Examining the Experiences of Student Veterans on Campus: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study

By

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Abstract

Student veterans represent a rising proportion of university students due to the increased utilization of state and federal education benefits. However, few studies have examined the daily experiences of these individuals following combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and how these experiences may influence the success of these individuals on civilian campuses. The current study includes individual interviews with four student veterans from the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater. To better understand student veteran experiences and identify factors that increase or decrease academic and transition success, I utilized a phenomenological framework. The findings reveal that student veterans: have unique perspectives due to differing values from their civilian peers, have needs influenced by various converging identities and roles, and experience a continuum of connectedness with peers and faculty. Additionally, limitations of the current study are addressed and suggestions for future research with this population are presented.

Key words: student veterans, civilian campus, daily experiences, phenomenological design
Examining the Experiences of Student Veterans on Campus: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study

The United States has been actively engaged in military operations for nearly two decades following the al Qaeda-led terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The subsequent combat operations in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom, OEF; Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, OFS) and Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom, OIF; Operation New Dawn, OND) have comprised the most sustained U.S. combat activity since the Vietnam War (Torreon, 2018).

The post-9/11 combat operations have resulted in over 2.5 million military veteran personnel returning to the U.S. civilian population with more post-9/11 veterans choosing to pursue a college education than veterans of previous military conflicts (Borsari et al., 2017; United States Department of Veterans Affairs [VA], 2016). Furthermore, the number of veterans utilizing veteran benefit programs (e.g., Post-9/11 GI Bill, Montgomery GI Bill) has steadily increased to over a million education beneficiaries within the past five years (VA, 2018). The result of this increase in veteran pursuance of college education, particularly with the Post-9/11 GI Bill, has been the funding of nearly 450,000 post-secondary degrees or certificates and the funding potential for approximately 100,000 additional degrees per subsequent year (Student Veterans of America [SVA], 2017). This trend suggests an optimistic future for the educational potential of returning veterans, though there are also substantial barriers that student veterans face in the attainment of postsecondary education.

Student veterans continue to represent a significant minority of less than five percent of the U.S. postsecondary student population despite their increased pursuance of
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college education (United States Department of Education [U.S. Education], 2016). This presents specific challenges for student veterans attending college as student veterans tend to experience unique stressors and circumstances compared to their nonmilitary peers. On average, student veterans are older than nonmilitary students (U.S. Education, 2016; SVA, 2017), are married (U.S. Education, 2016; SVA, 2017), and have a service connected disability (e.g., Posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD], Traumatic brain injury [TBI]; VA, 2018; SVA, 2017; Borsari et al., 2017; Grag, Ysasi, and Marini, 2015). These differences between student veterans and nonmilitary students can be particularly challenging for student veterans and may contribute to the nearly thirty percent postsecondary attrition rate among student veterans (SVA, 2017).

A persistent challenge faced by student veterans is that many tend to experience difficulties forming interpersonal relationships with nonmilitary students due to differences in identities and characteristics, which, in turn, may decrease the student veteran’s academic functioning and experiences (Fredman et al., 2018). Student veterans may have difficulty forming interpersonal relationships with nonmilitary students if nonmilitary students perceive student veterans as dangerous and unstable (Schreger and Kimble, 2017) or if the student veteran had experienced previous exposure to traumatic events (Smith, Vilhauer, and Chafos, 2017). These factors may further inhibit the academic success of student veterans as they may experience complications or prolongations in their transitional process to the less structured and hierarchical environment of civilian colleges (Borsari et al., 2017). Combined, student veterans tend to experience unique transitional factors that are often rare for nonmilitary students, including, but not limited to: losing a sense of identity and purpose in the military as one
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becomes a veteran (Naphan and Elliot, 2015) and experiencing incongruity between military and civilian life (Reyes et al., 2018). Additionally, some of these unique factors may include poorer post-deployment social support and readjustment to previous relationships (Young, 2013; Reyes et al., 2018; Freytes et al., 2017; Zinger and Cohen, 2010) and coping with physical and mental service-connected disabilities (Borsari et al., 2017; Graf et al., 2015; SVA, 2017). The combined impact of these factors suggests that student veterans experience a variety of unique stressors that are not experienced by their nonmilitary peers and that these factors can affect their academic experiences and success.

**Purpose of the Present Study**

As previously stated, the student veteran population requires additional consideration given the scale of potential future enrollments and unique obstacles faced by student veterans as they transition from military operations to civilian colleges. The current body of literature has made numerous recommendations on how campus communities can increase the sense of community and academic success among the student veteran population, though there is still disagreement on the emphasis placed on certain factors (e.g., accommodations for service connected disabilities like PTSD and TBI) and how to best implement policy changes (Borsari et al., 2017). Furthermore, the majority of studies examining student veteran experiences in college and demographics were conducted while military combat operations were active in Iraq and Afghanistan. As such, there is a paucity of research that adequately reflects the present experiences of student veterans currently enrolled in postsecondary educational institutions following the U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. This necessitated an updated
investigation into the experiences and perceptions of student veterans as they pursue college educations as military veterans on a civilian campus. Thus, the following research questions guided the study: What are the daily experiences and perceptions of student veterans attending a civilian postsecondary educational institution? Which factors do student veterans believe facilitate or inhibit the successful pursuit of their educational goals? And which factors do student veterans believe facilitate or inhibit their transition into civilian environments?

**Researcher Background, Context, and Positionality**

At the time of this study, I was a counseling student and the current study was completed as part of the requirements for a master’s degree conferment. I entered the counseling program with a passion for the military and factors related to the well-being of military personnel that stemmed from having multiple family members who had served in the military. I recognized that their experiences varied both within the military, some being more positive than others, and that their needs after the military were often informed by their experiences. However, I had felt limited in my capacity to adequately advocate for these needs due to my age and perceived lack of experience with non-familial members of this population.

My interest in the phenomenon of student veteran experiences on civilian campuses was further informed by my work over the last seven years with the military veteran population. I had formed multiple friendships with student veterans during my undergraduate career at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, and I gradually became more involved with the student veteran organization on campus as a means to interact with and advocate for this population’s needs. During my time with the student veteran
organization, I engaged with multiple student veterans and became more informed through their disclosures about their perceived uniqueness from traditional students. Furthermore, I increased my awareness of the disconnection between civilian and veteran students by the lack of engagement of civilian peers during campus-wide events hosted by the student veteran organization. Because of this, I had served as the vice president of the student veteran organization to both advocate for student veteran needs and encourage the engagement of civilian students with their student veteran peers.

My work with student veterans at the University of Wisconsin – Madison highlighted the perceived uniqueness within this population compared to their civilian peers. Multiple student veterans described to me stressors that they had experienced that were not experienced by their civilian peers (e.g., becoming intoxicated and getting into physical altercations to cope with traumatic memories from military service, having to disclose killing enemy combatants during class icebreaker activities, etc.) and that some student veterans explained how they felt their campus experiences aligned more with racial minority students than with their civilian peers. Furthermore, these experiences were described as barriers to their academic goals as they did not believe they were receiving adequate support during their transition to civilian environments. Because of this, I wondered whether these experiences were universal among student veterans on civilian campuses. I also wondered whether the academic success and perceived well-being of student veterans could improve with additional support during this transitional period and, if supported, which factors would be most beneficial for this population. As such, this study was conducted to examine the experiences of student veterans at the
University of Wisconsin – Whitewater and whether similar needs were shared among this population.

Method

I conducted an exploratory, phenomenological study to describe the experiences of student veterans on a civilian campus. Qualitative research methodology was particularly suited for exploratory purposes as it allowed for the inclusion of experiences that have not been previously examined (Koch, Niesz, and McCarthy, 2014; Hunt, 2011). The study aimed to address the lack of research that adequately describes the daily experiences of student veterans following the conclusion of U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in addition to the discrepancies within the existing body of literature about which factors and policies are the most beneficial to the academic success of student veterans (Borsari et al., 2017).

Reflexive Statement

According to Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2013), phenomenological research “attempts to understand individuals’ lived experiences and the behavioral, emotive, and social meanings that these experiences have for them” (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell, 2013, p.11). Moustakas’ design was chosen as the phenomenological framework to illuminate how today’s student veterans navigate their daily existence at a civilian postsecondary educational institution by: (a) determining the research problem and phenomenon to study; (b) bracketing researchers’ experiences; (c) collecting data from several persons who experienced the phenomenon through in-depth interviews; (d) analyzing data through horizontalization, textural description, and structural descriptions; and describing the essence of the study. The understanding gained from this approach can
be crucial in addressing social issues and problems in a fairer, more effective manner (Koch et al., 2014).

