

Female Student Veterans Postsecondary Education Experience

A Dissertation by

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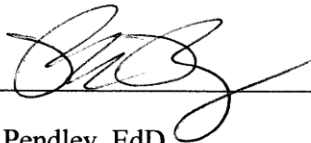
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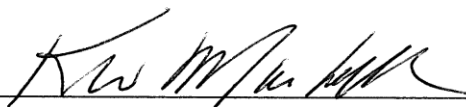
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Female Student Veterans Postsecondary Education Experience

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## ABSTRACT

### Female Student Veterans Postsecondary Education Experience

by Felicia R. Haecker

Recent policy changes have again expanded the role of women serving in the armed forces. As a result, more women are joining the military, which results in more women also departing the military. Many of these women are deciding to use the improved educational benefits provided by the Post-9/11 GI Bill and enroll in postsecondary education. This qualitative case study examined the transition of experience of female student veterans into postsecondary education. The intent of this study was to understand this transition from the perspective of the female student veterans. Having participants from all levels of transition paints a picture detailing their motivations, obstacles, supports, and any advice that could be offered to future transitioning female veterans. Using Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) adult transition theory as the foundation of this study and also incorporating the adaptive military model, and self-determination theory, themes emerged that aid in understanding why and how these female student veterans work toward degree attainment. Through the detailed and rich stories of these women, postsecondary institutions could use these insights to better prepare for the predicted increase of female student veterans on campuses throughout this nation.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

While some cultures applaud women who pursue education, others balk at the idea. Education is thought to be a means by which to alleviate poverty for all individuals, but this seems to be especially true for women (DiPrete, 2013). This issue is still a source of contention around the globe, but many researchers acknowledge that educated women tend to have more options available to them as they move through life. The region in which a woman lives has a direct influence on the obstacles she must overcome to acquire an education.

In the Middle East, the subject of women having access to education is viewed differently depending on the region. The Taliban-occupied sections of Pakistan provide an extreme example; the militia has banned girls from attending school. Malala Yousafzai, a young Pakistani girl, defied the Taliban, which led to an assassination attempt on her life. She ultimately survived a gunshot to the head. The group openly declared that it would make another attempt to kill her, resulting in her relocation to England where she currently attends school. Being in England, however, has not stopped her advocacy for equal access to education for girls in Pakistan. Other activists in favor of girls attending school have also flouted the Taliban, and they face similar threats (O'Malley, 2007).

In the United States, this subject is not as fragmented as it is around the world. Girls enjoy the same opportunities to attend school in the United States as boys do. All children are required to attend school from ages 6 through 16, and they must decide if they wish to continue on to postsecondary education. Women have become an increasingly larger segment of the postsecondary educational landscape. In 2012, women

earned 56.6% of associate's degrees, 52.1% of bachelor's degrees, 55% of master's degrees, and 36% of doctoral degrees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). An ever-increasing number of women joining the educational landscape are female veterans. Hamrick and Runmann (2011) stated,

Women comprise increasing shares of the active duty military ranks . . . colleges and universities are consequently enrolling larger numbers of women veterans who seek to utilize their earned education benefits. Ensuring that . . . women veterans are well served by colleges and universities entails greater understanding of demographic changes, duty and deployment experiences, transition experiences, and negotiations of complex social identities. (p. 1)

According to the California Research Bureau, over 167,000 female veterans reside in California (Foster & Vince, 2009). Many of these veterans have already enrolled in postsecondary education, while others may be thinking of doing so. This dissertation contains a description of female veterans enrolled at two postsecondary educational institutions in California.

Since 1944, the issue of military veterans transitioning into civilian society has been a topic of concern. As a result of this concern, the Montgomery GI Bill was drafted and installed as a means for easing military veterans into their new lives as civilians (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Women Veterans Task Force, 2012). Despite the efforts of the GI Bill, many barriers that prevent female military veterans from seamlessly transitioning into the civilian sector still exist.

Research indicates that the number of female veteran students enrolling into higher educational institutions has steadily increased in recent years (Foster & Vince,

2009). This upward trend can be attributed in part to the improvements to the GI Bill in 2008, which has been renamed the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The improvements include, but are not limited to, a housing allowance, a book stipend, and an increase of over \$20,000 in educational monies (O'Herrin, 2011). Female veterans understand that obtaining a postsecondary education can advance their employment opportunities, thereby enhancing their quality of life as well. While the educational monies help attract female veterans to enroll in postsecondary education, the expansion of women's roles in the armed forces most significantly contributes to the influx of female veterans on college campuses.

As the female veteran populations continue to increase on college campuses, it becomes more important to understand the perceptions of these female student veterans regarding how they are treated in the college environment and how the treatment impacts their transition experience. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) and Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky (1996) reported, "In many situations in the classroom and in everyday life, women often feel unheard, even when they have something important to say" (as cited in DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 75). This study aimed to let female veterans be heard on their transition experience into postsecondary education. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) went on to describe the female student veteran in this manner:

By the nature of their lives, they have learned to be passive and view authorities as having all the power. They do not speak out because they have been told their words do not matter and therefore they do not matter. (p. 75)

Providing a voice to these women while raising awareness of the obstacles female veterans encounter is vital to this society and is imperative in demonstrating that their

perceptions and opinions are not only important but needed in order to effectively improve all veteran programs and policies in the future.

### **Background**

The last 40 years have yielded great expansion of female veterans' military roles. Women have contributed significantly to this country's military effort throughout history; these contributions can be traced as far back as the Revolutionary War. Notwithstanding the ban on women serving in the military until 1948 (Escobar, 2013), numerous women have nevertheless zealously sought to support this nation's war efforts. Activities ranging from organizing supply drives to collecting supplies for the soldiers engaged in combat have demonstrated the courage and patriotism to the U.S. Armed Forces that countless women have exhibited from the military's infancy to the present ("Women in the Civil War," 2013).

Despite these heroines' manifold acts of bravery, their efforts have largely been marginalized both throughout history and today. The trivialization of their achievements, however, has not deterred women from joining the armed forces. To date, this segment of the veteran population is growing faster than its male counterpart (Foster & Vince, 2009). Female veterans, much like their male counterparts, look to enrich their quality of life through postsecondary education.

The road from military service member to student veteran comes with many transitional needs. A large number of these needs are not uncommon to both male and female veterans; however, some gender-specific needs for female veterans attempting to transition out of the armed forces and into postsecondary education do exist. Higher education institutions need to be aware of these gender-specific concerns and attempt to



address them to better serve the female veteran populations on their campuses (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Policy and Planning, 2007).

### **Growing Female Veteran Population**

Amendments to policies and laws, such as the Women's Armed Forces Services Integration Act of 1948 and the rescission of the 1994 Department of Defense (DoD) assignment policy, have expanded the roles of women in the military over time. As a result of these policy changes, more jobs have become available to women in the military. Currently, women constitute 14% of the active duty and reserved military forces. More women are joining the military, but more women are also exiting and transitioning to veteran status (National Women's Law Center, 2012).

