’s Response to the Photo Prompt**

In his own words, Beau chose the picture above because:

> It represents farming for me. And when I'm in a mood, not to be bothered, I go out to visit the cows. And it calms me down, no matter what kind of mood or a state I'm in. So, if I'm angry, or triggering flashbacks then I'll just go and hang out with my cows. You know, that or I'll just drive by a country land where there's farm animals, and just, stress levels come down.

When asked to provide a caption for the photo, Beau stated, “Bringing peace into your life through the preservation of the farm animals.” Beau used the farm animals to change stress levels. Removing oneself from a stressful situation or being able to self-reflect and finding a way to cope through were common strategies for participants.

In addition to self-reflection, or using other techniques to bring stress levels down, participants also created their own adjustments when they could. As shared by participants
earlier, the campus environment provided barriers to learning such as large classrooms with many students. Although some participants did register with the university DSO, not all did as they were able to adjust on their own and did not need anything formal in place. For example, Jack provided the picture below to show how he found an easier way around campus.

![Bike on Campus](image)

**Figure 4.9. Jack’s Response to the Photo Prompt**

If he were to add a caption to the photo, Jack stated it would be “Freedom.” When describing why he chose that picture, Jack shared:

That's the thing that I have I guess the most relationship with here on campus because I'm always riding it. I mean it gets me to and from places. It saves time. It's less time than walking, that kind of stuff. And then it's a good thing to ride when you're just trying to clear your head a little bit, you know, that kind of stuff.

Due to difficulty walking around a large campus, Jack found that a bike was easier. He was also able to adjust in the classroom, too. He explained:

My biggest problem is I don't hear well out of my right ear, so I tend to sit in the classes ... Sit on the right side so my bad ear is towards the wall. Even with a hearing aid it's towards the wall, so my good ear is where the instructor in the majority of the classes is.

By adjusting his seat in class, he is able to better hear the instructor. Other participants also discussed the importance of having a preferred seat in class. Sheldon shared his thought process:
Where should I sit in the class for this particular instructor's style? If they do a lot of power point, what's the best place to sit in their class? Or for the large chemistry classrooms, and then for a class where there's a lot of PowerPoints, I need to sit where I can focus.

Adjusting without a formalized plan or accommodation in place provided the participants an opportunity to mitigate barriers that were in the way.

Formal accommodations or plans were the last way in which participants modified the situation. Formal accommodations such as extra testing time or a separate test setting were among the most common accommodations used by participants. All participants who registered with the SU’s DSO had an accommodation of priority registration, allowing them to register for classes first, to more easily manage disability-related limitations. Although Jennifer was not registered with the DSO, she received priority registration as a student veteran. She explains why this resource is helpful:

The ability to register early, I think is a fantastic resource. I'm able to make the classes when and how I want them so that I only go to school two or three days a week, ideally. And, I can do no morning classes, cause I take medicine at night and it makes me really tired. So, the earliest I really would want would be like 11 or 12.

For student veterans, who usually have families or other priorities at home, priority registration made a big difference in providing an opportunity to best schedule both classes and time at home.

Formal accommodations provided through the DSO gave participants the opportunity to access their education without, or with fewer barriers. In addition to testing accommodations, accommodations can be provided in the classroom (such as audio recording, use of a computer,
note-taking, among others). Nate talked about how his accommodations have allowed him to perform at an equal level with his peers. He describes:

Before I was getting help, and even now ... test taking's kind of where I felt the biggest impact, but note taking, everything, processing some of the information, and recalling, I can't do it as quickly as I did before, and it was so frustrating when I started college. It was bothering me. It was taking twice as long to do homework than it should have, and it was taking- I was feeling rushed on tests. It was ... I mean, there were nights where I was pulling all-nighters on just a difficult school night because I wasn't able to process fast enough or my mind would be jumping to other things and I couldn't focus or just different things like that but now that I have a LiveScribe pen that I can re-listen to the lecture to kind of help myself focus in or, like on a test, with recalling the information, I've got a sheet I can use with non-tested information that helps me with some of the things that I might struggle to remember so as far as the process goes.

Accommodations, formal and informal, and self-coping strategies were the most common ways participants modified the situation.

**Control.** Controlling the meaning of the problem was another strategy that participants used. Although the problem or stressor itself cannot be changed, the participant can look at it from a different mindset. They can try to assess how they can make the situation positive by looking at it from a different angle. When asked to provide a picture to summarize their transition to SU as a student veteran with a disability, over one-third of the participants provided pictures that illustrated how they controlled the meaning of the problem, or the transition. Those images and descriptions are shown in this section.
According to JJ, the caption for his photo would read: “Channel, either previous conflict you've had or the change in danger, adventure and comradery, that you may have had, and kind of, re-channel that in to something that's very freeing.” JJ describes why he chose the photo above:

I took a picture of my sailboat, it's kind of been, during the last two years, been, kind of, a transition, I mean, doing a very adventurous, dangerous, exciting job and then trying just to be a student, kind of, not lost myself, but, needed something else, to fill that gap, within the realms of normality. So, a friend of mine, was really in to sailing, and so, I went out with him a few times, and joined a local club, and really kind of fell in love with it. I really fell in love with the freedom it had, with the work and control that it needed, and it gave me a new sense of adventure and something to focus energy on in a positive way. It's really been a Godsend over the last year and a half, or so, to kind of like, working on it, and sailing, and learning, so, yeah, so that's why I chose it.
Figure 4.11. Rob’s Response to the Photo Prompt

To caption his photo, Rob shared the following:

You need to ... Everyone gets out sooner or later. You need to move on. It's better for you to move on. You have to move on, and the best way to do that is by finding something or some things you're passionate about, and focusing on those things for a productive direction to take your life in. You're looking forward, while also helping you deal with whatever is unsettled about the past, or angry things that you're angry about when you got out. Even if you're not angry about things from when you got out of the military, it's just that kind of hole that's in your life. You need to fill it with something. Find something that you're passionate about ... You were passionate about before the military, or that interest you gained while you were in.

Rob describes why he chose this photo:

I was hoping that that would kind of capture the chaos. I have some gym gear set on the table in the foreground, just to show that, okay, while I'm working on these problems, I still had this hanging over my head. My other priority, I'm going to be running out the door to take care of that, or maybe I just came back from the gym. The picture is really to capture the essence of those 2 competing priorities. I don't know, I wouldn't really call them competing priorities, but just the 2 main things that I focused on. When I was
getting out, I didn't want to wait another semester, and I just jumped right in. I was real busy, because I had to be. My girlfriend reminded me. She said, ‘You didn't want to do it half-assed or anything. It was all or nothing.’ I think, the way I approached it was, I'm going to do it 100%, to its completion, not turn something in that somebody else kind of helped me out with, that I don't quite understand. I want to understand everything I'm doing. When I turned it in, it's got to be done right.