**Participants**

To participate, participants had to have: served and discharged from any branch of the United States Armed Forces, are not currently serving in any branch of the United States Armed Forces, and are currently enrolled either part-time of full-time at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater. Five University of Wisconsin – Whitewater student veterans were recruited and four participated as one participant failed to schedule an interview within the data collection period and was excluded from this sample. Participants identified as male (75%, n = 3) and female (25%, n = 1); White/Caucasian (100%, n = 4); age range was 33 to 45 years old (M = 37.75, SD = 5.85). Participants identified as undergraduate (75%, n = 3) and graduate (25%, n = 1) University of Wisconsin – Whitewater students and all participants were enrolled part-time (25%, n = 1) or full-time (75%, n = 3). Participants had previously served in the United States Army (50%, n = 2), Marine Corps (25%, n = 1), Air Force (25%, n = 1), and/or National Guard (50%, n = 2) with years served in the military ranging from 8 to 23 (M = 13.17, SD = 8.52). All participants identified as enlisted personnel at time of discharge and had been involved in OEF (75%, n = 3), OIF (25%, n = 1), or both OEF and OIF (25%, n = 1) combat operations. All participants had been deployed at least once while in the military with the number of times deployed ranging from 2 to 7 deployments (M = 4, SD = 2.45). Most participants had engaged in combat activities while in the military (75%, n = 3) and some had been injured or wounded in the military (50%, n = 2).

**Data Collection and Analysis**
Recruitment. Before data collection, the current study was granted human subject review committee approval by the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater Institutional Review Board (IRB). I recruited participants for the study through targeted advertisements via email, social media, printed flyers, or in-person presentations (see Appendix D) as well as snowball sampling within the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater student veteran organization. Individuals interested in participating completed an online survey indicating demographics, inclusion criteria, and availability for a semi-structured interview (see Appendix B). I contacted eligible participants via email to schedule a semi-structured interview on the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater campus and participants received written information regarding the informed consent process and informed consent documentation prior to the interview (Appendix A).

Data Collection. I conducted five in-person interviews that ranged from 23 to 53 minutes ($M = 42.2, SD = 11.69$) with one participant requiring a second follow-up interview due to the participant’s scheduling restraints. Participants received additional verbal information regarding the informed consent process, the consent process, confidentiality and limits of confidentiality, and their rights as a participant during the informed consent process and prior to the interview (Appendix C). I discussed any questions or concerns expressed by participants prior to the initiation of the interview to confirm that participants fully understood their participation. Participants also received a copy of their signed consent form at the end of their interview that included the contact information for additional community counseling resources if the participants required additional support (Appendix A). I followed an interview protocol in a semi-structured
manner by utilizing a list of predetermined interview questions with additional follow-up questions asked for clarification or depth of response (Appendix C). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed by hand, and copies of the transcriptions were emailed to the participants for possible corrections and feedback to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions.

**Data Analysis.** To align with Moustakas’ recommendations, I completed field note journals throughout the interviewing process to record my thoughts, emotions, reactions, and hypotheses in order to bracket my potential biases during data analysis. I read the transcripts in the open coding process and, following the completion of data collection and the completion of my field note journals, used horizontalization during six cycles of data analysis to assign equal value to statements. The statements were clustered into themes and I developed master codes for phrases via line-by-line analysis in order to capture the nuances of meaning for participant responses. I further analyzed the data through textural description and structural descriptions to identify broad assertions, and corresponding sub-categories. These themes, broad assertions, and sub-categories were discussed amongst the members of the committee to increase overall face validity and inter-rater reliability. I utilized triangulation methods to identify the most representative participant responses for each broad assertion and sub-category and performed a member check by emailing the participants a copy of the completed study results to confirm their agreement with the accuracy of the study’s analysis and interpretations.

**Establishing Trustworthiness.** I reduced potential researcher bias by utilizing multiple trustworthiness strategies to describe the process of the study and maximize the validity and rigor of the study (Morse, 2015; Birt, Scott et al., 2016). As such, I utilized
several strategies to increase the trustworthiness and validity of the current study. I established and followed a methodology as defined by the current study being a phenomenological qualitative study. As mentioned previously, I used Moustakas’ (1994) steps to a phenomenological study to describe the essence of the study. The use of semi-structured interviews further increased the trustworthiness of the study by facilitating consistency through a standardized coding scheme which, in turn, increased inter-rater reliability and decreased researcher bias and subjectivity (Morse, 2015).

The use of an audio-recorder during the semi-structured interviews provided reliable data during transcription and reduced my subjective biases. Furthermore, the transcriptions were sent to the participants to check for accuracy and potential corrections (i.e., member checking; Birt et al., 2016). Finally, transcriptions were coded after member checking in accordance with Moustakas’ steps (i.e., horizontalization, triangulation) to capture the essence of participant responses, particularly in the identification of structural (i.e., large themes) and textural codes (i.e., small themes; Moustakas, 1994). I utilized several additional trustworthy strategies outside of the data analysis, including but not limited to: (a) completed reflective journals to bracket biases and assumptions; (b) triangulation of data through the utilization of additional investigators to demonstrate the study’s validity and reliability (Morse, 2015).

Confidentiality and data storage. I have taken the necessary steps and precautions to protect participant confidentiality. All identifiable participant information (e.g., participant names, emails, phone numbers, addresses, Qualtrics survey responses, etc.) has been stored in an electronic spreadsheet on a password protected computer and no identifiable participant information was used in the dissemination of the current
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study’s results. Furthermore, any additional documents with identifiable participant information (e.g., signed consent forms, written correspondence, etc.) have been stored in a locked filing cabinet separate from other data. All other electronic data containing identifiable participant information (e.g., interview schedules) were replaced with participation codes (e.g., VP06). Additionally, all participants chose a pseudonym at the start of their interviews and audio-recordings and transcriptions have only referred to participants by their pseudonyms. All participant information has been omitted and replaced by participant pseudonyms in the dissemination of the current study’s results.

Interview data and audio recordings has remained confidential with file names corresponding to participation codes and has been stored on my password protected computer. All data files and audio recordings will be retained for a minimum of three years in accordance with federal guidelines and then destroyed.

I informed participants during the informed consent process of situations where they may need to breach participant confidentiality under the following circumstances: (a) participant revealed the intent to harm or kill themselves; (b) participant revealed the intent to harm or kill others; (c) in cases suspected of child, elderly, or adult-at-risk abuse or neglect; (d) the current study’s records were subpoenaed by a court of law.

Additionally, I informed participants that they may need to breach participant confidentiality if the participant was subject to the requirements of United States Standard Form 86 (SF 86) Section 21. A participant’s affirmative answer to SF 86 Section 21 may have initiated a federal request for information related to the participant’s mental health while participating in the current study if the federal agency determined that the requested information was necessary to evaluate the participant’s consideration
for, or retention of, national security positions. Finally, I informed participants that they could not guarantee participant confidentiality or anonymity in the event of snowball sampling as data collection occurred within a minority population within the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater campus. I asked all participants to keep any information shared within the context of current study confidential within the above listed exceptions and the scope of the law.

**Findings**

I identified three broad assertions related to the experiences of student veterans attending a civilian campus: (a) differences in values compared to civilian colleagues, (b) student veteran needs being informed by their identities, and (c) the experience of a continuum of connectedness with others on campus. These broad assertions contextualize the daily experiences of these student veteran participants, and I will present each broad assertion with, when applicable, its corresponding sub-categories.

Pseudonyms were used for each participant to not only preserve confidentiality but to also maintain the unique characteristics of each individual. Some student veteran participants chose pseudonyms that reflected their military experiences, like “Talon”, while other participants chose “Andy”, “Billy”, and “Kate” because they liked these alternate names.

**Differences in Values**

Differences in values emerged as student veteran participants repeatedly expressed attitudes, viewpoints, and opinions that they believed differed from those of their civilian counterparts. All student veteran participants described situations where they believed these differences were salient, pronounced, and, in some cases, either
mitigating or amplifying their perceived differences from non-veterans. The common experiences described can be defined by three sub-categories: (a) student veteran values were derived through their experiences, (b) student veterans experienced challenges from their differing values, and (c) student veterans experienced strengths from their differing values.