### **Female Veterans' Characteristics**

Female veterans tend to be younger than their male counterparts (Foster & Vince, 2009). The majority of this population comprises women from the Gulf War era, consisting of pre- and post-9/11 veterans. Most of these women are still raising families, seeking employment, and attempting to attain college degrees (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013). College degrees will greatly assist minority female veterans, who make up the largest segment of the female veteran population, in combating the racial and ethnic barriers they will likely encounter when entering the civilian work force (Moore & Webb, 1998). Additionally, earning a college degree will directly contribute to reducing the unemployment rate for female veterans, which tends to be higher than that of male veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013).

Transitioning into postsecondary education is the next logical step for many female veterans seeking to enrich their lives and earning potential.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The coping mechanisms that an adult utilizes to deal with life transitions can profoundly impact his or her life, and the coping mechanisms that female veterans employ while transitioning from the military to college provide no exception. Using the theoretical framework of Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1998), a three-phased approach to transitions is presented. This transition model, moving in, moving through and moving out, delves into the transitional experience and explores the factors that impact the individual as he or she moves through the phases. Each phase may require a person to deploy specific resources to negotiate that specific stage of the transition model.

Diving deeper into the adult transition model, Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) presented the 4S model, consisting of understanding the situation, self, supports, and strategies for coping. These models demonstrate how female veterans can handle transitions from the military into postsecondary education and useful coping mechanisms to employ to successfully manage the transition phases to attain their degrees.

This model can be a framework to understand and get through a transition by working through the four quadrants of the model (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012):

1. The self—accessing the resources and deficits one has at his or her disposal to understand the situation.

2. Situation—evaluating the specifics of the circumstances. For example, examining what triggered the transition, whether the transition was voluntarily or involuntarily triggered, and whether the transition is viewed as a positive or a negative.
3. Support—What supports are available to aid in navigating the transition?
4. Strategies—What actions can be used to manage the transition and the stress that may accompany the transition?

Additional theories such as Diamond's (2012) adaptive military transition model, which builds upon the works of Schlossberg's transition theory, are discussed and examined. This model also employs a three-phase model and explains how a military veteran experiences transition out of the armed forces. The adaptive military transition model also suggests that veterans tend to transition at varying speeds.

In examining female student veterans' persistence through postsecondary education, the self-determination theory is also pertinent to this discussion. This theory introduces factors that can influence female student veterans' motivations to pursue postsecondary education. According to Deci and Ryan (2012), three fundamental components must be present for motivation to arise: (a) competence, (b) autonomy, and (c) relatedness. Competence allows female veterans to adapt to the new surroundings into which they are attempting to assimilate. Being able to integrate into the college culture is a foundational piece of motivation. Another facet of this process is also being able to feel connected to the college environment or experiencing relatedness. The ability to connect to one's environment also cultivates motivation and leads to autonomy. Autonomy can materialize when the other components align and the values are integrated into the female student veterans' self. To successfully transition, not only is motivation

required, but female student veterans have additional needs that colleges and universities need to be aware of.

### **Transitional Needs**

Female and male veterans have many of the same needs; however, female veterans may approach their needs in a different manner as they attempt to reconstruct their identities as civilians in college environments. Female veterans do have some gender-specific needs that must be addressed while transitioning out of the armed forces and into postsecondary education. Transitioning out of the military leaves many female veterans feeling isolated; the support systems they grow accustomed to while in the military evaporate virtually overnight once they enter civilian life (Sander, 2012). A review of literature reveals the recurring theme that veterans often seek out the company of other veterans, but female veterans experience extreme difficulty finding other female veterans in civilian society. Veterans are already a small part of the civilian population, and female veterans constitute a very small percentage within the veteran population. As a result, female veterans often lack the company of other female veterans when they transition to the civilian sector, a fact that holds true as they transition to higher education after they leave the military (Demers, 2013; Sander, 2012).

Veterans express feeling overwhelmed in the Transitional Assistance Program (TAP). Upon leaving the military, veterans are required to attend such a program that prepares the military member to exit the armed forces. While most veterans expressed the TAP's helpfulness in introducing many of the benefits available upon leaving the service, they also attested to the difficulty of digesting such vast amounts of information at one time (Bascetta, 2002). Furthermore, the healthcare information at the TAP does

not address female veterans' specific needs. Female reproductive concerns and back problems that arise due to their job specialties while serving, along with other health issues, are often not discussed. Addressing female veterans' healthcare needs is essential; literature suggests that female veterans are not accessing health care to have their needs met. Ruggeri (2009) asserted that a government-launched audit found that of 19 facilities audited, "none had implemented the VA policies pertaining to women's veterans' healthcare" (p. 7), a discouraging fact that is evidenced by the lack of women using the Veterans' Affairs (VA) healthcare system (Ruggeri, 2009). Upon actually leaving the military, most of the resources seem to fade away, especially if the veteran is not near a military installation. Female veterans do, however, express their awareness of the GI Bill in their pursuit of postsecondary education attainment, but they note the difficulty in understanding all of its details without the assistance of an expert in that area.

### **Motivation to Pursue Postsecondary Education**

Female veterans are motivated to pursue college degrees due to the aforementioned benefits of receiving such a degree—acquiring skills that are helpful in gaining employment, getting promoted, and supporting one's family (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Upon entering the civilian sector, many veterans discover that the job skills critical to their success in their past employment in the Armed Forces do not translate to civilian employment (Clemens & Milsom, 2008), forcing many veterans to return to school in order to obtain new skills that will assist them in civilian employment. Female veterans who are single parents are also drawn to pursue postsecondary education. According to Foster and Vince (2009), female veterans are more likely to be single parents than male veterans. As the sole providers for their families, college degrees open

more opportunities for gaining employment and raising their future earning potential. However, attempting to acquire a college degree can be complicated, and female veterans face specific obstacles that they must overcome in their transition into postsecondary education (Baechtold & DeSewal, 2009).

### **Obstacles Encountered in Pursuit of Postsecondary Education**

In charting out a path to earning a college degree, female veterans must first understand the college terrain. The military is an extremely structured environment. Military leaders rigidly govern each facet of a service member's life, and service members must follow the strict regimen of the military hierarchy. Members are told how to wear their hair and uniforms. Service members experience specific weight and physical fitness requirements; expectations for military members in all aspects of their lives are very lucid. Conversely, the veteran encounters relative autonomy in a college environment; the responsibility for staying on track falls squarely on the student (Ellison et al., 2012). Being unfamiliar with such levels of autonomy, many veterans experience difficulty. The personal issues that many veterans experience, such as PTSD and traumatic brain injury, combined with the relative lack of structure in a college environment can create enough anxiety to prevent veterans from moving forward with their educational pursuits (DeSewal, 2013). The structure and support systems that the military provide help veterans deal with the stress associated with the gruesome realities of war. But leaving the military and transitioning into postsecondary education introduce the veteran to an absence of structure that can be overwhelming and lead to the veteran getting lost in the college system and eventually quitting or failing out.