![Image of an ice cream cone](image)

**Figure 4.12. Mark’s Response to the Photo Prompt**

Mark shared he would caption his photo with the following statements:

I'd say just slow down and enjoy the moment for a sec. Enjoy this, because it's a new experience. It'll be a defining experience, so...don't be so uptight. Just kinda slow down a little bit, have your priorities but enjoy the small stuff. It matters. It helps with the big stuff.

Mark chose the picture of the ice cream cone as it reminded him of his freedom. He shares his reasoning:
Actually, I'd say that pretty much represents what my transition has been like, which has been pretty much just me experiencing things that I hadn't experienced before when I was in the military. So, I took that photo Saturday. It was Saint Patty's Day, downtown [city name], and we didn't do the typical, ‘Oh, let's go get wasted,’ type of thing. It was kinda just like, ‘Let's go have a few beers, watch the games,’ the March Madness NCAA tournament. So, we met some friends, watched the game, and it was really nice out, so we're just like, ‘There's an ice cream place right around the corner, let's just go do that and then we're gonna walk to [street name] to look at whatever they had going on downtown.’ So that's pretty much what we did. So, getting out, for at least that first year and a half, was mainly me just like, ‘I'm gonna go do all these things that I can just do on a Tuesday or a Saturday,’ because it wasn't here, or it wasn't where I was living at, or I just didn't have the time. So, pretty much that picture just represents me transitioning out into the broader world where you have this big mix of different people and different cultures, and people just kind of going about doing stuff they want to do. So, I was just like, ‘You know what? If I wanna walk around downtown [city] with a triple scoop of ice cream on Saint Patty's Day, you know what, I'm gonna go ahead and do that. I've never really done that before. I'm gonna go ahead and try that.’ That's pretty much what the picture represents to me. Just trying new things, just being open, and just kinda taking time to slow down and kinda enjoy the moment, if you will. Don't be so stressed or worried about what tomorrow brings. Just kinda enjoy today for a second.
As a caption for this photo, Scratch chose the following phrase: “There’s a better place for you and me.” When asked why she chose that picture, Scratch shared:

Bella has been a rock for me through transitions. That's the one I finally settled on, because I went through a variety of other options. Bella was sweet... I used to pick her up and dance around, and say, ‘There's a better place for you and me.’ So there's a better life for you and me is out of the song, which is interesting when I was finding that ... that's what I would sing to her, just that one line because I couldn't remember the rest of it. But, I didn't realize that song is actually considered the anthem of the Vietnam War. So, the rest of the lyrics are about just growing up blue collar, living blue collar, there's a better life for you. But, it came out the right time during Vietnam, so it was all about that. So, I just discovered that, which I thought was interesting about being military-related. So, every time I moved somewhere, or when something comes down really hard or tragic or whatever, we used to dance around.
Steve shared the following caption for his photo: “If you find the right field that you're interested in, leaving the military to finding that field and being educated in it can be very rewarding.”

When asked to describe why he chose that photo, Steve explained:

> It's a computer model of a capacitor, which is a fairly common electrical component in phones and computers and everything. They're really small, but the voltage is split across them in an electrical system. They charge up sort of like a battery. But that's the ... It's basically a picture of the voltage, and inside of it, positive and negative, but in various colors. It helps us kind of understand the shift in voltage from one side to the others, and so the ... There's sort of layers in it. There are layers in it that once ... Some layers are positive. Some are negative, and they're interlaced between each other, which is what makes the device work, and ... But it develops really high electrical fields, and so there's problems with the device integrating over time. This kind of helps us see how that works a little better.

All five of these participants’ images reflect how they were able to change their mindset, view the transition in a positive manner, and keep moving forward. Photos captured finding new hobbies, such as sailing, and new areas of study. Photos also captured different outlooks such as having hope and learning to enjoy the moment. Additionally, photos captured how one can
refocus their energy into something new. Regardless of the way in which the situation or problem was controlled, participants used different strategies to overcome the problem.

**Manage.** The third type of strategy listed by Schlossberg et al. (1995) is manage, or those strategies that manage the stress of the aftermath. There are situations or problems that cannot be modified or controlled; the events unfold, and the individual must look to see what they are going to do next. Because all of the participants were still enrolled in SU at the time of interviews, and they were specifically asked to reflect on their first semester at SU, most participants did not talk about future plans or strategies they would use. Marie and John were the only two participants to share strategies that managed the situation. Marie used her experience transitioning to SU to push her academically now and for a terminal degree in the future; John is using his experience as an active duty veteran at SU to help veterans transitioning to universities in the future.

Marie was one participant who used her difficult transition to SU to manage her future. She shared:

I was struggling before, and it's just kind of something that I never really took up seriously. I was like, ‘Ah, whatever, it just kinda happens.’ But then a year and a half goes by, two years go by, and then I'm like, ‘Okay, I really like education. I want this to be in my future. I want to get my PhD, I want to teach, so I have to get this taken care of.’ And it just wound up being the timing because getting my associates was just a way for me to test the waters, and I was like, ‘I love this stuff.’ And then my first semester here I was like, ‘Philosophy. That's it.’ And then I fell in love with it and I was like, ‘Okay, if I want this to be my future, I have to do really well.’ And I can't have any excuses that'll
hold me back, including this. So, I have to take it just as seriously as I do waking up early to go to the gym. It's no different. It's something you have to work on.

Marie had a difficult first semester at SU, but was able to come back, reframe her thinking, and focus on why she was in school. Her focus was on a future degree and a career goal. Similarly, John also used his transition experience to lead his career path. He explained:

I'm hoping to kind of break the stigma and I think by being a clinician and working with military members. The hardest part is the buy-in obviously for any treatment or any kind of communication with anybody. It's the first and the last part of everything. So, if I can say, ‘Hey look I was there, I've seen it. I deal with it, I have a service dog. And I'm living it.' And I can be somewhat a success story to somebody, I think we can reach more people and make a better change. I shift it to that kind of from being too prideful and let's not talk about it. To like, "It's okay." Those two can work together until one becomes well adapted, then that's another story.

As a student veteran with a disability, John is hoping to use his own experiences and stories to help other veterans make similar transitions.

**Strategies summary.** Strategies are those that modify, control, or manage a situation or problem. When going through the transition into a research extensive institution as a student veteran with a disability, participants shared they used strategies of modification by self-reflecting and using formal and informal accommodations. Some participants used strategies of control to reframe their mindset and focus on positive outcomes of their transition. Lastly, two participants used strategies that managed their transition by reflecting on their current situation and how they could make the most of that transition for themselves or for individuals who would be in a similar situation in the future.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transitioned into a research extensive institution. The study aimed to answer the research question: How do the factors of situation, self, support, and strategies shape the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transition to a research extensive institution? Using a demographic questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a photo prompt, student veterans with disabilities shared their transition experiences to a research extensive institution. Their experiences were then coded according to the Four S factors supplied by Schlossberg et al. (1995) transition theory. All themes fit under a known S factor; emergent subthemes arose as findings regarding disability and research extensive institutions needed to be included.