**Values Derived Through Experience**

Every student veteran participant believed that their values were derived through their experiences in the military. Participants described how the rigid routine and structure of the military had a galvanizing effect on their values because it instilled a sense of accountability and work ethic. Almost all of the participants described these values promoted within the military as necessary for them to complete their missions as a team, and that without that sense of accountability there would be a breakdown in communication or personal obligations that may put their team at risk. As such, these participants described how their values within the military carried over to their lives on a civilian campus. Billy explained:

“I think the structure and the discipline that I received in the military has helped me make my grades a priority. I don’t have to show up to class, I do all the time, even on Fridays when I know there’s gonna be six people in the lecture of sixty people. It’s (pause) the military established in me a work ethic and that’s definitely come with me to college. I work hard in all my classes. Because I want to succeed.”

The predominant theme described among the student veteran participants was that despite each one having multiple obligations and responsibilities in their lives, their primary
mission on-campus was to succeed in their educational goals. As such, the values instilled within the military pushed them to pursue those goals with an intensity that sometimes outpaced their civilian peers because that is what they believed they needed to do to accomplish their mission. This intensity, in conjunction with the values of prioritizing education, communication, accountability, and work ethic, was seen repeatedly among the student veteran participants as they described their approaches to class, homework, and interpersonal communication. Andy stated that:

“…another thing that I brought from the military is if you’re not fifteen minutes early, you’re late. So if you’re on time you’re late. I really pride myself on being on time. And, I also try to pride myself on getting back to people, because I know how important that was in the military. If somebody asked you something, I may not have the answer for it, but I’m gonna try to find it and get back to you on it.”

These values pertaining to accountability, communication, and honesty repeatedly manifested themselves in the experiences of the student veteran participants. These values were critical for the safe completion of their jobs and overall missions within the military and appear to have carried over in their lives as veterans, thus influencing their work and way of being on a civilian campus.

In addition to the emphasized values of the military structure, many participants described their values related to communication, accountability, and work ethic as being strongly influenced by experiences within the military that sharply contrasted with their civilian experiences. The participants described situations of extreme stress, tension, uncertainty, and hardship that occurred daily. These experiences broadened their worldviews and tended to put their civilian concerns and values in perspective as they
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encountered situations often unseen elsewhere in the world. The student veteran participants described experiences of trauma that had occurred during their time in the military with one such situation described by Talon:

“I went, I signed the contract, I went through basic training, (inhales) and then I’ve deployed, I’ve seen hell, you know, firsthand. And I’ve gained a certain appreciation for human life that I probably would’ve never even began to have understood without having that experience. For example, when I was gone, one of the things I’ve seen that really kind of opened up my eyes was, um, I’ve seen starving children. I’ve seen children that were basically skin and bones and begging for water, begging for food. And, they were probably three, four years old, and, seeing that, seeing a third world country up front. And seeing these children begging for food really made me appreciate the privileges that I have growing up in America. And the privileges that my children will hopefully have one day as well. It made me really start to appreciate life a little bit more because (laughs) when I first enlisted, I was young and, and the world revolved around me. And then when I actually went and seen the world for what it is, it made me appreciate it a little more.”

To many, these experiences increased their awareness of pain, hardships, and struggles that occur elsewhere in the world, and this awareness has helped define their values related to gratitude, freedom, and insight. Every participant described situations where they believed their civilian counterparts on campus lacked similar awareness, and they tended to consider some civilian students and faculty as oblivious, naïve, or self-centered. Kate described a situation as such:
“…it’s easy for them to get caught up in their everyday jobs, or their woe is me, you know? Like, ‘Oh I have to work, oh, I have this, oh, my boyfriend, oh my God’, you know? There’s such a bigger world out there, there are people suffering that need us. And sometimes it’s like, grow up. There’s a lot more to life than just working and fights with your boyfriend!... my last deployment was helping wounded soldiers get the medical care they needed. I was responsible for helping take them off of the aircraft and load them into ambulances and then get the aircraft ready for its next mission. I would say just being in that role of helping those soldiers with their care. It was amazing, we supported the flight medics and flight nurses. They were amazing in how they could keep their cool and calm and be able to make decisions and knowing that this guy’s a double amputee, and maybe even some soldiers came off just being kept alive on a breathing tube. And how they could just hold all those emotions and do their job. That inspired me to want to do my best, too. And be there for them, and be in the moment, and take care of everything, and then kind of deal with those emotions later.”

These experiences highlighted situations that are unique to student veterans due to their experiences in the military. Because of this, the student veteran participants expressed values that were influenced by these experiences and differed from civilians who have not shared similar experiences. As such, the student veteran participants expressed a set of values that influenced their work and way of being on campus that made them unique from their civilian counterparts. The net result of this uniqueness is that student veterans tend to experience both challenges on and bring strengths to the civilian campus.

Challenges from Differing Values
Student veteran participants repeatedly described that having values that differed from civilian classmates and professors was a significant frustration and challenge in the pursuit of their educational goals. Many of the participants explained how they perceived non-veterans on campus as not sharing their values for freedom of expression, freedom of choice, and sacrifice and expressed frustration when they witnessed situations where it felt like these values were being impeded by others. For some, like Kate, frustrations stemmed from the perception that her civilian peers do not value the rights and freedom that she had served in the military for:

“…when people complain about their freedoms or their rights, or that they should be able to do this and do that, it’s like, well, that’s what I went to war for. It was so you could stand there with your sign and say what you want. So, don’t complain about what veterans did or don’t do, or the military, or, (inhales) yeah. That can be a sore subject.”

Other student veteran participants felt frustrated by the belief that political biases on campus interfered with their peers’ ability to form opinions for themselves. As described by Talon:

“I’ve talked to a lot of veterans about this, we all talk about it down in the lounge. We’ll talk (inhales) you know, privately or openly, and we’ll be like, ‘Hey, I got this class, blah, blah, blah, I can’t believe this’. We always say they’re over there serving up the Kool-Aid, and this and that, and that’s because they’re pushing their political agenda (inhales). I’ve had veterans walk into the lounge and talk about professors pushing these students to go and lobby bills (exhales). It’s one thing to tell somebody to go and vote, it’s a different thing to tell them who to
vote for. Or to go and lobby a certain cause that they know this much about. I’ve definitely felt a little restricted when it comes to that, so I just kind of keep my mouth shut now.”

These situations tended to make the student veteran participants feel confined and pressured to conform to the civilian values and political beliefs if they wanted to succeed in their educational goals. These situations prompted expressions of frustration among the participants because they conflicted with their values about freedom of expression and the right to express their opinions without fear of penalty.

The student veteran participants also described situations where they felt frustrated because it did not appear that their civilian peers and professors shared the same value for sacrifice and service. As previously mentioned with the student veteran perception that civilian experiences tended to be myopic from their lack of global awareness, many of the student veteran participants described situations where they believed that non-veterans did not express respect for the military sacrifices that allowed them to have differing values. Andy explained:

“I was in class one time and we’re talking about existentialism, and there was a question, “What would you die for?”. And it’s not the first time I’ve heard that question. And I remember the instructor (exhales) I wouldn’t say that she was laissez-faire about the question, but I think she was trying to teach the curriculum and I probably took it a little personal. So, it was maybe a little bit of a triggering moment for me because it almost seemed like the instructor was talking about something they didn't know about, they’d never had to experience it... there’s been a couple moments where there’s been triggering effects, like, I can’t believe
you just said that… I try to control it as much as I can, but it probably leaks out every once in a while.”

These student veteran participants explained how these situations made it difficult for them to pursue their educational goals because it felt like their values derived from their military service were not understood or accepted on campus. Many of these situations included perceptions that their opinions and strengths were being confined or discouraged, and this contrasted with the values they believed they served and fought for. Ultimately, many of the student veteran participants believed that these differences in values present additional challenges and obstacles in their educational goals and make it difficult for them to express their individuality and experiences.

**Strengths from Differing Values**

Despite the challenges previously expressed, every student veteran believed that the values instilled in them during the military set them apart from their civilian counterparts and that these values were significant assets to the campus. Every student veteran participant believed that their values for integrity, a strong work ethic, and commitment to their mission made them exemplary students. As previously stated, these individuals described how these values were forged in an environment where their ability to perform a job well may be the difference between life or death for themselves and those around them. As such, Billy expressed a common sentiment that “I certainly wouldn’t be in the position I am now had I not joined the military. I wouldn’t have the work ethic and the integrity that I have now”.
These values were described as a tremendous strength among the participants because they expressed the belief that these were a shared set of values among student veterans. As described by Talon:

“you have to keep in mind that most of our soldiers have integrity, and that’s something that we pride ourselves on. Being honest and being straightforward. Because we don’t believe in beating around the bush because it doesn’t get you anywhere.”