## **Motivation to Persist**

Compared to their civilian colleagues, veterans tend to be older and have various other responsibilities outside of college (O'Herrin, 2011). Female veterans transitioning into college are often parents with children under the age of 18 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013), creating pressure to balance family, work, and college pursuits. For this reason, online education is extremely attractive for many veterans (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2012). The ability to work at one's own pace anytime from anywhere fits better into the lifestyle of a veteran with dependent children than being confined in a classroom setting for a large portion of the day. Female veterans who do choose the traditional classroom setting may depend upon resources provided by organizations that support female veterans, an example being childcare offered on campus. This type of resource could be a tremendous asset when trying to mitigate the postsecondary education transitional obstacles (Burns Phillips, 2010).

## **Obstacles After Transition**

Attempting to complete their degrees on specific timelines with financial responsibilities presents an additional challenge for female veterans. Female veterans maximizing the GI Bill must use all of their funds by deadlines prescribed by the DoD. Other timelines can add pressure to completing a degree, including employment opportunities based upon obtaining a degree, family obligations, and the amount of monies available. While these factors can be viewed as obstacles, they can also be motivating factors to push female veterans to persist in the pursuit of obtaining a college degree. Furthermore, to collect the maximum monies under the GI Bill, the veteran must

enroll full time into college. These additional monies assist student veterans in paying for living expenses; however, many veterans attest to the insufficient nature of these funds to cover all living expenses for a single individual or a family (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Increasing earning potential is paramount for female veterans. Younger female veterans have the highest unemployment rates of all subgroups of female veterans. Earning a college degree affords the younger female veteran the opportunity to diminish the probability of being unemployed as well as the long periods of unemployment. Female veterans are generally less likely to live in poverty than society as a whole; however, earning a college degree further increases the likelihood of experiencing poverty for a female veteran (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013).

A female veteran ultimately hopes to improve the quality of life for herself and her family, and female veterans with college degrees are less likely to be subject to physically demanding jobs. A female veteran with a college degree is more likely to have an office or managerial job than a female veteran without a college degree (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013). Most female veterans attempt to improve their quality of life through income enhancement, but research indicates that women as a whole earn less than men. Earning equal pay for equal work is a concern for all women in society, and female veterans engage in this struggle as well. For female veterans, having a college degree is an approach to breaking the glass ceiling (Cooney, Segal, Segal, & Falk, 2003). Female veterans may be motivated to persist in obtaining their college degrees for all of the



above reasons, but potential stumbling blocks do present themselves for female veterans attending college.

Both male and female veterans seek out and feel more comfortable around other veterans. But in the military, women especially seek the company of other women to help create separate identities to assimilate into a male-dominated organization. Ideally, a female veteran could find other female veterans to relate to in the college setting (Demers, 2013). However, female veterans are often difficult to identify on college campuses; some are not comfortable being labeled as veterans and some do not wish to disclose their status as veterans to avoid any critical reactions to their military service. Female veterans also reveal their struggles relating to younger, nonveteran students with less life experience. Their sense of camaraderie is different as is their sense of what is important (Sander, 2012).

Difficulty socializing with nonveteran female students due to age differences leaves many female student veterans struggling with feelings of isolation. Forming social groups is a large part of their transitional needs (Business and Professional Women's Foundation, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c), but female veterans often encounter many persisting stereotypes that further force them to avoid social activities on campus, increasing their feelings of isolation; "Relating to nonmilitary students is frequently cited as a transitional challenge for this student population" (DeSewal, 2013, p. 96). Female veterans highly value support systems, and many note the companionship that comes from being around other female veterans, easing the transition into postsecondary education. The company of other women who have similar experiences in the military gives them the camaraderie to which they are accustomed.

In the college environment, many veterans feel that their professors do not appreciate their life experiences, especially in subjects related to politics, war, and military topics (Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, & Sulak, 2011). Female veterans feel especially underappreciated, often feeling disrespected and unacknowledged for their military service, leading to extreme frustration and intense feelings of invisibility. Male veterans, on the other hand, are often celebrated for their military service and revered as heroes upon their arrival on college campuses. Female veterans want to be acknowledged and allowed to share their stories and opinions without the instructors marginalizing them or feeling as if the female veteran is challenging them in front of the other students (Holmstedt, 2009). Many female veterans have successfully transitioned into higher education and graduated with their degrees. These female veterans and their college experiences can provide much needed information that can aid other female veterans through their transition into postsecondary education.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

The transitioning of individuals out of the armed forces and into the civilian sector has been a great concern since 1944 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Women Veterans Task Force, 2012). To address the transitional concerns of veterans, the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill, was created. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2013), "The GI Bill had far greater implications. It was seen as a genuine attempt to thwart a looming social and economic crisis" (para. 8). Seventy years after the creation of the GI Bill, veteran transition issues continue to be an area of concern for U.S. society. The 2008

improvements to the GI Bill resulted in a significant number of veterans pursuing postsecondary education.

The 2008 GI Bill overhaul coupled with the expanding roles of female veterans in the armed forces has catapulted the number of women joining the military and enrolling in postsecondary education (Foster & Vince, 2009; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Women Veterans Task Force, 2012). While most studies have attempted to examine the postsecondary transitional experience and needs of veterans, these studies have not specifically examined the female veteran's transitional experience. The literature predicts that the number of female veterans will continue to steadily grow through the year 2020 and many will enroll in college (Foster & Vince, 2009); therefore, understanding the transition experiences and needs of this population can aid colleges and universities in understanding this segment of their student population and how to meet their needs.

As policies have changed, the roles of women have expanded greatly over the last 40 years. The result of this expansion has led to more women joining the armed forces. As these women transition out of the military, many have decided to enroll in postsecondary education (Sandhoff, Segal, & Segal, 2010). The transition from female service member to female student veteran is an area in need of research. In a recent study "45 percent of female veterans reported that their needs upon returning to civilian life were not different from those of male veterans" (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 73). However, female veterans have different means of handling these transitional issues based on their lived experiences. Many female veterans have successfully transitioned into postsecondary education and have attained degrees. Interviewing these women

provided useful insights into what motivates female veterans to enroll in postsecondary education and overcome transitional obstacles, as well as the resources and coping mechanisms these women used to get through their educational programs.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to understand what factors motivate female student veterans to pursue postsecondary education. It was also the intent of this study to uncover what common obstacles female student veterans encounter in pursuit of their degree and why they are able to persist beyond these obstacles. Finally, the information provided from the female student veteran's transition experience can be beneficial to other female veterans considering transitioning into postsecondary education.

The results of this research will assist postsecondary educational institutions in providing necessary resources to female veterans as they transition into the college culture on their respective campuses. Additionally, this research will enable postsecondary educational institutions to ascertain which resources female veterans feel contributed to the successful completion of their educational programs and which resources they did not find useful. The study may also provide insights regarding which additional resources are needed to further help female veterans to successfully graduate.

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following five questions:

1. What factors motivate female military veterans to pursue higher education?
2. What obstacles do female military veterans face when pursuing higher education?
3. What factors motivate female military veterans to persist after enrolling in college?
4. What obstacles do female military veterans face after enrolling in college?

5. What recommendations do female military veterans who have successfully transitioned into higher education have for female military veterans who are considering higher education?