This chapter will provide a summary of Schlossberg et al. (1995) Four S factors (situation, self, support, and strategies) as applied to student veterans with disabilities at a research extensive institution. I will provide subthemes that confirmed previous studies and discuss new subthemes within the major theme. I will then share theoretical implications, implications for future research, and implications for practice.

Discussion

This study was guided by Schlossberg et al. (1995) transition theory. Studies have been conducted to better understand transitions of student veterans into postsecondary education (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012; ). Of the studies conducted, none have focused on the transition experiences of student veterans with disabilities transitioning to a
research extensive institution. This section will reflect on past literature that has been conducted and demonstrate how the findings from this study extend the current literature.

Schlossberg et al. (1995) defines transition as “any event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 27). A transition is three stages one moves through: moving into the transition, moving through it, and moving out of it. Wheeler (2012) added student veterans go through two transitions, one transition from soldier to civilian and one from civilian to student. Hammond (2016) adds that veterans who are in the process of transition to both civilian and college life are in the midst of a fluid process without a definitive ending to that transition. Participants in this study shared their experiences transitioning to SU from the perspective of civilian to student; however, those stories included experiences from their time in the military confirming findings by both Wheeler (2012) and Hammond (2016).

The four S factors as presented by Schlossberg et al. (1995) included situation, self, support, and strategies. These four factors shape the transition experience for an individual. They examine what triggered the transition, role change, other concurrent events, who the individual is (demographically and psychologically), what support systems an individual has and the strategies they employ. Findings from this study follow the four S factors with additional subthemes that emerged. Each of the four factors are analyzed further next.

**Situation**

Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined situational factors as those that triggered the transition, the timing of the transition, if there was a role change, and having a similar previous experience. Financial concerns, benefits, and allocation of transfer credits were also included as additional concurrent stress factors by other authors (Ackerman et al., 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Schiavone & Gentry, 2015). Participants in this study shared experiences about each of these
aspects of situation. One difference that was specific to the population of this study, was that disability triggered the transition to education for the participants. Either they were medically discharged from the military or they no longer could perform their trained specialty (due to disability) and decided to further their education, thus, also altering their role change.

Student veterans with disabilities shared their stories of previous experiences, most of those experiences being a previous transition to education such as going to a community college. They also shared other stress factors they were facing as they made their transition to the university. Factors such as finances and benefits were described as stressful by participants (Ackerman et al., 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Schiavone & Gentry, 2015). In addition to factors shared by Schlossberg et al. (1995) and the other authors mentioned, finding time to study or spend time with family and the time it took to commute to campus were other stress factors that participants shared. Semer and Harmening (2015) also found that the more time a student spent commuting to class, the more likely their GPA was going to be lower. Although this study did not take GPA into account, or even ask of GPA from participants, having a lower GPA can indicate a more difficult transition.

Self

The factor of self, as explained by Schlossberg et al. (1995), included demographic and psychological features of the individual. Some demographic data, such as age and sex, was collected from participants but was not analyzed to see if it shaped the transition experience. One of the most notable findings for this study was the impact disability had on the individual. All participants were diagnosed with a disability acquired during their time in the military. The disability affected each participant either physically, emotionally, or mentally and impacted the participant throughout the day, in-class, or when taking exams. The impact of disability was
varied; however, it was felt by all participants. Since the time that data was collected for this study, Elnitsky, Blevins, Findlow, Alverio, and Wiese (2018) found that 92.7 percent of student veterans experience chronic pain that impacts them on a daily basis. It is important to include how disability shapes one’s identity.

Participants did disclose their identities and other psychological aspects that expressed who they were. In terms of identity, participants were varied in the identities they shared. Some shared they were comfortable stating they were a student veteran with a disability, some did not want to disclose their disability status, and some did not want to disclose their veteran status. The reason participants shared why they did not want to disclose was due to how the other individual may perceive them. Perception from others was a theme that emerged from the data and does support findings by Hammond (2016), which also stated student veterans did not want to disclose their status to other students because they may be seen as a “killer”.

Similarly, to the perception of self from others, was the students’ sense of belonging on campus. Participants did not feel as though they fit in with their peers and found it difficult to find study partners or do group work. Jones (2017) also found this to be the case at the community college level, even though there was more of an opportunity to be surrounded by more non-traditional students.

Lastly, factors of self-efficacy and resilience were substantial themes that emerged from the data. Participants were able to not only believe they would be successful at SU, but also pushed through any barriers that they came across. Reyes, Kearney, and Bryan (2018) share that student veterans build resilience as they are able to integrate various aspects of personal and academic challenges. While resilience and self-efficacy are psychological factors and fit within
the Self factor of the transition theory, it is critical to understand an individual's ability to believe they will be successful and how resilient they are.

Support

Support factors, according to Schlossberg et al. (1995), consist of three facets: types, functions, and measurements. During this study, the type of support the individual used or had was focused on. Functions and measurements were discussed; however, data was not collected to address these two aspects. The most common type of support used by student veterans with disabilities was institutional. Participants shared their stories about the DSO and the MRC finding support from both campus offices. Only six of fourteen participants used the services provided by the DSO. This supports the suggestion by Parks and Walker (2014) that student veterans with disabilities are less likely to seek support services (regarding disability) because they do not see themselves as being disabled. This could also be because they may not know of the services they could receive through the DSO (Gwin et al., 2012). Although over half of participants did not visit the DSO, all participants did visit the MRC at some point during their transition to SU.

Relationships were the next type of support that was found to be thematic within the study. Participants shared they felt more connected to fellow veterans rather than their civilian peers. This supports previous findings (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010); however, this contradicts a recent study by Jones (2017). Jones’ (2017) study revealed that veterans found it easier to connect with non-veterans because non-veterans did not know what the veteran had gone through, and therefore could not make assumptions about their experiences. Although the study by Jones was conducted at a community college, it would be important to explore how and why student veterans with disabilities choose the support systems they do.
Participants in this study also described positive and negative interactions with faculty members. For those participants who had positive interactions, they shared they were able to talk to the faculty member about life circumstances and built relationships with them. Because the faculty member was seen as a support to the student, faculty members were included under the factor of support. Rumann and Hamrick (2010) share that interacting with a faculty or staff member is in a form of experiencing a positive situation and therefore, include it as a situational factor. Are relationships, including those that may be temporary in nature, a form of support? Or because they are temporary, should they be considered situational?