The student veteran participants described this way of being, their interpersonal styles, as being assets to their peers and their classrooms. Every participant described how they valued sharing their experiences in addition to their work ethic and integrity because they believed this benefited those around them and made their class stronger as a whole. Kate explained that her experience in the Air Force made her value organization and efficiency when completing tasks. As such, she described multiple situations where her civilian classmates sought her assistance when organizing their own tasks:

“…being able to plan all my activities. Like, being able to stay on top of things. Knowing which assignments coming due. I had a student say something the other day, he said, ‘Oh, just ask Kate, she’s always on top of everything!’ , and I was, like, ‘Oh, thanks’, you know? I took that as a compliment. And I thought, ‘Well, it’s probably because that’s what we had to do in the Air Force’.”

These student veterans repeatedly described situations where they believed that their values learned in the military were strengths on campus. For some, there was the belief that their willingness to work hard to complete assignments made them feel like they
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were more committed to their academic goals than their civilian classmates. As described by Talon:

“…it gets to be overwhelming to see some of the lack of work ethic compared to that of veterans. People that have learned to set their priorities and get things done and get them done in order, and go back and review stuff instead of procrastinating, waiting till the last minute, and then cranking everything out in the last hour, at one o’clock in the morning.”

Because of this mentality, every student veteran participant interviewed believed that their values learned in the military not only helped them make progress towards their educational goals, but also act as strengths and resources for others on campus.

**Needs Being Informed by Identities**

The concept that student veteran needs are informed by identities emerged as the student veteran participants described the plurality of roles and obligations they fulfill in their daily lives. While student veteran participants varied in terms of the different roles they assume (e.g., spouse, employee, mother/father, etc.) all identified two important roles of nontraditional student and veteran. As such, these two identities are divided into subcategories. Below, I describe the unique needs inherent to each identity and how these identities ultimately shape the daily experiences on campus for these participants.

**Identity as a Nontraditional Student**

Each student veteran participant shared how they experienced difficulties managing their obligations as a nontraditional student. Participants described themselves as older than their civilian classmates, married, have children, and work outside jobs to support their families and their educational goals. All of the participants stated that they
commute to school and that managing their personal schedules, in addition to the
schedules of their spouses and children, is difficult and can cause additional daily stress.
As described by Andy:

“…when you have a family, and you work full-time it’s difficult. It’s only, like, a
thirty-minute drive for me, but still it’s a juggle of schedules. Like this semester I
decided to take both classes on the same day. So I’m here all day long. And that’s
torture. It’s torture. *(Laughs)* I don’t care how you spin it.”

The student veteran participants described their needs as nontraditional students being
unique from their civilian counterparts. Participants described how they often needed to
prioritize how they use their limited time and availability, and that there are situations
where they must sacrifice time for themselves and their families due to class scheduling
restrictions.

Most participants believed that the university primarily focuses on the schedules
of traditional students and did not adequately accommodate the schedules of
nontraditional students. These participants expressed the belief that they were limited by
the number of courses they could take because most class meeting times conflicted with
their work schedules. Furthermore, the participants described how they often have to
choose between sacrificing time with their families to take courses that accommodate
their work schedules (e.g., night courses) and overloading one or two days of the week
with classes that conflict with their work schedules so they can continue the pursuit of
their educational goals. A situation like this was described by Billy:

“This semester has been difficult. I’ve got a class that was only offered two nights
a week, from 6:30 to 7:45, and I’ve got a wife, I’ve got kids, you know? So, it’s
very hard for a, a student who’s got a family to have to stay late at night…it’s not fair to my wife, to work all day and then have to be alone with the kids. And I wouldn’t want that. I’ve got the same situation next semester where it’s the class I need is only offered at night. I’ve gotta do it. And it’s a big inconvenience.”

While the student veteran participants recognized that some traditional students may have experienced similar stressors, they also described the combination of these factors with stressors related to other identities as unique compared to their traditional student counterparts. Multiple participants stated that they felt guilty about their student obligations because they either placed additional stress and burden on their families or they felt like they were missing family experiences because of the time needed to complete their educational goals. For Talon:

“I go to class all day and then I go home and I do homework all night, even over the weekends and stuff like that. It makes me feel successful, schoolwise, but then again, as a parent it kinda makes me feel like I’m missing out a lot. My wife and my son will go to the park while I’m sitting there, stuck doing homework. (Inhales) I know it’s all for a good cause, and my wife always reminds me I’m doing it for a better future for all of us. But sometimes it kills me a little bit inside, I guess you can say, cause it does take away a lot of time from my family.”

Each student veteran participant expressed awareness that their stressors experienced as nontraditional students (e.g., full-time job, juggling schedules, spouse and family obligations, daycare expenses etc.) did not necessarily differ from those of other traditional students. However, the participants did believe that their identities as nontraditional students corresponded with their other identities that differentiated
themselves from their younger, traditional student peers. Because of this, the participants continued to express the belief that they experienced daily stressors that are not typically experienced by traditional students and that the university has not provided adequate accommodations to reduce these concerns. This was particularly challenging for participants as they described how grades impacted their perceived progress towards their academic goals and that high grades helped reduce the stress they felt from other factors in their lives. As such, participants described how the perceived lack of accommodations negatively impacted their grades and magnified their daily stressors.

Identity as a Veteran

In addition to their identities as nontraditional students, every student veteran participant also believed that their identities as veterans afforded unique daily experiences on campus. These unique daily experiences included adherence to a daily routine they perceived as more structured and rigid than their civilian peers, having their worldview influenced by international travel from military deployment, and having their perceptions impacted by encounters with dangerous environments. Participants repeatedly described challenges in their transitions from the military to the civilian world because of the differences in attitudes and structure that they encountered. Each participant described how life on a civilian campus was less structured than their lives in the military, and that this lack of structure provided both freedom and challenges. As described by Kate:

“…in the Air Force it was pretty rigid. I had to be at work at a certain time, and sometimes I always had people checking up on me...Going from a really structured environment to not being structured, and I know for everybody’s
personality it can be different for them, but, relying on that structure and then it not being there kind of gives you that anxiety. Because then you’re, like, ‘Oh, I have to think through this now. I have to figure this out now’. Just simple things of choosing what you're going to wear, going from wearing a uniform every day to, oh, now I gotta make sure I have clean clothes every day, and, I need more clothes.”

This difference in environments, the transition from a highly structured to a low structure environment, was disorienting for some participants. Some of the student veteran participants explained how the process of enrolling had been overwhelming because they needed to transition from a world that they were familiar with to one that offered little structure and support. These participants also described how it was challenging for them to obtain the information and support needed to complete their enrollment, schedule, and attend classes when compounded with previously stated stressors from their other identities.

These contrasting environments exacerbated the perceived differences some participants felt when comparing themselves to their civilian peers. Many of the student veteran participants expressed the belief that their civilian peers and professors did not adequately understand their experiences during the military and did not have an appropriate understanding of their identity as veterans. Talon explained “that’s one thing that a lot of people fail to understand and it’s hard (inhales) coming back into the civilian lifestyle after being in a situation where you’re in constant threat or danger and the fear of the unknowing of if you’re even gonna live that day”. Many of the student veteran participants believed that they were perceived by their civilian counterparts as different,
and that, in conjunction with their identities as nontraditional students, were treated differently from the younger, civilian traditional students. These participants explained that they felt like a minority on campus and that their identities, experiences, and needs were not being considered by the university as much as the civilian traditional student majority. As described by Billy:

“It doesn’t seem like the veterans are a priority to the university, in my opinion. I think they want to say that they are, but they’re not. I think the university could do certain things to help the veterans out. Whether it’s scheduling classes at more convenient times. Maybe waving some of these stupid gen-ed classes, you know?”

The student veteran participants stated that they did not feel adequately supported by the civilian faculty on campus. Participants described how the current faculty tasked with assisting transitioning student veterans was often difficult to reach and that they seldom had the opportunity to meet with them in-person. Many of the student veteran participants also described how they did not believe their academic advisors acknowledged their experiences obtained in the military and felt overridden when they required them to satisfy mandatory general education courses that these participants believed were unnecessary. However, the participants felt supported by campus faculty who shared their veteran identity because they believed these faculty members better understood their stressors as veterans and were more inclined to offer support to student veterans because of this understanding.