### **Significance of the Problem**

Recently, many institutions have recognized that the student veteran population is increasing on campuses nationwide. In response to this trend, most institutions have begun to create and implement programs to aid this segment of their student populations. While evaluating the impact of these programs, it has become clear that several subgroups exist within the overall veteran population. These subgroups have their own specific needs. Female student veterans are one of these subgroups. The difficulty in creating programs to address their needs lies in the scarcity of research on this topic, but today the research is growing. Some institutions have considered providing childcare and reserving slots for female veterans at on-campus daycare centers. This can be a great resource for female student veterans, but they have many additional needs.

Understanding the psyche of female veterans is foremost in addressing their needs, and many institutions appear to be falling short in this area. Any professionals or institutions wishing to help these women must understand the environment of which these women were once a part and how the military structure and war atmosphere have impacted their identity. Comprehending this information could provide the most valuable steps to creating programs to address their needs and getting female veterans access to much-needed resources. Understanding the psyche of female veterans also involves realizing that these women are used to a one-size-fits-all approach, meaning they are accustomed to figuring out how to make situations work that are not necessarily meant to

address their concerns as women. Postsecondary educational institutions, as well as society at large, are often guilty of this major oversight.

Currently, very little specific literature exists addressing how postsecondary educational institutions are meeting female student veterans' needs. However, the conversation is growing, and the time is ripe for this study. This study is meant to contribute to the emerging foundational literature to help postsecondary institutions better serve the female veterans on their campuses.

Providing supplemental resources for this segment of the veteran population that is growing at an exponential rate will greatly assist their transition into postsecondary education. Many currently available resources are geared toward men, often lacking consideration for female veterans and their unique sets of needs (Foster & Vince, 2009). The aforementioned healthcare system is one example. Although the VA has outlined specific services that VA healthcare centers need to provide for women veterans, many VA healthcare centers have failed to meet the expectations the VA has set forth (Ruggeri, 2009). Lumping female veterans with male veterans fuels the popular perception that most veterans are White men. It is imperative to understand female veterans' needs as they transition into postsecondary education.

When female veterans who have successfully graduated from college after exiting the military share their transitional experiences, they can defy the stereotypes that female veterans require more assistance because they are weak and that male veterans are strong and in need of less help. As stated by Iverson and Anderson (2013), "This stereotype can hinder the acculturation and success of women veterans . . . and can further exacerbate the barriers that veterans may encounter while transitioning to campus life" (p. 123).

Interviews with female veterans can yield qualitative data to better understand the following four topics:

1. How female veterans perceive their college experiences.
2. What resources or support systems significantly helped them get through college?
3. What coping mechanisms they employed to persist through their educational programs?
4. How female veterans considering transitioning into postsecondary education can more easily navigate the college terrain.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Commission.** When an individual is recognized to wear the rank of an officer and is considered a commissioned officer.

**Needs.** Requirements or resources that aid in easing the transition into postsecondary education and help one reach his or her intended goals.

**Permanent change of station (PCS).** When a military member is assigned a new duty station and must move to that location postsecondary education. Education after high school; this study is focused on undergraduate and graduate work at a 4-year institution.

**Reserve Officer Training Corps.** A college program that trains individuals to commission in the armed forces.

**Transitioning.** Ending one's military service obligations and enrolling as a student in a postsecondary institution.

**Veteran.** Any individual having served in the U.S. military and considered by the armed forces to be a veteran. For this study, this definition also includes active duty females.

Operational definitions serve two essential purposes: (a) They establish the rules and procedures the research investigator will use to measure the key variables of the study, and (b) they provide unambiguous meaning to terms that otherwise might be interpreted in different ways. Every research proposal must include operational definitions of major variables and terms.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations, which many confuse with limitations, presented themselves in this study. Mauch and Birch (as cited in Roberts, 2010) averred, “A limitation is a factor that may or will affect the study in an important way, but is not under control of the researcher; a delimitation differs, principally is controlled by the researcher” (p. 139). The researcher had full control over the timeframe in which this study was conducted and chose to carry out the study in the 2013-2014 academic school year prior to the summer session in order to maximize the number of female student veterans available on each campus to participate in the study. California State University at Sacramento, Sierra College, and American River College were chosen for this study based on their proximity to the researcher and the presence of each institution’s veteran success center. This allowed the researcher to have access to the female student veteran population for the purposes of this study. As the literature suggests, identifying female students on college campuses was quite difficult, which required the researcher to expand the scope of the study beyond the Sacramento area. At that point, social media venues, such as Facebook,



were utilized to advertise the study and recruit additional participants, which resulted in the participation of female student veterans from all over the world in the study.

The participants chosen had to meet the researcher's preestablished criteria outlined in the Sample section of Chapter III. Research indicates the existence of numerous factors that influence female veterans to transition into postsecondary education, but this study focused specifically on understanding the transition experiences of female student veterans and how they are able to overcome obstacles and successfully continue in the pursuit of their postsecondary educational goals.

### **Organization of the Study**

Female veterans are not only a growing population within the overall veteran population; their ever-increasing presence can also be found on college campuses across the nation (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009). Postsecondary institutions recognize the unique needs of this segment of their student population as well as the obstacles they must overcome, obstacles not only in successfully assimilating into the college culture but also in staying motivated to continue with their education as new obstacles arise after enrollment. Numerous female veterans have experienced many setbacks through their college careers, attesting to the difficulty in staying motivated to complete college courses as obstacles continue to arise with little to no guidance. Furthermore, female veterans have cited lack of awareness of available resources, and many do not understand the few benefits they are familiar with, the GI Bill being an example. The intent of this research was to provide female veterans with a voice and a platform to relate how they successfully completed college, thereby providing a roadmap for other female veterans attempting to transition to postsecondary education. This research also sought to yield

insight into the ways in which postsecondary institutions can assist female veterans, potentially prompting female veterans to access the resources and benefits they have earned.

Chapter II provides an examination of the literature available on female veterans. This discussion begins with a historical overview of the earliest contributions of women in support of historical military efforts and demonstrates how these roles have expanded and contracted several times throughout history. The chapter also explains how the expansion of women's roles in the military has contributed to a growing female veteran population. Several of the specific needs of this population are also examined.

Chapter III focuses on the methodology used in this study. The design of the study as well as the process of gathering and analyzing data are discussed. The rationale behind the selection of conducting a qualitative case study is explained in detail. The population and sample are also described in depth coupled with the criteria for selection. Chapters IV and V address the findings of the study as well as conclusions that can be drawn and applications for society at large.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **History of Women in the Military**

This chapter presents a review of literature on female veterans. The chapter begins with examining the history of women and the military and moves to understanding the role expansion of females in the military and how this contributes to the growing numbers of female veterans. The literature review also covers transitional needs and theories that provide an understanding of obstacles and motivational factors that aid these women to obtain postsecondary degrees. This review of literature is aimed at providing an overview and a voice for female veterans, which is lacking at this point. Belenky et al. (1997) pointed out that the silencing of these women “is usually ascribed to those women who have usually never had a voice” (as cited in DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 76).