**Strategies**

The last, and most varied, factor of the transition theory is strategies. These are actions an individual may use to modify a situation, control the meaning of the problem or situation, and those that manage a situation after the fact (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Participants in this study shared strategies that fit within the themes of modify, control, or manage. Strategies varied by participants and also vary by author. Previous studies have shown that strategies are employed by individuals (Love et al., 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014) and also by the university (Branker, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Goldberg et al., 2015; Parks et al., 2015; Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013; Summerlot et al., 2009). Participants in this study relied on themselves to modify, control, and manage their transition. Most of the strategies focused on changing their state of mind for better mental health, other participants used accommodations through the DSO office or adjusted on their own. One participant used his experience to support future student veterans with disabilities transitioning into universities. The most notable aspect of this theme is that the strategies participants used focused around their disabilities.
Conclusions

Overall, four main conclusions emerged from this study, one from each of the Four S factors. The first conclusion is that disabilities create a concurrent stress factor when transitioning to a large research extensive institution. The second is that undergraduate students, more than graduate students, did not feel as though they belonged on campus. The third conclusion is that institutional supports were the most common type of support used by all participants. And lastly, participants used strategies of control, their sense of agency, through their transition. This section will further discuss these four conclusions.

Disabilities created a concurrent stress factor when transitioning to a large research extensive institution. Participants shared that the size of the institution was difficult to navigate due to physical limitations such as back and knee pain. In addition, the size of some of the classes also created barriers for the students. Participants shared they experienced anxiety and difficulty concentrating due to the number of people in the classroom. One participant added how he had to sit in certain spaces of the classroom to hear the instructor. It is possible these barriers would not exist or may be less impactful at a different institution type.

The second conclusion was undergraduate students, more than graduate students, did not feel as though they belonged on campus. Undergraduate participants questioned whether SU was the right place for them or felt as though they did not fit in. One participant shared his GPA was not great in high school and he was not sure if he would be able to handle the workload at SU. Other participants shared it was hard to make friends or find study partners due to the difference in age. Sense of belonging is an aspect that impacted the participants factor of self when making the transition to SU.
The third conclusion was institutional supports were the most common type of support used by all participants. Although important, it was less common for participants to talk about support from their family and community. While all participants did not use the disability services office, they all did interact with the military resource center at some point during their transition, sometimes even multiple times. They used the military resource center to navigate the financial and benefit process, to find other veterans, and as a place to retreat to. Depending on the resources available, some institutions may not have a military resource center, or other institutional support offices used by the participants.

The last conclusion was that participants used strategies of control, their sense of agency, through their transition. Participants recognized that different aspects of their transition to SU were challenging; however, to move through that challenge, participants shared how they would change their mindset. Participants had the ability to focus on positive ideals and events in their lives, rather than the stressful situation at hand. These participants would still have this sense of agency regardless of institution type; however, this conclusion focuses on the note that this population has a strong sense of agency.

Implications

Implications for Theory

When coding the data, most themes and subthemes were found when employing the a priori coding process which followed the Four S factors and the subthemes within provided by Schlossberg et al. (1995). In addition to a priori coding, open coding was also employed and found additional subthemes that should be considered in conjunction with those used by Schlossberg et al. (1995). Prominent subthemes that emerged from this specific population included specific types of concurrent stress factors, psychological features, institutional supports,
and strategies the student veteran with a disability practiced. This section will share specific subthemes and why they should be considered when using transition theory. In addition, I will share an additional factor that could be added.

Other authors (Ackerman et al., 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015) have included concurrent stress factors as a situational aspect. Specifically, for student veterans with disabilities at a research extensive institution, financial, housing, timing, and disability were all concurrent stress factors that emerged within this group. However, different from previous findings, disability was the one factor that emerged. Student veterans with disabilities have common stress factors as other student veterans without disabilities transitioning to postsecondary institutions. Participants in this study were impacted by their disability as they transitioned to the university. Disability is an additional stress factor that other populations do not have to experience, and therefore, when considering transition theory, the stress of disability needs to be a situational factor that is acknowledged.

Various psychological features emerged during the open coding process: identity, sense of belonging, perception from others, age/maturity of classmates, self-efficacy, and resilience. While all of these subthemes should be considered when employing transition theory, sense of belonging and the thought of how this population was perceived by others are two subthemes that are specific to this population at a research extensive institution. Throughout the study, participants, specifically undergraduate students, shared feelings of self-doubt, uncertainty regarding their ability to be at the institution, and gave more thought about whether or not to share their veteran and/or disability status.

Regarding the factor of support, the most common form used by participants was institutional. Support from campus offices such as the Disability Services Office and the Military
Resource Center were the most commonly used offices shared by participants. While the named offices do not have any implications for theory, in general, campus offices that support specific identities should be considered when looking at the transition to the institution.

Lastly, when examining strategies in transition theory, most authors (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; McGovern, 2012; Summerlot et al., 2009) share strategies the institution can employ to assist the student in making a successful transition. In this study, strategies were those the student used to move through their transition. Student veterans with disabilities at a research extensive institution used strategies of control. They explained their ability to refocus their energy into positive aspects and activities, so they could continue through their transition journey.

Overall, concurrent stress due to disability, sense of belonging on campus, support from individual offices on campus, and sense of agency are all subthemes that need to be considered when looking at transition theory and the transition of other populations. These subthemes emerged from a small population of students at a research extensive institution. The subthemes that did emerge could have been very different had the study been conducted at a small associates or baccalaureates college.

When coding the data, some emergent themes were originally coded under a theme of “Surroundings” as the data directly related to the environment the participant was in. For example, navigating the large campus with a physical disability would be different on a small campus where buildings are closer together. Environmental factors have yet to be considered in transition theory. As we look at the four subthemes that were just discussed, they could fall under the factor of surroundings. Some of the concurrent stress factors related to disability would have been different on a smaller campus, participants may have felt like they belonged at a university
that was smaller, or less rigorous, and support services offered such as the DSO and MRC may not be found at other institutions.

**Implications for Practice**

**Institutional.** The findings of this study revealed the lived experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transitioned to a research extensive institution. From these findings, four recommendations are presented for research extensive institutions: 1) Provide additional benefits to all student veterans; 2) Provide detailed information regarding campus resources at the time of enrollment, more specifically, information about disability services; 3) Increase staff and faculty awareness through Green Zone training programs; and 4) Strengthen the partnership between SU and local community colleges.

**Additional benefits.** The first recommendation is to provide additional benefits for student veterans on campus. Some of these could be applied to the entire university from a universal design approach. From the results of this study, recommendations for additional benefits include transportation on campus, temporary housing, and access to the gym at earlier hours. Participants with orthopedic and mobility impairments had difficulty navigating the campus on foot. It could be recommended for the MRC on campus to have golf carts to help their student veterans with disabilities navigate the physical campus. If the university has a system like this in place for all students with mobility impairments, this information should be highlighted to the veteran when transitioning to campus.