Continuum of Connectedness
The themes of isolation and connectedness became increasingly salient as student veterans described their experiences on campus. As such, a continuum of connectedness with others on civilian campuses emerged as the student veteran participants continued to describe experiences where they felt connected with or isolated from others on campus. Participants described situations where the degree to which they felt connected or isolated depended on how others interacted with them, and that a participant could feel connected with others with some people yet isolated with others. It was this continuum, with the subjective feelings of connectedness and isolation at opposite ends, that helped explain the feelings of comfort and belongingness expressed by the student veteran participants.

The primary factors that contributed to where a student veteran fell on the continuum of connectedness were as follows: (a) the validation of student veteran experiences on campus, (b) situations where the student veteran felt connected with others, and (c) situations where the student veteran felt isolated from others.

**Validation of Experiences**

One of the primary factors expressed by the student veteran participants that increased their feeling of connectedness was when others on campus validated their experiences. These validations included acknowledgements of their increased age and experience compared to traditional students, peers and instructors inquiring about their military experiences to act as subject experts for topics related to the military, and professors and faculty making accommodations for their nontraditional obligations and restrictions. Conversely, the greatest factors expressed by the student veteran participants that decreased their feeling of connectedness and increased their feeling of isolation was when university faculty did not validate their experiences.
Participants described situations where they believed their identities as nontraditional students, and the experiences gained by their increased age, work, and life factors, were not acknowledged and validated by their instructors. As such, the participants stated that they felt they were treated the same as a younger traditional student without similar life experience, which made the participants feel frustration because they felt invalidated and condescended towards. Billy expressed the sentiments that “I would like to be treated as an adult… Treat me like I’ve been around and I’ve done things in my life. I’m just not fresh out of high school, you know? I have some life experiences”. This desire to have life experiences validated was echoed by every participant because the participants believed their experience and accumulation of knowledge should be credited towards their coursework (e.g., general education requirements).

These student veteran participants also repeatedly described how they believed their increased age, knowledge, and experience could be an asset to their peers and professors because they could provide a unique viewpoint that could enrich the education of traditional students. Because of this, the participants felt frustrated when professors and faculty did not acknowledge these factors and their nontraditional identity because they believed it disregarded their experiences and stifled their ability to help others learn through their experiences. Kate described how she wanted to be “recognized for my experiences, that I am older, and been around the block a few times. And, I don’t want to give them that attitude of, ‘Oh, yeah, been there, done that’, you know? But, (pause) recognize I’ve had a lot of life experience and respect for that”. Every participant stated that they did not want to be treated specially or differently from their traditional student
peers, but each participant described how they simply wanted their identities as nontraditional students and veterans, including the experiences associated with those identities, acknowledged and validated. For Talon, the belief expressed was:

“I don’t want to say, like, treated specially, or any different, it’s just keeping that mindset in the back of your mind this person is older, they do have a family, they have been around the world or in different parts of the world and have seen some things that people only have nightmares about.”

The student veteran participants described situations where they felt most satisfied with the campus, peers, and faculty when these experiences were acknowledged and validated. Subsequent sub-categories will explain in further detail the specific situations where the student veteran participants felt that their experiences were validated or invalidated on campus and the effect these situations had on their feelings of connectedness or isolation.

**Feeling Connected**

Participants explained that they felt most connected when their experiences were acknowledged, validated, and understood by those around them. These situations most often occurred in the presence of fellow student veterans because there was the assumption that their experiences were analogous to the participants’ experiences. Because of this, the student veteran participants described how they believed that there was a shared language, that they could speak openly with their peers and be understood. These situations gave the participants a feeling of connection and belonging, and nearly every participant identified the student veteran organization as their primary support network on campus. Billy expressed this belief when he described what advice he would give to any incoming student veteran:
“I would give the advice of get in touch with the veterans service organization, and build a connection with some of the other vets. Cause, that’s what’s really kept me going is actually having people that I can relate to, that I can talk with, and share experiences with. We help each other with homework and stuff all the time, it’s just great. So that’s what I would tell other veterans is get involved with veterans service organization.”

This environment facilitated the connection between student veterans on campus who felt like a minority. Participants felt more connected on campus by having shared experiences and identities with others, and the ability to discuss their feelings and encounters with peers who understand them. The impact of peers understanding and feeling connected was particularly pronounced when Talon described how he felt more comfortable talking about his PTSD symptoms with those had experienced similar situations:

“You’re sitting there, you’re prepping, you’re running these scenarios, you’re getting ready, you’re figuring everything out in case if something happens, and it’s all for nothing. And you do it all the time. And it’s just a major distraction. Sometimes it’s even right in the middle of class. So, I’ll be sitting in the middle of class and they’ll run those drills, tornado drills, active shooter alarms, this and that, instantly (snaps finger) you start jumping back. Okay, what would I do? Because it brings it up in your mind. Okay, it’s been a little bit, cause complacency kills in the military, so you don’t want to become complacent, so you instantly start thinking, ‘Okay, what would I do? Am I actually in the best position if they came in from this side of the building? Or, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah’. (Inhales) What would I do? Is there a flagpole in the room? What would I
use to defend myself with? Am I gonna be stuck with a chair? Or am I gonna end up using a pen? You start thinking of different tools and stuff that you’re gonna use that, if something did happen, you would react just based on your response. Like, you would just react. There would be no hesitation, no thought. And that’s because, that’s the other thing that you’re taught in the military is if you hesitate, you die. You hesitate, you die. You get complacent, you die... you do it without noticing it. And, next thing you know, twenty minutes has gone by and you’ve sat in the same place, and maybe even somebody talking to ya. And you’ve just sat there like this *(stares with a blank expression)*, and you’re like, ‘I’m sorry, what was that?’ And they have no idea, and you’re not gonna be, like, ‘Oh, hey, so, yeah, if there was this scenario’ and explain that to em, like, cause then you just sound crazy! *(Laughs)* I’m not gonna lie, cause you do! You, you sound crazy... it’s, the, the hypervigilance aspect of it, or constantly being alert, or, like, walking into, even strategically placing yourself when you sit into a classroom. People don’t, most people don’t do this, all the veterans I talk to do, though. So I know I’m not the only one *(both laugh)* thank God!”

The student veteran participants described situations that they did not feel their civilian traditional student peers would understand. As such, these participants felt relieved to be able to discuss situations with others with shared experiences because it validated their thoughts and emotions. This validation helped the participants feel connected with others on campus because they did not feel like they were the only ones to feel the way they did.

The connection described by the student veteran participants tended to be of increased value during stressful and triggering situations. The participants described the
sense of connectedness with peers who shared similar experiences and who could validate their identities as being necessary to be able to decompress from their stress and feel a sense of release. Participants believed it was important to have individuals on campus who shared their experiences and act as an outlet for decompression after stressful events. Andy stated that:

“I think that the counseling department, the actual counseling agency here on campus, should have somebody very familiar with veterans’ needs. Like, combat PTSD. Traumatic brain injury counseling, things like that. And maybe they do, I’ve never looked into it. Because I don’t know what the student population is, veterans compared to non-veterans, but if it’s something that the school brings in, and there’s a population here, we should at least be concerned with that because even in my experience, when I was talking about the triggering events in class, it would have been helpful for me, and I didn’t seek it out, it would have been really helpful for me to be able to go talk to somebody. I need to decompress here for a second, and I need to hit the reset button...So maybe a veteran peer support specialist. Maybe they don’t necessarily need to be a counselor, but a peer support specialist.”

Most student veteran participants stated that there were some civilian traditional students that they could relate to and feel connected with. But nearly every participant described how they felt more connected with other student veterans on campus due to their shared identities and analogous experiences. Because of this, the student veteran participants felt most connected, comfortable, and belonging with peers and faculty who validated their experiences and provided that sense of release through understanding.
**Feeling Isolated**

In contrast to the feelings of connectedness, the student veteran participants described how they feel most isolated on campus when others invalidate their experiences and appear to condescend towards and talk down to them. The participants described how they feel that these individuals do not recognize and do not understand their experiences. As such, the participants explained that they often feel confined and silenced and ultimately feeling isolated from those around them because they cannot openly express their identities and be understood.

The participants explained that they experienced different reactions and emotions when they felt invalidated and isolated from traditional student peers compared to faculty. In general, the student veteran participants expressed frustration with both populations when they felt their experiences were not validated. However, the participants described how they felt disconnected from their civilian traditional students when they did not express understanding of their experiences and tended to negatively impact their opinions of their civilian peers. For student veterans like Andy, feelings of isolation with civilian traditional students manifested as appearing guarded and dampening interactions with these individuals:

“I have seen, I think, the worst in the human condition, where they’ve maybe seen not that bad… I keep things somewhat guarded. I don’t talk about the bad experiences because that’s for me and whatever demons I have to go through. And they’re not even really demons, they’re just things that I have to work out every once in a while.”
The student veteran participants explained that the frustration with civilian traditional students not validating their experiences typically occurred because these individuals had not accumulated enough knowledge and life experience to empathize with the participants. Most of the participants expressed understanding that their civilian counterparts were not in the same life stage as they were and that most of them simply have not lived long enough to have experienced similar experiences and adversities. Because of this, the student veteran participants tended to avoid interactions with and isolate themselves from civilian traditional students because they assumed that these individuals would be unable to understand their experiences and provide the validation needed to feel connected with them.