Women and the U.S. military have an interesting history. Women have contributed significantly to this country’s military effort throughout history; these contributions can be traced as far back as the Revolutionary War. However, despite these heroines’ manifold acts of bravery, their efforts have largely been marginalized both throughout history and today. As a result, women have continually struggled to gain recognition for their service to this nation (Small, 1998). Women have been permitted to contribute to the military at various points in history without being allowed official status and compensation for their efforts (Murdoch et al., 2006). Eventually, women were granted the chance to serve in an official capacity, but only in limited roles that were thought to be appropriate for women (Wechsler & Faith, 1992). Historically, the role of women in the military expands during high threats to national security and then contracts when the threat is low, “When women are no longer needed, their military activity is

reduced. Women serve as a reserve labor force, both civilian and military” (Segal, 1995, p. 761)

### **Early Contributions**

The origins of the military are rooted in masculinity; however, women’s contributions and participation in the military can be traced back to the American Revolutionary War. An estimated 20,000 women became part of the military camps, which required some level of support to the war efforts (De Pauw, 1981; Purcell, 2010). Specifically, women are credited with slowing down the desertion rates of Army soldiers. Desiring involvement in the war, women mobilized and took on such tasks as chopping wood, cooking, constructing shelters, and providing medical support to the soldiers. Prior to women taking on these roles, soldiers lived in dire conditions and exhibited an alarming desertion rate. George Washington recognized the impact of these dedicated women; he said, “Without the Army’s women many more would have deserted” (Small, 1998, p. 101). Such efforts have typified the courage and patriotism to the U.S. Armed Forces that countless women have exhibited from the military’s infancy to the present (“Women in the Civil War,” 2013).

Many women lived among soldier camps for various reasons. Historians call such women “camp followers, because they marched with army camps. Camp followers were soldiers’ wives, poor women, and women simply looking for adventure. They were not paid, but they received a half ration of food” (Hall, 2013, p. 10). Traveling with the soldiers meant also coming under enemy attack with the soldiers.

During the time, that women were not officially allowed into the military; a number of occasions have been documented when women took up arms and defended a

position, sometimes out of necessity and many times by choice. The Battle of Monmouth Courthouse provides a perfect illustration. As the temperature soared during the heat of battle, a woman named Molly Pitcher provided the soldiers with water. Questions do exist regarding Molly Pitcher's true identity, as some historians assert that any woman who carried water to soldiers was called "Molly Pitcher" (Berkin, 2005). The story is generally thought to be true, but the identity of the woman in the story, possibly Mary Ludwig Hayes, is less clear. When the cannon crew was incapacitated, she manned the cannon and returned enemy fire. Margaret Corbin, a nurse who picked up her husband's gun after he was mortally wounded by enemy fire and returned fire, presents another example. She also was eventually wounded in this battle, but she survived her wounds and later was awarded a military pension as a result of her actions (Mayer, 1999).

Other women did not wait for the war to come to them; they went to the war. These women disguised themselves as men and joined the military. Cathy Williams, a former slave from Independence, Missouri, disguised herself as a man and joined the Thirty-Eighth U.S. Infantry from 1866-1868 during the Civil War. Private "William Cathay" went on to serve in this unit for 2 years until an injury led to the discovery of her true identity (Tucker, 2002). After discovering that she was a woman, she was discharged from the Army. She later applied for a pension from the Army, but the government denied her any compensation.

When the Civil War began, many women questioned how they too could show their patriotism and support for either the Union or the Confederates. Determining that their best contribution would be performing medical aid to sick or wounded soldiers, most women served in the role of nurses. The lack of formal requirements to being a

nurse and caring for the soldiers resulted in numerous women acting on instinct rather than having formal training (Egenes, 2009). Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to graduate from medical school in the United States, deemed the medical inexperience of these nurses unsatisfactory. Seeing an opportunity to train women in the medical profession, she influenced the creation of the Sanitary Commission (Giseberg, 2006).

The U.S. Sanitary Commission (USSC) organized independent efforts to send aid to soldiers and consolidate and streamline the delivery process, “Bringing order out of chaos, the association coordinated the efforts of numerous aid societies, ultimately providing thousands of soldiers with food, warm clothing and medical supplies” (Small, 1998, p. 101). Nearly 7,000 aid societies cropped up all over the North and West, resulting in “millions of dollars’ worth of food, medicine, and clothing were sent to the soldiers at the front” (Giseberg, 2006, p. 5). Several branches of the USSC were exclusively run by women, but the official board directors were all men.

### **Allowed to Serve but not Given Official Status in the Military**

The results of the early historical contributions of women have demonstrated the helpfulness of their efforts to military endeavors. Early on, women were especially noted for their medical assistance; indeed, women first expanded their roles in the military by taking on the role of nursing. Notwithstanding their acceptance as nurses, the government made no provisions to compensate women for their labor. They were later allowed to serve in a quasi-military status and paid \$12 a month (Brockett & Vaughan, 1993),

Devilbliss (1990) related women’s tangential relationship to the military during this time:

It is important to observe here that women served *with* the military, not *in*, the armed forces during this time. That even though they may have paid (or not paid) for the duties they performed, they did not hold military rank and were thus *attached to*, not *part of*, the armed forces. (p. 1)

At this time, compensation was a step forward for women and would lay yet another building block to advancing and expanding the roles of women in the armed forces.

### **Allowed to Serve, but Only in Limited Roles**

World War I proved to be the first genuine opportunity for women to serve in official capacities outside of the field of nursing. Segal and Segal (2004) reported,

The U.S. military employed women in unprecedented numbers in World War I—approximately 34,000 served in uniform. Both the Navy and Marine Corps established women's auxiliary units in which women were granted official military status and assigned to traditionally female jobs such as telephone operators and clerks. (p. 26)

At the end of the war, the role of women in the military narrowed again when women's units were deactivated (Segal & Segal, 2004).

### **Women Used as a Reserve Labor Force**

World War II again showed an increase of women's roles in the military, allowing them to perform in occupations other than nursing, operator, and clerical jobs. The high demand for personnel fueled the need for women to perform in nearly every capacity except direct combat (Segal, 1995), and as a result, World War II marked a large decline in opposition toward women serving in the military. Dwight Eisenhower relayed that his visit to Great Britain, in which he saw women fully serving in the British Armed Forces,

engendered his understanding that women could be an asset to the U.S. Armed Forces.

Their helpfulness was captured:

In fact women were so effective in their jobs they performed during the war-in addition to their eating generally one half as much as men. . . . Thus women were eagerly utilized and resistance to their use diminished when their positive contributions to the task at hand became evident. (Titunik, 2000, p. 242)

However, forward progress did not continue after the war's end. Laws passed in 1948 placed restrictions on military women in the United States that hampered their opportunities for more than 40 years, "When women are no longer needed, their military activity is reduced" (Segal, 1995, p. 761). This was not only occurring in the military, but in the civilian sector as well.

The war effort impacted many facets of society. The manufacturing community was especially in need of more workers to keep up with the demands of war. With many men serving in the war, numerous manufacturing companies looked to women to fill the plethora of vacancies in their plants. Honey (1984) reports that while manufacturers recognized the dependability of women as a labor force, some refused to pay women the same wages as the men who had previously performed the same tasks.