Unless the student is a local resident, it is unlikely they know where they will be living once they enroll on campus. For some veterans, separation from the military to enrollment is a quick process without ample time to find adequate housing for the student veteran and/or their families. One recommendation is for the university to set aside temporary housing for veterans as
they enroll in the university until they are able to secure permanent housing for themselves. This would take away additional stress for the student transitioning to the institution. Temporary housing for veterans would also provide the veteran an opportunity to meet other veterans, possibly in similar situations.

The last benefit is to open the gym at earlier hours. Most participants in this study shared they missed the structure of the military. In most responses regarding structure, participants shared stories of beginning their day at the gym. However, currentlY, at SU the gym opens too late for some and they are unable to use it at an early time that is convenient to them. By opening the gym doors one or two hours earlier (for those with veteran identification or all students), it would provide access to the student and keep a more preferred routine.

**Information at onboarding.** The second recommendation drawn from the results of this study is to provide detailed information regarding campus resources to the student at the time of enrollment, throughout their onboarding process, and beyond. As students transitioned to the large university, most found it difficult to navigate the campus and find their classrooms or resources they needed. Once a student veteran is accepted to the university, it is recommended they are sent information regarding campus structure and resources as soon as possible. This recommendation supports other studies (DiRamio, 2015; Glover-Graf et al., 2010) and suggests it is critical to ensure student veterans know of the resources available. Simply creating programs is not enough, veterans must be explicitly told these programs exist.

The MRC was a commonly used office for all participants. This would be a great place for veterans to find information about campus resources. The office could send a welcome packet to the newly enrolled veteran that includes information about overall campus structure, benefits, transportation, housing, counseling, and disability services. The results of this study
suggest that not enough student veterans with disabilities know the services the DSO can provide. It is also suggested that student veterans are informed of the DSO at the time of enrollment, throughout their onboarding process, and throughout their time at SU. For those students using benefits through VR, DSO information could be provided to those students to ensure they know of the resources available. Although it may be difficult to disclose a disability as it could be seen as a sign of weakness (Parks & Walker, 2014), it is important veterans understand the support available to them.

**Green Zone Training Programs.** The third recommendation from the results of this study is to increase veteran awareness of faculty and staff through Green Zone training programs. Increasing veteran awareness on campus supports the findings of other research (Barry et al., 2014; Dillard & Hu, 2018; Grossbard et al., 2014; Parks et al., 2015; Sporner, 2012). Participants in this study shared their frustrations with faculty and staff who did not seem supportive of student veterans. Although the university has a Green Zone Training program in place, not all faculty and staff are required to participate. Also, some participants did not know the program existed and therefore, could not seek out those faculty and staff members with the training. Dillard and Hu (2018) suggest that faculty and staff not only need to be educated about these programs but be able to train others as well. It would be unreasonable to train every faculty and staff member at a large, public research extensive institution. However, it is reasonable to train all faculty, associate deans, or department heads and have each share information with their departments.

**Community college partnership.** The fourth and last recommendation is to strengthen the partnership between the local community colleges and SU, or the nearby four-year institution one may transfer to (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013). Participants shared their difficulty transitioning to
SU due to shock about physical campus size, class size, and class structure. Some participants shared that what they learned at the local community college did not prepare them for their coursework at SU. In addition, most community colleges did not have the resources available that SU had, and once the student transitioned to SU, they assumed those resources were not there. By strengthening the partnership between the local community colleges, it would better prepare student veterans with disabilities (and all community college students) for their transition to SU. This partnership would primarily focus on academics, such as ensuring courses are transferable, so that academic credits are not lost. Another focus could be within the local community college’s student affairs division who could provide information on the resources available at nearby four-year institutions.

**Faculty.** Faculty members were shared as a form of support for most of the participants in this study. Those participants who felt they were able to form relationships with their instructors, felt supported as a student. Based on the results of this study it would be recommended for faculty members to reach out to students, specifically those who are non-traditional, and offer support. For faculty members who are unsure how to support student veterans, taking the Green Zone Training would be recommended. If the faculty member is uncertain about how to support students with disabilities, they can contact the DSO on campus. Regardless of background of the faculty member, creating a form of contact with the student and offering support is recommended.

**Veterans.** Student veterans on campus were an additional form of support that was shared by participants. Interacting with other veterans brought back a shared relationship, comradery. As student veterans with disabilities transition to the research extensive institution, they should reach out to their military resource center and seek other veterans. Participants
shared it was helpful to meet other veterans and that it was good know they were not the only one in their position. If the veteran transitioning in is having difficulty with benefits, or navigation, or the transition overall, it is recommended they seek resources such as the military resource center as they should be able to direct the veteran to the support resource.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study explored the experiences of student veterans with disabilities as they transitioned to a research extensive institution using Schlossberg et al. (1995) transition theory. Previous studies have examined the transition of veterans from military to college (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012;). Student veterans with disabilities transitioning to a research extensive institution has yet to be explored. The findings of this study emphasized how being a veteran with a disability impacts each of the four transition factors. However, more research needs to be conducted regarding this population of students. This section will suggest three areas of future research to be considered.

The first area to explore further is that of identity development. What does identity development look like for those with acquired identities, such as veteran and disability? Crenshaw (1989) recognizes the importance of analyzing how two or more oppressed identities intersect with one another, such as being Black and a woman. In terms of identity development, what does it mean to be a veteran with a disability? Throughout this study, participants monitored when they shared their identity as a veteran, and even less commonly shared their identity as someone with a disability. Is this because these identities are new? If we take an example of a Black woman (assuming they are not transgender), that individual was born with both identities; they have known of themselves to be Black and a woman their entire life.
Although individuals can be born with disabilities, the participants in this study all had acquired disabilities, and most of them recently. Participants joined the military after the age of 18. For some, their time as a veteran represented less than half their lifetime; however, length of time does not take the identity away. What does identity development look like for populations who acquire an identity, especially an identity in an oppressed group? Is it the newness of these identities that make them unlikely to be shared? Is it the possible stigma associated with being a veteran? Or the stigma associated with having a disability? Identity development for acquired identities should be explored.

The second question to consider would be, how does the debriefing process a student veteran with a disability goes through shape their transition to postsecondary education? Ackerman et al. (2009) shares this process is a situational factor. Although participants in this study did not share their debriefing process, some briefly alluded to the process and information shared. Due to varying reasons for separation and varying disabilities, veterans with disabilities have differing debriefing processes when separating from the military. What educational information is shared with this population? Are they aware of the resources available to them? Unless the participant was a student at a previous four-year institution, when they separated from the military, they began at the community college. Is community college the standard recommendation for veterans? If so, is this why they are unaware of resources at four-year institutions? Veterans can have high levels of training in certain fields, why do undergraduates not begin at a four-year institution?