The student veteran participants expressed increased frustration with campus faculty when instructors did not validate their identities and experiences. The greatest complaint expressed by the participants was being treated like a civilian traditional student because it felt like the instructors were invalidating their life experiences despite, in some cases, the participants being older than the instructor. The participants repeatedly explained how they felt belittled when the instructor did not validate their experiences and that this compounded the feeling of isolation from their peers. Billy explained:

“That drives me crazy when I’m talked down to like I’m a, an eighteen-year-old high school kid. I’m not. I’ve done things that they couldn’t even possibly imagine. So that kind of drives me nuts... I’ve been to twelve different countries, and half the stuff in the World of the Arts I’d been to and seen, as far as the Mona Lisa and Leonardo da Vinci’s this and that. It’s like, I’ve done all of this. I don’t need to do this again. Why am I sitting here listening to this?”
The participants explained that they felt particularly frustrated by instructors because there was a shared assumption that these individuals are older, have a greater amount of experience, and should be able to understand some of the experiences and stressors of their identities. The student veteran participants further explained that feeling isolated from their professors exacerbated any stressors they experienced because there was the belief that the instructors were instrumental in the participants’ ability to achieve their educational goals. This presented additional challenges for the student veteran participants because many expressed the belief that they could not adequately learn course material from these instructors and that their educational goals were impeded. The student veteran participants typically reacted to faculty who made them feel isolated with expressions of irritation, contempt, and beliefs the instructor was either unqualified or inept to teach. One such situation was described by Talon:

“I do have a professor that does talk to me as if I was an eighteen-year-old kid, and I can’t stand it. I don’t want to say it’s like a trigger, or it makes me outrageously angry, cause it really doesn’t. It just (inhales) that I feel like it’s disrespectful.”

The participants believed that these experiences with both civilian traditional students and faculty increased their sense of isolation because they did not feel like their identities were validated and understood. This ultimately decreased their sense of connectedness with others on campus and decreased their feelings of belonging with those who do not share similar experiences.

Discussion
The examination of the situations and examples disclosed during the interviews demonstrated the multifaceted daily experiences of student veterans on a civilian campus. Specifically, the convergence of multiple identities and their corresponding obligations defined the unique stressors experienced by student veterans and contrasted with the perceived experiences of civilian traditional students. Every student veteran participant expressed awareness that their civilian traditional student peers may experience similar stressors from their identities (e.g., trauma, spouse/family obligations, academic pressure), but few populations report a comparable proportion of its members experiencing this unique combination of identity stressors as student veterans (U.S. Education, 2016; SVA, 2017). As such, the experiences presented during these interviews offered glimpses of the unique perspectives of life on campus for this particular population.

The prevailing narrative described by the student veteran participants was one of individuals returning to the civilian world after serving their country and, while pursuing their educational goals, navigating through the stressors and obligations of life outside the military. These individuals described how they did not want to be treated any differently than their classmates, yet each wanted to enrich the academic community with the values and experiences they had cultivated throughout their lives. These interviews identified immense strengths (e.g., work ethic, integrity, honesty, communication) that are regularly demonstrated within this population despite the combination of daily stressors on and off campus. The daily experiences described by these student veteran participants suggested the continuous prioritization of needs while being pulled in different directions by the obligations associated with their various identities. Every participant described additional
stressors to their academic pressures, and these additional stressors tended to present challenges, barriers, and distractions during class, the completion of assignments, and the pursuit of their educational goals.

The factors that facilitated or inhibited the pursuit of student veteran educational goals also tended to influence how well the student veteran perceived their transition into civilian environments. Specifically, the student veteran participants tended to feel more successful in their educational goals if they received desirable outcomes for their effort (i.e., high grades) which tended to validate their exertions on and off campus. This, in turn, tended to have a positive effect on their perceptions of success within a civilian environment and their transition from the military. Furthermore, the validation of their experiences on campus by peers and faculty increased their feelings of connectedness and belonging and mitigated the stressors related to their identities. Ultimately, it was this combination of factors that increased the participants’ perception of success in their academic goals and transition into civilian life. Conversely, it was the invalidation of values and experiences, lack of accommodations for stressors related to their identity obligations, and perceived lack of understanding from their peers and faculty about student veteran experiences that increased feelings of isolation and decreased the participants’ perception of success in their academic goals and transition into civilian environments. In the present study, the student veteran participants described factors and specific campus resources, such as veteran-specific counselors and peer support specialists, that would hopefully decrease the stressful experiences of student veterans, increase the sense of connection on campus, and increase the perception of success in academic goals and the transition into civilian environments.
Limitations

The primary limitation of the current study was its small sample size of four student veteran participants. The lack of funding and resources limited my ability to allocate time for scheduling, conducting, and transcribing additional participant interviews. Furthermore, educational program time constraints limited my window of recruitment and ability to follow-up with eligible participants which resulted in a low number of study participants. The underrepresentation of female and racial minority student veteran perspectives is also a limitation of the current study. The perspective of one female student veteran was included, though this does not necessarily mean that this participant’s perspectives are representative of all female student veterans on civilian campuses. Additionally, all perspectives shared by the student veteran participants in the current study are those of White/Caucasian identities on a single Midwest public campus and do not represent the potential for additional stressors experienced by other racial identities in other geographic locations. Lastly, the experiences of student veterans who had discharged as officers, served in military conflicts prior to the Gulf Wars, and who had served in the Navy or Coast Guard were absent in the current study and the experiences of these student veterans may not be represented by the current participants. As such, the results from the current study may be most appropriately defined as exploratory in nature and the representativeness and generalizability of its assertions for student veteran experiences on civilian campuses may be limited.

Implications and Future Research

As previously mentioned, the results of the current study are exploratory and require additional research within the student veteran population to determine the
representativeness of the experiences described by the current student veteran participants. However, the experiences described within these interviews suggest an element of fortitude within the student veteran population that may become more evident with further research. The current student veteran participants repeatedly described their continued demonstration of desirable student attributes on campus, such as strong work ethic, dedication to academic goals, and emphasis on communication and accountability, despite multiple daily stressors associated with their identity obligations. It may be beneficial for future studies to further examine the values and potential coping strategies of student veterans to gain better insight about the mechanisms that promote this apparent fortitude.

The current study also identified factors that may increase or decrease the perceived feelings of success and connectedness of student veterans on campus. Specifically, the presence of student veteran organizations, veteran-specific resources and peer-support specialists, and faculty aware of potential student veteran stressors all suggested the increased feeling of connectedness and belonging on campus among the participants. Furthermore, the current student veteran participants also described how the presence of faculty members who presented as politically biased, were unfamiliar with student veteran experiences, and who appeared to invalidate the stressors, experiences, and obligations of their multiple identities may negatively impact the perception of success among student veterans and promote greater feelings of isolation within this population. As such, future research may provide greater clarity of these factors and their impact on student veteran well-being on campus in order to help inform campus policy to maximize positive and protective factors for this population.
Future studies should include larger sample sizes that will hopefully provide a more representative and in-depth examination of the student veteran perspectives on civilian campuses. These studies should attempt to examine the daily experiences of student veterans of various age, gender, disability, and racial identities as well as the experiences of veterans from each military branch and various ranks at discharge. These studies will hopefully provide evidence about whether certain identities among student veterans experience a greater or lesser combination of daily stressors, whether there are cohort effects among student veterans of shared identities or experiences, and whether certain identities promote the greater utilization of coping skills and protective factors. Lastly, future studies should be conducted on multiple public and private universities that range in size and geographic location to determine whether there are inherent campus factors that influence the perceived feelings of connectedness, belonging, and success for student veterans.

Conclusion

The student veteran participants of the current study described a variety of factors and situations they encounter daily on a civilian campus that they perceive as positively or negatively impacting their progress towards their academic goals. The primary factors that emerged from the participant disclosures was the difference of values among student veterans compared to their civilian traditional student peers, the presence of multiple identities and roles filled by student veterans and how their needs are informed by these identities, and the confluence of peer and faculty interactions that increased or decreased the student veteran’s perception of connectedness with or isolation from others on campus. The results from the current study are exploratory and require additional
research to further define the factors identified, though these factors may have the potential to highlight future university policy changes that may improve the overall perception of success for student veterans.