The timing of the initial advance in women's employment and the extensive propaganda used to attract women into the labor force during the war, have led many to credit World War II with spurring the modern increase in married women's paid employment. (Goldin, 1991, p. 1)



## **Growing Female Veteran Population**

Amendments to policies and laws, such as the Women's Armed Forces Services Integration Act of 1948 and rescission of the 1994 DoD assignment policy, have expanded the roles of women in the military over time. As a result of these policy changes, more jobs have become available to women in the military. Currently, women constitute 14% of the active duty and reserved military forces. More women are joining the military, but more women are also exiting and transitioning to veteran status (National Women's Law Center, 2012). Understanding this segment of the veteran population can aid our society in meeting the transitional needs of female veterans.

## **Increased Numbers of Women Entering and Departing the Armed Forces**

Cultural expectations of how women were to behave accounted for many of the limitations placed on women's attempts to fully serve in the military. Herbert (1998) summarized previous cultural beliefs, "that a woman who would place herself in an environment that was both numerically and ideologically 'male' must be looking for a husband or multiple sex partners or must wish that she were in fact male" (p. 9). The roles that women were allowed to fulfill in the military corresponded to work that women performed in the civilian sector, including secretarial tasks, telephone operators, seamstresses, and cooks. The change in cultural perceptions produced a shift in thought surrounding the role of women in and out of the military.

## **Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948**

In June of 1948, the federal government passed legislation that allowed women to serve as fully recognized members of the U.S. Armed Forces (Escobar, 2013). President Harry S. Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948, which

allowed women the opportunity to serve in expanded military roles, but still placed restrictions on both the number of women who could serve and the specific capacities in which they could serve (Murnane, 2007). The act mandated that women could only constitute 2% of the total armed forces and women officers could only make up 10% of the total number of enlisted females serving. Under these limitations, lieutenant colonel represented the highest rank a female officer could achieve, and the act explicitly prevented them from holding command over males. This act remained in effect until its repeal in 1970. The repeal resulted in the expansion of women's roles as the draft would come to an end.

### **The All-Volunteer Force**

The 1970s yielded the discontinuation of the male draft. Consequently, the military went to an All-Volunteer Force (AVF). The draft initially represented an attempt to fill the job vacancies in the military that were not being met on a voluntary basis. But the difficulty in recruiting qualified men as a result of the cessation of the draft to fill these gaps caused the military to begin allowing women to serve in the AVF. As a result of this policy change, more women joined the military. The AVF would have been in serious peril if not for the qualified women who voluntarily joined the military. Binkin (1993) explained, "From 1976 to 1980 Army recruits' levels of education and entry test dropped to the lowest in recent memory" (p. 8). The literature suggests that qualified and educated female recruits of this time prevented the reinstatement of the draft.

Allowing women to serve in the AVF also created a need to amend many of the previous policy restrictions on their service. Murdoch et al. (2006) posited,

Women's selection criteria, previously more stringent than men's, were equalized, and their training and promotion lists were integrated with men's. In 1978, the Women's Army Corp (WAC) was dissolved. Pregnancy, marriage, or dependent children were no longer grounds for military discharge. (p. 6)

The policy changes also provided that women could constitute more than 2% of the armed forces. In 1972, 45,000 women were serving in the military, equal to 1.9% of the total force. In contrast, by 1976, 109,000 women were serving in the military, totaling 5% of the military (Binkin, 1993). However, the new policies still prevented women from serving in combat roles.

### **Rescission of the Risk Rule**

Additional policy and law changes in the 1990s again allotted the expansion of women's roles. Foster and Vince (2009) stated,

Congress repealed the combat exclusion laws, making it possible for women to fly combat aircraft and serve on combat ships and the Department of Defense (DOD) narrowed previous "risk rule" restrictions to direct ground combat and removed obstacles to training assignments to over 260,000 military occupational specialties previously closed to women. (p. 10)

The "risk rule" mentioned in this quote refers to a suggestion made by a Women in the Military Task Force that was commissioned by the DoD and determined that the term *combat mission* was inconsistent across its branches and in its application to restrict women from certain roles within the military. The task force put forth the following approach in assessing risk in combat:

Risks of direct combat, exposure to hostile fire, or capture are proper criteria for closing non-combat positions or units to women, when the type, degree, and duration of such risks are equal to or greater than the combat units with which they are normally associated within a given theater of operations. If the risk of non-combat units or positions is less than comparable land, air or sea combat units with which they are associated, then they should be open to women. (Center for Military Readiness [CMR], 2003, p. 2)

Several more task forces were ultimately commissioned to examine the issues surrounding women serving in the military and how their roles commiserate with the new missions the military was embarking on—fighting enemies who no longer wear conventional uniforms. These recommendations ultimately lifted restrictions on women serving on Naval vessels or Air Force aircraft (Parham, 2005).

In 1994, Defense Secretary Les Aspin rescinded the risk rule; he believed this rule was outdated and inappropriate. In past military conflicts, with Operation Desert Storm being the most recent at this time, women had proven to perform their duties much like their male counterparts (Burrelli, 2011). Furthermore, everyone deployed for combat in Desert Storm was at risk, not just the women. These observations further solidified the argument for the rule to be rescinded (Harding, 2012).

The rule was rescinded, but women were still restricted from participating in *direct ground combat*, defined as “engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to high probability of direct physical contact with the host forces personnel” (National Women’s Law Center, 2012, p. 5). Only precluding women from serving in direct ground combat opened 80,000 jobs

to women. This policy prevailed until 2003, when the lines between the definitions of combat and support roles were questioned (MacKenzie, 2012).

### **Opposition to Expansion of Women's Military Roles**

The numerous people who supported the expansion of women's military roles throughout the decades of these policy changes did not prevent many, including some in the military, from opposing the new legislation. Representative John McHugh, the chairman of the Military Personnel Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, and Duncan Hunter represented two opponents. They proposed an amendment to the FY 2006 National Defense Authorization Bill that would restrict the 1994 provisions, including specifically prohibiting women from serving in forward support units. In 2005, Duncan released a statement in which he maintained the following:

The Forward Support Companies under the new Army modularization will be called upon to move into battle to support combat forces. Rocket-propelled grenades, machine gun fire and all the other deadly aspects of war will make no distinction between men and women on the front lines. The nation should not put women into the front lines of combat. (as cited in National Women's Law Center, 2012, p. 5)

The bill ultimately passed; however, it was met with opposition and much ridicule. Democrats specifically pointed out the perceived unfairness of this amendment to the FY 2006 National Defense Authorization Bill, citing its adverse impact on the advancement opportunities for women serving in the military. Additionally, the bill made 21,925 jobs unavailable to military women (Scott, 2006). This and other

amendments introduced by Representative McHugh stifled women's progress in the military and mitigated any advancements made since the 1994 assignment policy to expand women's military roles to include serving in combat support units.