The last area of recommendation for future research is, how does resilience shape the transition experience for a student veteran with a disability? Student retention rates are just beginning to be studied (Cate, 2014). However, what makes a veteran with a disability stay
enrolled? What keeps pushing them through? I would suggest using an academic resiliency model such as that presented by Martin (2002). Sheerin, Stratton, Amstadter, Education Clinical Center MIRECC Workgroup, & McDonald (2018) explored resilience models for combat veterans. Although approximately half (N=849) of participants were in mental health treatment, this was not applied to higher education. Each participant in this study faced a barrier, or many barriers, during their transition to SU. There is a resilience factor within this population of students and it should be investigated.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of student veterans with disabilities transitioning to a research extensive institution. Participants shared their own narrative following Schlossberg et al. (1995) transition theory. Disability factored into each aspect of the four S factors. And although there were factors and barriers involved in each participants transition, each showed strength and self-determination as they matriculated at SU. Student veterans with disabilities can be classified as a group of disciplined, determined, and resilient individuals who bring unique perspectives and diverse experiences to the university that would otherwise be lost within the academic community.
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Appendix A

Email to Student Veteran Center

Dear Mr. Nick Drake/Daniel Hackley,

I am conducting a study as the final step of my doctoral degree. The study is titled, “Exploring the Experiences of Student Veterans as they Transition into a Research Extensive Institution.” As the director of the Student Veterans Center, I was hoping you could please send an email on my behalf. The email (below) should be sent to all students who are in your database. This study has been approved by the IRB at NCSU. I am available for questions or concerns at the contact information below.

Thank you,
Jamie Bojarski
jlcoccar@ncsu.edu
814-397-0198 cell

Dear student,

You are receiving this email because you are listed as a veteran using an educational benefit with the university. I am currently working on a research project that focuses on student veterans with disabilities. I understand some students may or may not want to disclose their disability status to the university and I hope to talk with students who have disclosed their disability and also those who have not.

My name is Jamie Bojarski and I am a current Ph.D. Candidate in the Educational Research and Policy Analysis program here at NC State. I also work as a full-time staff member in the Disability Services Office. Currently, I am in the process of working on my dissertation that will explore experiences of returning student veterans who acquired a disability while they were on active duty.

Are you interested in participating?

Participants should:
- Have acquired a disability while on active duty
- Have been separated from the military for less than five years
- Be a student veteran
- Not be enrolled in a distance education program

Study Requirements:
- Complete an initial interview, including a demographic questionnaire (approximately 60-90 minutes)
- Take one photo that represents your transition to the university as a student veteran with a disability
- Complete a second interview (approximately 45 minutes)
You will **not** be asked about your deployment nor any of your duties while in the military. The questions will only focus on the transition you made coming into NC State. *My goal is to understand how your disability has impacted, or not impacted, your transition into the university.* The interviews can take place in the Student Veterans Center, the Library, or another location of your choosing.

If you are interested, please contact me as soon as possible at jlcoccar@ncsu.edu.

For participation in this study, you will earn a $25 Amazon gift card!

Participation in this study will not change any disability status you have, or do not have, with the university and you will remain anonymous.

Thank you. I appreciate your time and I hope to hear from you.

Jamie Bojarski
APPENDIX B

Email to the Disability Services Office

Dear Mr. Newmiller,

I am conducting a study as the final step of my doctoral degree. The study is titled, “Exploring the Experiences of Student Veterans as they Transition into a Research Extensive Institution.” As the director of the Disability Services Office, I was hoping you could please send two emails on my behalf. The first email should be sent to all students who have disclosed that they have a disability and they are a student veteran. The second email should be sent to all students who have disclosed a disability to the office. By sending both emails, I am hoping to notify a student veteran with a disability that has not disclosed their veteran status to your office. This study has been approved by the IRB at NCSU. I am available for questions or concerns at the contact information below.

Thank you,
Jamie Bojarski
jlcoccar@ncsu.edu
814-397-0198 cell

Email to students who have disclosed disability status and student veteran status:

Dear student,

You are receiving this email because you checked off that you were a returning veteran on your disability disclosure statement when registering with the Disability Services Office. I am currently working on a research project and if you still meet these criteria, I encourage you to please read further.

Some of you may know me as your access consultant in the disability services office. For those that do not know me, I work with students who have learning disabilities and brain injuries. I am also a current Ph.D. Candidate in the Educational Research and Policy Analysis program here at NC State. Currently, I am in the process of working on my dissertation that will explore experiences of returning student veterans who acquired a disability while they were enrolled in the military.

Are you interested in participating?

Participants should:
- Have acquired a disability while on active duty
- Have left the military for less than five years
- Be a student veteran
- Not be enrolled in a distance education program

Study Requirements:
- Complete an initial interview, including a demographic questionnaire (approximately 60-90 minutes)
- Take one photo that represents your transition to the university as a student veteran with a disability
- Complete a second interview (approximately 45 minutes)

You will **not** be asked about your deployment nor any of your duties while in the military. The questions will only focus on the transition you made coming into NC State. *My goal is to understand how your disability has impacted, or not impacted, your transition into the university.* The interviews can take place in the Student Veterans Center, the Library, or another location of your choosing.

If you are interested, please contact me as soon as possible at jlcoocar@ncsu.edu.

For participation in this study, you will earn a $25 Amazon gift card!

Participation in this study will in no way impact your current accommodations or status with the Disability Services Office. As a participant, you will remain anonymous.

Thank you. I appreciate your time and I hope to hear from you soon.

Jamie Bojarski

**Email to students who have disclosed disability status only:**

Dear student,

You are receiving this email because you are registered with the Disability Services Office. I am currently working on a research project that focuses on student veterans with disabilities. I understand some students may not disclose their veteran status when registering and I want to reach out to you.

Some of you may know me as your access consultant in the disability services office. For those that do not know me, I work with students who have learning disabilities and brain injuries. I am also a current Ph.D. Candidate in the Educational Research and Policy Analysis program here at NC State. Currently, I am in the process of working on my dissertation that will explore experiences of returning student veterans who acquired a disability while enrolled in the military.

If you meet the criteria, I hope that you will participate.

Participants should:
- Have acquired a disability while on active duty
- Have left the military for less than 5 years
- Be a student veteran
- Not be enrolled in a distance education program

Study Requirements:
- Complete an initial interview, including a demographic questionnaire (approximately 60-90 minutes)
- Take one photo that represents your transition to the university as a student veteran with a disability
- Complete a second interview (approximately 45 minutes)

You will not be asked about your deployment nor any of your duties while in the military. The questions will only focus on the transition you made coming into NC State. My goal is to understand how your disability has impacted, or not impacted, your transition into the university. The interviews can take place in the Student Veterans Center, the Library, or another location of your choosing.

For participation in this study, you will earn a $25 Amazon gift card!

If you are interested, please contact me as soon as possible at ilcoccar@ncsu.edu.

Participation in this study will in no way impact your current accommodations or status with the Disability Services Office. As a participant, you will remain anonymous.

Thank you. I appreciate your time and I hope to hear from you soon.