The current study suggests that student veterans offer a unique combination of experiences, strengths, and values that could enrich the learning of peers and the campus as a whole. However, the current study also demonstrated that there are still areas of improvement that could maximize student veteran perceptions of connectedness on campus. As described by Talon, “we’ve gone and seen hell firsthand, and that’s one thing that a lot of people fail to understand. It’s hard coming back into the civilian lifestyle after being in a situation where you’re in constant fear of the unknowing, of if you’re even going to live that day”. Future research will hopefully elaborate further on the daily experiences of student veterans on civilian campuses and define the factors that can best promote academic and personal success within this population.
References


Appendix A

University of Wisconsin - Whitewater
Consent Agreement for Research Study Involving Human Subjects

Title: Examining the experiences of student veterans on campus: A phenomenological qualitative study

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Description:
Student veterans enrolled at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater are invited to participate in a research study examining their experiences and perceptions related to their pursuit of a college education as a military veteran on a civilian campus. The following research question will guide this study: What are the daily experiences and perceptions of student veterans attending a civilian postsecondary educational institution and, specifically, which factors do student veterans believe facilitate or inhibit the successful pursuit of their educational goals and transition into civilian environments?

This study will consist of a brief screening survey to provide background information about who you are (demographics, confirm eligibility, and availability), which should take you no more than 10 minutes to complete, as well as in-depth questions about your experiences during a qualitative interview (scheduled on a later date, based on availability). The qualitative interview will focus on semi-structured interview questions related to the research question listed above. All participants will be sent a copy of the interview questions before participating in the qualitative interview which will last between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure accurate representations of participant experiences. However, participants can be assured that all responses and recordings will be kept completely confidential and stored in private, secure manner. An additional qualitative interview may be requested if additional clarification of, or elaboration on, information discussed in the first qualitative interview is needed (scheduled and based on availability). The criteria for inclusion in this study are student veterans currently enrolled full or part-time at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater and have: (a) served as an enlisted personnel and/or commissioned officer within any of the U.S. military branches (Army, Marine Corps,
EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT VETERANS

Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard), Reserve, National Guard, and/or Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) prior to enrolling at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, and (b) are not currently serving as an enlisted personnel and/or commissioned officer within any of the U.S. military branches (Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard), Reserve, National Guard, and/or Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) while enrolled at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater.

All eligible participants selected for the qualitative interviews will be provided with informed consent information prior to their qualitative interview. The investigators will confirm that each participant received the consent form at the start of their interview and review key points of the consent form to verify any additional questions of concerns.

Research Risks:
As far as can be anticipated, participants will encounter no or minimal mental, social, legal, emotional, or physical risk from participating in the research study. You may experience varied degrees of discomfort and/or distress while recounting past and current experiences and any qualitative interview will be paused or terminated if you feel that your emotions or experiences are too intense to continue. If you feel that your experiences are too intense, you are encouraged to contact any one of the following agencies:

University Health & Counseling Services
710 Starin Road
Whitewater, WI 53190-1790
Phone: (262) 472-1300
Hours: Mon-Fri, 0800-1630

Winther Counseling Lab
Winther Hall 3004
230 N Prairie Street
Whitewater, WI 53190
Phone: (262) 472-2842
Hours: Mon-Thurs, 0900-2000

Veterans Crisis Line
Phone: 1-800-273-8255 (Press 1); Text: 838255
Hours: 24/7

Janesville VA CBOC
2419 Morse Street
Janesville, WI 53545
Phone: (608) 758-9300
Hours: Mon-Fri, 0800-1630

United States Standard Form 86 (SF 86), used by the United States Government in conducting background investigations and evaluations of persons under consideration for,
or retention of, national security positions, asks in Section 21 whether the individual has ever received mental health or counseling services. Participation in this research study would necessitate the answer of “Yes” on SF 86 Section 21. Though as far as can be anticipated, there is no penalty for participating in this study as SF 86 Section 21 states, “mental health treatment and counseling, in and of itself, is not a reason to revoke or deny eligibility for access to classified information or for holding a sensitive position with access to federally controlled facilities or information systems”. Certain mental health diagnoses may influence the processes described in SF 86 Section 21, though the investigator will not diagnose participants during the course of the research study. Any existing mental health diagnoses, as diagnosed prior to or after your participation by a physician or other mental health professional, would need to be listed in SF 86 Section 21.

**Research Benefits:**
Participants may benefit from the research study by discussing their experiences and perceptions as a student veteran attending a civilian college in a manner that may inform future campus policies and procedures. Participant experiences and perceptions may provide the necessary perspectives to identify aspects of current university policy that are beneficial or inhibitory to student veteran academic success and may promote changes that can improve the overall functioning and satisfaction of current and future student veterans on campus. These changes may occur in but are not limited to: student-faculty relations, student-peer relations, veteran-civilian relations, available veteran campus resources, veteran competency in existing campus resources.

**Special Populations:**
Participants will be selected from the veteran population and will be considered members of a special population due to their veteran status. The special member status of participants will be considered throughout the study by recognizing the potential for discomfort and distress as participants discuss their experiences. The investigators will take all steps necessary to reduce the chance of negative participant experiences while participating in the study. These steps include the options for participants to decline the answering of interview questions as well as the termination of the qualitative interview if participants feel overwhelmed by the discussed content. These steps further include the provision of additional mental and physical health resources (see above) if participants wish to pursue further care after their participation in the study.

**Time Commitment and Payment:**
Approximately 10 minutes for the screening survey and 60-90 minutes for qualitative interviews. Participation in the research study is considered voluntary and participants will not be compensated for their time.

**Safeguarding the Identity of Participants:**
The investigators will take all steps necessary to ensure participant responses are anonymous. All information gathered in this research study will be stored in secure electronic and/or physical locations and protected to the extent afforded by law. Only the investigators and the research sponsors conducting the research study will have access to
the raw survey data and qualitative interview transcriptions. Participants’ identifiable information (e.g., name, university name, address, etc.) will be removed from the transcripts to protect the identities of the participants. Furthermore, all participants will have the option to either choose or be given a pseudonym and will only be referred to by that pseudonym in the qualitative interviews, transcriptions, and transcripts. However, since this research is conducted in a public education setting, some electronic communications may be subject to open records requests and anonymous results from this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications. The investigators and the research sponsors of the research study may need to breach participant confidentiality under the following conditions:
(a) If a participant reveals the intent to harm or kill him/herself.
(b) If a participant reveals the intent to harm or kill others.
(c) In cases of suspected child, elderly, or adult-at-risk neglect and/or abuse.
(d) If records are subpoenaed by a court of law.

Permission to Audio or Video Tape:
During your participation in this research study, you will be audio recorded. By consenting to participate in the research study you give the investigators and the research sponsors to use the recording(s) for additional purposes of publication beyond the immediate needs of data transcription for this study. These audio recordings will not be destroyed at the end of the research study and will be retained for a minimum of three years as required by federal guidelines, and then destroyed.

☐ I agree to be recorded as part of my participation in this research study.

Consent for Future Use of Data:
The data collected in this study will not be used in any future research by researchers in this study, or by others. The data will be kept for three years after the completion of the study and then destroyed.

Right to Withdraw:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may choose not to participate without any adverse consequences to you. Participants are free to abstain from answering any question they choose. Participants are also free to terminate their participation within the qualitative interview and/or the research study at any time.

IRB Approval:
This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.
Statement of Consent:
I acknowledge that my participation in this study is voluntary and I certify that I am at least 18 years of age or older. I am aware that I may choose to terminate my participation in this study at any time for any reason. Additionally, I acknowledge that by completing this online demographic survey and interview I agree to participate in this study as described above. I also certify that I have been offered, or received a copy of this consent document:

____________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Participant                  Date

____________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Witnessing Researcher        Date
Appendix B

Online Demographics Survey

_Description and Consent (included at the start of the Qualtrics Survey)_

See consent form in Appendix A

_Demographic and Eligibility Questions_

_Name_

_Email address_

_Please indicate your enrollment status at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater_

- [ ] Part-time
- [ ] Full-time
- [ ] I am not currently enrolled

_Please indicate your current year at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater_

- [ ] Freshman
- [ ] Sophomore
- [ ] Junior
- [ ] Senior
- [ ] Graduate

_What is your major or interest of study?_

_Which branch of the military did you serve in? Choose all that apply_

- [ ] Army
- [ ] Marine Corps
- [ ] Navy
- [ ] Air Force
- [ ] Coast Guard
- [ ] Reserve
- [ ] National Guard
- [ ] Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC)
- [ ] I did not serve in the military

_How many years did you serve in the military?_

_Choose the option that best describes your rank at the time of discharge from the military_

- [ ] Enlisted
- [ ] Warrant Officer
- [ ] Officer

_Which era best describes the period you served in the military? Choose all that apply_

- [ ] Vietnam Era
Which Post-9/11 combat operations were you involved in while in the military?
Choose all that apply

- Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)
- Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)
- Operation New Dawn (OND)
- Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS)
- I was not involved in any Post-9/11 combat operations

Were you ever deployed overseas while in the military?