### **Reversal of Women's Military Restrictions**

Challengers of these restrictive amendments made sure that more investigative committees were launched to ensure that women were in fact getting equal opportunities to advance through the military ranks. By 2010, Robert Gates, the Secretary of Defense at the time, gave notice to Congress that Navy submarine duty and Female Marine Counter Intelligence and Human Source Intelligence Operations Officer and Specialists positions should be open to women (National Women's Law Center, 2012). Moreover, the 2010 Military Leadership Diversity Commission findings from an evaluation of *the diversity of military leadership* served as a basis for recommending that the DoD and all branches of the U.S. Military should eliminate the combat exclusion policies (National Women's Law Center, 2012).

Signing a new policy that included permitting women in nearly all military jobs eradicated the former policies; however, actually implementing the expansion of women's roles was a slow process. Many provisions had to be made and standards amended to allow women to serve in these newly opened jobs (Epstein, Yanovich, Moran, & Heled, 2013; Young & Nauta, 2013), done in a phased approach. The first steps required the secretaries of the military to review the laws, policies, and regulations that were designed to restrict women from serving in various capacities in the armed forces per the National Defense Act of 2011, "DoD and the Services should eliminate the 'combat exclusion policies' for women, including the removal of barriers and

inconsistencies, to create a level playing field for all qualified service members” (National Women’s Law Center, 2012, p. 9). The historical performance of women in the military as well as their participation in war has culminated in the present recognition of women’s importance in the military as well as in their ability to serve in the armed forces free of restrictions. They are being utilized based on their qualifications and not disqualified based on their gender, “The dynamics of the modern-day battlefield are non-linear, meaning there are no clearly defined front line and safer rear area” (Bohon, 2011, p. 17), and therefore no reason to exclude women from units or positions that physically collocate with direct ground combat units (National Women’s Law Center, 2012).

### **Female Veteran Characteristics**

Female veterans currently make up “17.5 percent of the active duty military” (Escobar, 2013, p. 72) and are the largest growing segment of the veteran population. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Women Veterans Task Force (2012) reported the number of female veterans in 2011 to be 1.8 million, and by 2020 the expected number for the female veteran population will exceed 2 million. The rapid growth of the female veteran population evidences the importance of understanding the characteristics of this population that will better aid in meeting their unique needs.

#### **Age/Period of Service**

The expansion of women’s roles in both civilian society as well as the military has resulted in women joining the military at different stages of life. Female veterans tend to be younger than their male counterparts (Foster & Vince, 2009), with their median age being 41 as compared to 61 for male veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Women Veterans Task Force, 2012). The majority of this population (female

veterans) comprises women from the Gulf War era, consisting of pre- and post-9/11 veterans. On the other hand, the largest cohort of male veterans is from the Vietnam era. Female veterans from the Gulf War era have benefited tremendously from the establishment of the AVF and the 1994 and 2011 amendments to the assignment policies that greatly expanded women's military roles, and as a result, they are still active in the work force, raising families or pursuing educational goals.

### **Race and Ethnicity**

Many view the military not only as a way of serving the nation, but also as an opportunity to learn job skills, to reap educational benefits, and to enhance life skills in general for use in the civilian world (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza Mitchell, 2009). Members of racial and ethnic minorities, particularly in an all-volunteer force, have availed themselves of those opportunities in relatively large numbers (Foster & Vince, 2009).

The White, non-Hispanic group, at 66.9%, constitutes the largest ethnicity within the female veteran population, which is also comparable to nonfemale veterans in the civilian female population. Of the female veteran population, 25.3% are non-White and non-Hispanic. In the Women Veteran Profile report, "Nonwhite' includes Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, some other race, and two or more races" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013, p. 16). The report also found that Hispanic female veterans make up the smallest group of this population at 7.8%. The non-White and non-Hispanic segments of the population have their own set of needs;



underrepresented members still struggle in some areas of U.S. society including employment and education attainment. This is discussed later in the study.

### **Marital and Parental Status**

Very little percentage difference exists between the marriage statistics for female veterans (48.7% are married) and nonfemale veterans (48% are married; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013). Divorce percentages (23.4% for female veterans and 12.5% for nonfemale veterans), however, are considerably different (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013). Slightly fewer female veterans are widowed or separated (11.7%) than nonfemale veterans (12.3%; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013). Female veterans are significantly less likely to have never been married (17.5%) than nonveteran females (27%; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013).

A review of literature did not reveal any specific data regarding the parental status of female veterans in general. However, research did attest to statistics on active duty female service members' parental statuses. According to Foster and Vince (2009), "Nearly 38 percent of women in the active duty force have children . . . approximately 11 percent of women in the military are single mothers compared to four percent of single fathers" (p. 17). This is vital information when attempting to understand female veterans' needs. Leigh Brown (2013) wrote in an article for the *New York Times* that "female veterans are far more likely to be single parents than men. Yet more than 60 percent of transitional housing programs receiving grants from the Department of

Veterans Affairs did not accept children, or restricted their age and number” (p. A1) based on a 2011 report by the Government Accountability Office. This is an example of the outdated nature of some of the resources that are provided to endeavor to meet the needs of today’s female veteran.

### **Employment/Income**

In 2007, the U.S. Bureau of Labor reported that unemployment rates were comparable among female veterans in general and their female nonmilitary counterparts at about 4% (Foster & Vince, 2009). However, for younger female veterans specifically, the literature highlights that female veterans ranging from 18 to 24 years of age had “twice the unemployment rates of their non-veteran counterparts. In 2007, the unemployment rates for female veterans ages 18-24 were 16.3 percent and nonmilitary females rates were 8.4 percent” (Foster & Vince, 2009, pp. 18-19). Younger female veterans have the highest unemployment rates off all subgroups of female veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013).

Female veterans’ median income is higher than that of their nonmilitary counterparts. The median household income for female veterans is \$30,378, while nonmilitary women earn \$20,458. A comparison of female veteran earnings with their male counterparts, however, conveys that male veterans make on average \$5,000 more than female veterans. Female veterans are generally less likely to live in poverty than society as a whole (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013). According to Foster and Vince (2009),

A 2008 Census study found that while women veterans had higher salaries than women with no military experience, they also worked full-time hours. The study suggests that military education and work experience may translate into higher paying civilian jobs than women with a high school diploma would normally expect. (p. 20)

### **Education Attainment**

Research lucidly illustrates the significance of female veterans understanding the need for an education. As female veteran's transition out of the armed forces, attaining a college degree can be a means of acquiring new skills and honing the skills she already possesses. Some veterans also see transitioning into postsecondary education as means of going from a strictly military mindset to a mix of military and civilian mentality.

### **Transitional Needs**

Much of the research surrounding veteran educational attainment revealed that support systems and understanding veterans' benefits are key attributes in veterans' successfully transitioning and persisting through postsecondary education. Female student veterans also require such resources, and research suggests that female-specific programs would benefit them.