Jamie Bojarski
APPENDIX C

Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this study. Please complete the short questionnaire below. The information will be used to compile demographic data of all participants.

Your preferred pseudonym _________________________

Gender __________

Age _______

Class standing (circle one): Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate

Branch of Service (circle one): Air Force Army Marine Corps Navy

Years of Active Duty: _______

Number of credit hours completed prior to enrollment at [Institution Name] _______
Where were these credit hours completed? _____________
Were any of these hours completed prior to enrolling in the military? ____
If yes, how many? _______

Are you registered with the Disability Services Office? Yes  No

Please check your diagnosed disability or disabilities.

- Anxiety
- Brain Injury
- Chronic Illness
- Depression
- Hearing Loss
- Mobility Impairment (if possible, please be more specific) _______________________
- Posttraumatic stress
- Vision Loss
- Other _______________________


APPENDIX D

Interview One Protocol

RQ1: How do student veterans with disabilities describe their transition experiences as it relates to situation, self, support and strategies?

Introduction: I would like to thank you for meeting with me. I know your schedule is busy and I appreciate the time you are taking to meet with me as a participant in this study. Before we begin, I’d like to provide a brief of what the interview process will look like. First, we will go over the consent form. Next, I will have you complete a demographic questionnaire. Lastly, once the questionnaire is complete, I will be asking you to share your experiences as you made the transition to [Institution Name]. All information shared with me today will be kept confidential. The stories you share will be under the pseudonym you choose. Today, I have just three questions for you; however, I may ask a few follow-up questions depending on your story. You may choose to not answer any of the questions asked of you; participation in this study is voluntary, and you may stop participating at any time.

1. I have just three questions for you. First, I want to know how you got to [Institution Name] and why you chose [Institution Name]. I want to hear this story from your point of view. I hope that you’ll be able to share with me your journey from the time you left your position in the military through today. Please share as much as you would like to. I may have a few follow-up questions depending on what you shared.

   Possible follow-up questions:
   Situation:
   a. As you made this transition, what came as a surprise to you?
   b. What were you expecting?
   Self:
   a. How were you impacted emotionally transitioning to the university?
   Support:
   a. What relationships did you make when you first came to the institution? This could be with a university department or with someone on campus. How did that relationship shape your transition?
   b. What support systems did you use as you transitioned? Family, friends, other veterans… and how did they impact the transition?
   Strategies:
   a. What barriers did you come across and how did they impact your transition?

2. Thank you. Now, can you share with me what a typical day would look like for you? Walk me through a day from when you would wake up until you would go to sleep that night.

3. Do you think having a disability has impacted or altered your transition in any way?

   Possible follow-up questions:
   a. Situation:
i. Did having the disability impact the timing of you coming back to school?
ii. What was your experience of the campus environment as someone with a disability?

b. Self
i. How do you feel your disability has impacted your role as a student on campus?
ii. How do you think your experience as a veteran helped to shape this additional identity as a person with a disability?

c. Support
i. What support systems have you used: this can be through the university, other student veterans, family and friends, or other community members.

d. Strategies
i. What resources did you use to modify limitations caused by your disability? For example, someone with ADHD has difficulty with attention and focus, what may they have used to be successful?

4. Is there anything additional you’d like to share about your transition experience?
5. For our next meeting, I would like you to send me a digital photo that represents your transition to the university and the discussion we had today. It can be a photo of an object, a person, song lyrics, there are no limitations. When we meet again, I’d like to talk to you about the photo and why you chose what you did.
APPENDIX E

Consent Form

North Carolina State University

INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: Exploring the Experiences of Student Veterans with Disabilities as they Transition to a Research Extensive Institution

Principal Investigator: Jamie Bojarski
Sponsor (if applicable): Dr. Chad Hoggan

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences student veterans with disabilities have as they transition to a large university.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will first be asked to complete a 30-60-minute interview. When you complete the interview, you will then be asked to take a picture of an object or place prior to coming in for the second interview. Next, you will complete a second interview ranging from 15-60 minutes. Lastly, I will ask that you review my first draft of findings to ensure I was able to understand and capture what you stated correctly.

Risks and Benefits
There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. Depending on the information you share, you may experience anxiety or panic; the interviews will take place during the NC State Counseling Center’s operating times. There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are that this study can provide knowledge to others to create better practices at the university and within community organizations.

Confidentiality
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely on a password protected drive. Your pseudonym will be used for all data points and therefore, data will not be able to be linked back to you. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

Compensation
For participating in this study, you will receive a $25 Amazon gift card at the end of your second interview. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will not receive payment. If you choose to complete both interviews and not submit a photo, you will still receive full compensation.

What if you are a NCSU student?
Participation in this study is not a course requirement and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your class standing or grades at NC State.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Jamie Bojarski, 2815 Cates Ave, Suite 2221 (Student Health Services Building), jlcoccar@ncsu.edu, or at 919-513-3766 (office) or 814-397-1098 (cell).

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the IRB Office via email at irb-coordinator@ncsu.edu or via phone at 1.919.515.8754.

Consent To Participate

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject’s signature _______________________________ Date ______________
Investigator’s signature _______________________________ Date ______________
APPENDIX F

Interview Two Protocol

At our last meeting, we talked about your transition to the university as a student veteran with a disability.

1. How have you been since that time?
2. Can you tell me about the photo you chose and why you chose that one?
3. If this photo was going to be used in a book given to other student veterans with disabilities, how would you want it captioned?
4. What advice would you give to another student veteran with a disability who is about to make the transition to [Institution Name]?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share that you think is important to this study?
## APPENDIX G

### A priori and Open Coding Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S Factor</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Exemplary Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trigger</td>
<td>What precipitated the transition</td>
<td>I was still in the military when I got back from deployment, that's when I realized I really wanted to get out, so I started going back to school. -Marie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Timing</td>
<td>Is the transition considered on time or off time in terms of one's social clock?</td>
<td>It can be daunting. Kind of scary at times, too, to know that your whole life is changing. Especially if it's an involuntary separation. If you're getting out, you can prepare for that. But if you're being told you're getting out because of an injury, that's a total change in your circumstance. -JJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Role Change</td>
<td>Is a role change involved? Is it seen as a gain or a loss?</td>
<td>To transition completely out of this social structure of the military into being a civilian. And a student at that. So, that's a big change in a very short amount of time. It was definitely difficult. Far from impossible, but it was definitely an adjustment, I guess is the best way to put it. -Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Previous Experience</td>
<td>Has a similar transition happened before?</td>
<td>Changing from a community college to a university is a big difference. -Jennifer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Concurrent Stress</td>
<td>Are other sources of stress present?</td>
<td>See open coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CS: Financial</td>
<td>Relating to financial stress and benefits</td>
<td>I went from December 20th, my last day in the Army, medically retired December 20th, and it was February 20th when I found out my pay information. I think that was kind of the biggest challenge, especially with kids and a family. -Sheldon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CS: Housing</td>
<td>Commute, location of home, finding a home</td>
<td>For a military guy, especially active duty, you have to figure out where you are going to live, but say you are going to a school that you really want to go to and you've been there. And know you have to house hunt and you have to figure out where to live, where not to live on top of transitioning. -John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CS: Time</td>
<td>Relating to the lack of time</td>
<td>I have breaks between my classes to go to the library and study and go to my next class. Then wrap up, go home, study before the kids get home and work on their homework. -Beau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CS: Disability</td>
<td>Relating to additional limitations due to disability</td>
<td>I have a four out of ten headache I've had for six years, from the thirteen concussions, three TBI's [traumatic brain injuries], so… three plates, sixteen screws in my head, just, I don't know… it wears you down. -JJ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX H