- Yes
- No

How many times were you deployed overseas while in the military?

On average, how long (in months) were you deployed overseas while in the military?

Were you ever engaged in combat activities while in the military?

- Yes
- No

Were you ever injured or wounded while in the military?

- Yes
- No

Are you currently serving in any branch of the military? Choose all that apply

- I am not currently serving in the military
- Army
- Marine Corps
- Navy
- Air Force
- Coast Guard
- Reserve
- National Guard
- Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC)

What was your highest level of education at the time of your enlistment into the military?

- Did Not Complete High School/GED
- High School/GED
- Bachelor’s Degree
- Master’s Degree
- Doctorate Degree

Did you participate in any college courses or receive any college credits while in the military?

- Yes
- No
Age

Gender

Availability Questions
Which days of the week would be most convenient for your individual interview? Choose all that apply
- Sundays
- Mondays
- Tuesdays
- Wednesdays
- Thursdays
- Fridays
- Saturdays
- No Preference

What time of day would be most convenient for your individual interview? Choose all that apply
- Mornings (0900-1130)
- Afternoons (1200-1630)
- Evenings (1700-2000)
- No Preference

Final Message

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded.
Appendix C

Interview Protocol and Questions

Background Information (to be completed by researcher conducting the interview)

Interviewer’s name:

Participants’ pseudonym:

Participants’ assigned participant number:

Interview date:

Interview start and stop time:

Interview duration:

Interview location:

Interviewer completed field notes and reflexive journal:

Date of interview transcription:

Date(s) transcription sent to participant and participant confirmation?

Follow up questions needed for subsequent interview?

All public record demographic information gathered?

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello and thank you for being willing to share with me your experiences and perceptions related to your time as a student veteran here on campus. I recognize that you may have a number of other obligations in your life right now and I appreciate you taking the time to participate in this study and being able to talk with me today.
Before we begin, I want to take a second to verify whether you have any questions or concerns about the informed consent document or anything we discussed in our previous meeting about what it means to be a participant in this study (discuss participant questions and concerns).

As mentioned before, the interview should last between 60 and 90 minutes and the audio from this interview will be recorded to allow for more accurate transcriptions afterwards. This interview is voluntary and you are free to stop the interview at any point, which you may do so by indicating that you no longer wish to answer any more questions. You may also choose not to respond to certain questions during the interview by stating that do not want to answer the question or may request to proceed to the next question. You may choose to return to any question you may have skipped at any point and may also explain any previous question further if you remember more details. If at any point during the interview you feel like the topics are becoming too intense, you may request a break in the interview and we will continue when you are ready. You may also request a break at any point if you need to get a drink, go to the bathroom, take a phone call, etc. After the interview is completed and transcribed, I will omit any identifying information and email the transcribed interview to you to confirm the transcription’s accuracy. During this time, you may comment on whether there is anything you would like to change, clarify, or add to the existing information. You will then email me back when you feel satisfied with the accuracy of the transcript with any edits you feel are appropriate. Do you have any questions about the process that I have just described?

Do you have any questions about anything we have discussed so far before we start the interview?

**Qualitative Interview**

**Interview Guide**

- What did you want to be when you were younger?
- What classes are you currently taking this semester?
- What made you choose the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater for college?
- What was the process of enrollment like for you?
• What do you hope to accomplish with a college degree?
• How would you compare your typical day on campus to a typical day when you were in the military?
• Tell me about how you think your experiences in the military have impacted your role as a student
• Tell me about a time when you thought your identity as a veteran has had an impact on your daily interactions on campus.
• What makes you feel successful in college?
• Tell me about a time when it felt difficult to attend college.
• What would you like to see changed in the campus environment?
• How would you like to be treated as a student veteran on campus?
• What advice would you give to any future student veterans?

Thank you again for helping me better understand your experiences as a student veteran and taking the time to share your thoughts. This interview will be transcribed over the next several weeks and I will email the completed transcription to you to see if you would like to change, clarify, or add any additional information to your responses. Also, I may contact you by email to request an additional meeting if there are any further questions or information needed once you approve the accuracy of the transcript. Do you have any questions about this process?

Turn off the recording device and conclude the meeting.
Email/Listserve Solicitation

Attention to all UW-Whitewater student veterans:
The conclusion of post-9/11 combat operations have resulted in over 2.5 million military
veteran personnel returning to the U.S. civilian population with more veterans choosing
to pursue a college education than ever before. However, you continue to represent a
significant minority of less than five percent of the total college student population. I
want to hear about your experiences and perceptions as a student veteran as you pursue a
college education on a civilian campus. As such, I invite you to take part in a qualitative
research study that will be examining the experiences and perceptions of student veterans
as they pursue a college education as a military veteran on a civilian campus. If you are
interested in participating in this study and sharing your experiences as a student veteran
in an individual interview, please complete this brief Qualtrics survey (5-10 minutes)
detailing your demographics and availability:
http://uwwhitewater.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5biG4rb5EyH9ibH
This research study has been approved by the IRB at the University of Wisconsin –
Whitewater. Please contact Jansen Legreid using the contact information below with any
questions. Thank you for considering this study and for your interest in bettering our
understanding of student veteran experiences. I look forward to sharing the results in the
near future and to help improve the UW-Whitewater campus environment for all student
veterans.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Betters-Bubon, Ph.D
Associate Professor and Program Coordinator,
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Social Media Announcement

Are you a military veteran going to school at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater?

There are hundreds of thousands of military veterans attending civilian colleges across the country, yet student veterans make up less than 5% of all college students. What have your experiences been like? Have you felt unheard on campus? Would you like to help improve the UW-Whitewater campus environment for all student veterans?

I am interested in your experiences and perceptions as a student veteran attending a civilian campus. Please consider participating in an in-person individual interview to share your thoughts and help make a difference for student veterans. For more information on this study, click here http://uwwhitewater.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5biG4rb5EyH9ibH to access a Qualtrics survey that asks for your demographic information and availability.

Thank you for helping us understand your experiences as a student veteran and helping better our campus environment.

Sincerely,
Jansen Legreid

This media announcement has been approved by the IRB of the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater. For questions or further information, please contact Jansen Legreid at LegreidJS31@uww.edu.
Are you a military veteran enrolled at UW-Whitewater?

Have you felt unheard on campus?

Do you want to help improve the campus environment for all student veterans?

Your experiences matter!

Help us understand your perspectives as a student veteran

We want to hear about your experiences and perceptions as a student veteran attending a civilian campus.

Let us hear about your experiences on campus. Email (LegreidJS31@uw.edu) Jansen Legreid to take part in an individual interview and share your voice.

Email “I am interested” to LegreidJS31@uw.edu for more information about the study and how you can get involved with sharing your experiences.
Oral Advertisement

Hello,

My name is Jansen Legreid and I am a graduate student currently working on my master’s degree in counseling. I am here today because I am conducting a qualitative research study about student veterans and I am interested in your experiences and perspectives as student veterans attending a civilian campus. There are hundreds of thousands of military veterans attending college on civilian campuses across the nation, yet military veterans continue to represent a minority of less than five percent of all college students. I want to hear about your experiences so that we can have a better understanding of what it means to be a military veteran on a civilian college so that we can make this campus the best it can be for student veterans.

The study will require the completion of a brief demographics survey to confirm your eligibility and to help me get to know you a little better as well as an individual interview about your experiences. If you are interested in participating in this study, please speak with me or send me an email at LegreidJS31@uw.edu to tell me you are interested. In the meantime, are there any questions about the study or what it means to participate in the study? [Answer any questions]

Thank you for your time and for helping us better understand your experiences as student veterans. I will leave these flyers here for anyone who is interested in participating or for someone you know who may be interested in participating. [Leave copies of flyers]