Participant Quote Summary/Member Check

Participant name: Nate

Below are snippets of quotes you shared when we had our interviews. These quotes are provided to you so that I can ensure I’m not completely misinterpreting what you shared. **Unless something is ABSOLUTELY NOT correct, please leave the quote be.** The University has not approved for me to obtain additional data (more information from you) via email. Again, this is simply a check to ensure I haven’t misinterpreted what you have said. The quotes will be intermixed with other quotes from other participants, so some of them have been cut short, but it’s to tell more of a story about the theme with more people. Please note that I have changed names of people, universities/colleges, cities, and states as to not identify you, or the school in which interviews took place (NCSU).

Prior to these quotes being provided, I do provide a background of who you are: age, military branch, years of service, people you live with, and other items you have shared that did not fit into exactly one of these topics but built a picture of you for the reader.

Also, if you respond, you WILL receive an automatic Out of Office Reply. I am able to receive those messages; however, the response is required due to my previous position with NCSU.

I thank you again for participating in this study. I had 14 total participants, and 14 very similar, yet very different transition experiences. I will notify you once the dissertation is published and of course, you will be welcome to read it.

**Situation:** These quotes provide the background of what you were getting into when you transitioned to NCSU, such as: timing and trigger of your transition, previous experience you’ve had, other stress factors in your life, your changing role, and barriers that may have been impacted due to disability.

After I separated, I came back here with my now ex-wife so she could be closer to her family. Was looking at working, looking at college trying to figure out what I wanted to do. Started at Local Community College ‘cause I didn’t think I was ready for a four-year institution right out the gate. Did a year there, got some of my general ed classes knocked out, some of the stuff they told me would be needed coming up here, wasn’t exactly true, but dealt with it. Then the reason for choosing SU was the [major] program. I talked to several different people including my Voc Rehab [Vocational Rehabilitation] counselor and she highly recommended SU along with other folks I spoke with. So, I applied. I honestly didn’t think I’d get in but I did, thank goodness, and, I mean I love it here.

I spent a lot of time on the road that first semester
Self: These quotes identify who you are as a person. Some demographic information, your psychological abilities (resilience/ability to move forward), identity, and your sense of belonging on the campus

I understand the need for the extra help. I guess when I started here, I was a little too prideful to ask, which hurt me in the long run. I'm retaking classes that I shouldn't be.

Part of it was I was kinda just out of practice as far as studying, test taking, and all of that and I'm still out of practice. I don't think I'm nearly as good of a test taker as I was before, but I didn't necessarily have the greatest GPA in high school. I think I was 2.6, 2.7, somewhere along there and, for like coming out, college was never an option for me. So, I kinda carried that mentality through.

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It hurt in the beginning 'cause it was back to that pride thing, "I can do this on my own. I don't need help." I mean, it's the same idea as going to sick call in the morning or something like that, where you're hurt or you're actually sick to the point you shouldn't be exercising but it seems as kind of a weakness, even though they're trying to get away from that stigma. It's still there. Even if it's unspoken. So, you ... you don't get the help you need necessarily. It took some urging from several different people to do it. My voc rehab counselor was the last one that said go see you guys and come back otherwise I'm not signing off on your paperwork.

I will insert the picture you gave me “Fight On” in this section. Caption: Fight for yourself. Fight for what you don’t have access to. Don’t take no for an answer. Be your own advocate. Description: The reason I chose it is not necessarily because of SU itself, but because of the things that I've gone through since I've been here. It seems like it's been a constant fight, constant kinda trying to keep thinking about things balanced, and struggling, and some of the personal things I went through. It's been that fight. So it's kind of become my mantra, just fight on, keep pushing.

As a student, academically, it's made it difficult. I mean, It's not gonna stop me. I'm going to make my goal. I'm going to be a teacher.

Support: These quotes will show the support systems you discussed (whether they were helpful or more of a hinderance) such as: institutional, support from DRO, MAVRC, friends, faculty, family, peers, community, etc.

I didn't know about DSO starting out. No one talked to me about it, no one worked with me, or even told me to go talk to you guys until my first meeting. I was struggling, was feeling rushed in every test, and I was frustrated with myself cause things kinda weren't coming as quickly to me as they were before. So, she recommended me going and talk to you guys.
Peers don't seem to have an issue with it. They think it's a cool idea that I'm getting help like that.

It's like, once you come here and once you graduate, it's like you're always a member of this giant family you're building.

It hurt in the beginning 'cause it was back to that pride thing, "I can do this on my own. I don't need help." I mean, it's the same idea as going to sick call in the morning or something like that, where you're hurt or you're actually sick to the point you shouldn't be exercising but it seems as kind of a weakness, even though they're trying to get away from that stigma. It's still there. Even if it's unspoken. So, you ... you don't get the help you need necessarily. It took some urging from several different people to do it. My voc rehab counselor was the last one that said go see you guys and come back otherwise I'm not signing off on your paperwork.

Don't be afraid to ask. I didn't even know about DSO at first, even when I found out, I thought, oh, that's not for me. I don't need that help. But then it ended up I got pushed to you guys. It shouldn't have taken that long. I should have came to you guys when I started. So don't be afraid to ask for the extra. Don't be afraid to go looking for what's available to you.

**Strategies:** These quotes discuss ways in which you dealt with stress or the transition to NCSU.

Before I was getting help, and even now ... test taking's kind of where I felt the biggest impact, but note taking, everything, processing some of the information, and recalling, I can't do it as quickly as I did before and it was so frustrating when I started college. It was bothering me. It was taking twice as long to do homework than it should have and it was taking- I was feeling rushed on tests. It was ... I mean, there were nights where I was pulling all-nighters on just a difficult school night because I wasn't able to process fast enough or my mind would be jumping to other things and I couldn't focus or just different things like that but now that I have a LiveScribe pen that I can re-listen to the lecture to kind of help myself focus in or, like on a test, with recalling the information, I've got a sheet I can use with non-tested information that helps me with some of the things that I might struggle to remember so as far as the process goes.