### **Support Systems**

While transitioning, a breakdown in familiar support systems can occur. The military is an extremely structured environment. Military leaders rigidly govern each facet of a service member's life, and service members must follow the strict regimen of the military hierarchy. Conversely, the veteran encounters relative autonomy in a college environment; the responsibility for staying on track falls squarely on the student (Ellison

et al., 2012). The military can provide a support system that becomes familiar and the other members are much like themselves. The members of this support group are of a similar background and have many similar lived experiences. However, transitioning out of the military leaves many female veterans feeling isolated; the support systems they grow accustomed to while in the military evaporate virtually overnight once they enter civilian life (Sander, 2012). Based on a review of the literature, a recurring theme is that veterans often seek out the company of other veterans, but female veterans experience extreme difficulty finding other female veterans in civilian society. Veterans are already a small part of the civilian population, and female veterans constitute a very small percentage within the veteran population. As a result, female veterans often lack the company of other female veterans when they transition to the civilian sector, a fact that holds true as they transition to higher education after they leave the military (Demers, 2013; Sander, 2012). Foster and Vince (2009) further expressed the state of female veterans after they exit the military:

Many veterans find that social interaction with civilian friends—and new people they meet—is difficult and leaves them feeling isolated. Women veterans describe missing their comrades, both male and female; some miss the support structure provided by being in the military. (pp. 24-25)

Female veterans highly value support systems, and many note the companionship that comes from being around other female veterans, “Connecting student veterans can effectively ease this isolation, and it’s especially helpful if connections can be made between new veterans and those who have successfully navigated a semester or two” (Lighthall, 2012, p. 85).

## **Benefits Advisement**

Each branch of the military is required to provide pre-separation counseling to members exiting the armed forces, “The legal requirement to provide transition assistance is grounded in the 1990 recognition by the U.S. Congress that military reductions were impending and some skills do not readily transfer into civilian career skills” (Clemens & Milsom, 2008, p. 247). Upon leaving the military, veterans are required to attend a transitional assistance program (TAP) that prepares the military member to exit the armed forces. Each branch executes this in a different manner. In a statement before the House of Representatives, Cynthia Bascetta (2002), from the subcommittee of benefits on Veteran Affairs, stated,

A large number of the Army’s separating service members have held combat-related jobs, which provide skills that have limited transferability to jobs in the civilian labor market. Further, many of these soldiers are young and have little civilian work experience. Therefore, the Army supplements DOD transition assistance funds to provide additional one-on-one counseling and interactive job training and assistance. (p. 6)

While many veterans express their initial satisfaction with the information presented during TAP, some veterans expressed that smaller classes, earlier access to the information and extending the programs could prove beneficial (Bascetta, 2002). Additionally, they also attested to the difficulty of digesting the TAP’s vast amounts of information at one time (Bascetta, 2002). Also, in the academic setting, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) postulated that “some veterans may have unrealistic expectations” (p. 29) based on the information these program counselors have briefed. As an example,

misunderstandings regarding educational benefits payments can hamper postsecondary transitioning. Moreover, upon actually leaving the military, most of the resources seem to fade away, especially if the veteran is not near a military installation. While this scenario is applicable to all veterans, it is of great concern for female veterans; the GI Bill, which explains veterans' benefits packages, is a document that they are neither accessing nor using to receive their benefits (Hamilton, Frayne, Cordasco, & Washington, 2013). The literature indicates that veterans need the most help navigating medical and educational benefits.

Accessing medical benefits is definitely a concern for female veterans. The healthcare information at the TAP does not address female veterans' specific needs, such as female reproductive issues or back concerns as a result of their job specialties while serving. Addressing female veterans' healthcare needs is essential. Ruggeri (2009) asserted that a government-launched audit found that of 19 facilities audited, "none had implemented the VA policies pertaining to women's veterans' healthcare" (p. 7), a discouraging fact that is evidenced by the lack of women using the VA healthcare system.

### **Female Veteran-Specific Programs**

Further health problems for female veterans arise due to the rigorous physical demands of the military, and many women experience female-specific health concerns, "Carrying heavy loads, the climate conditions, lack of adequate personal hygiene contribute to chronic pain and health conditions suffered by women veterans" (Foster & Vince, 2009, p. 3). Another California Women's Veteran report released in 2011 concurred with this assessment and also stated that the female veterans surveyed for the

report revealed that “they needed gender specific care, such as gynecological screenings, women doctors and nurses, and women counselors” (Blanton & Foster, 2012, p. 30). The findings in the report can be attributed to women conveying that a number of the male doctors in the VA healthcare system question the extent of the health concerns they face by downplaying or becoming argumentative over the expressed symptoms and the need for VA care (Ruggeri, 2009). Resistance from male doctors can deter women from seeking out health care, which can be detrimental to their long-term health. Having access to gender-specific health care can aid in the transition of female veterans in the civilian sector.

### **Adult Transitions**

Today’s technology has engendered numerous rapid economic and financial changes on global, national, and local levels. As a result, individuals have been forced to adapt their lives to the quickly changing economy, often necessitating personal transitions. Adults experience manifold types of transitions, and different individuals respond to life transitions in various ways. By examining the adult transition theory of Nancy Schlossberg (1981), a deeper understanding can be gleaned explaining the various ways that female student veterans experience and cope with transitioning into postsecondary education. The model that Schlossberg constructed also enables student veterans and postsecondary educational institutions to draft programs and policies that can further aid in successfully helping them graduate from their programs of study. Comprehending female student veterans’ transition experiences and coping mechanisms can help future female student veterans navigate the process of transitioning into postsecondary education.

## **Schlossberg Adult Transition Theory**

Schlossberg (1981) developed a transition model that built on the works of Lewin, Erickson, and a multitude other researchers, a model that provided a framework for understanding the process of transition. Transition, as defined by Anderson et al. (2012), “can be said to occur if an event or nonevent results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, thus requiring a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (p. 5). Based on this definition, Schlossberg et al. (1989) constructed a three-phase model. This transition model, moving in, moving through, and moving out, delves into the transitional experience and explores the factors that impact the individual as he or she moves through the phases. Each phase may require a person to deploy specific resources to negotiate that specific stage of the transition model. It appears to be the most appropriate model in describing the female student veteran’s transition into postsecondary education.

**Moving in.** This stage requires the female veteran to begin getting acclimated to the new environment she will inhabit, which in this study, entails becoming familiar with the collegiate landscape. Getting oriented to the new environment means learning new social cues, possibly establishing new friends and support systems, and understanding the requirements associated with being a student. The process of environmental assimilation can be especially difficult for female student veterans as they move from a male-dominated organization into the culture of postsecondary education. Baechtold and De Sewal (2009) contended, “When women veterans re-enter civilian life, they are often unsure how to fulfill not only their specific role as a student, but also their role as a woman” (p. 40). The authors contrasted this experience with that of male veterans being



“distinctly different” (Baechtold & De Sewal, 2009, p. 49) because masculinity is celebrated in the military and in society as a whole.

**Moving through.** Having begun the transition into postsecondary education, this phase calls for maintaining and balancing all of the demands of the transition. In this phase, the individual is negotiating the transition but is not fully transitioned. This stage of the process is lengthy, and the individual can easily be derailed. As Anderson et al. (2012) averred, “Moving through a transition requires letting go of aspects of the self, letting go of former roles, and learning new roles. People moving through transitions inevitably must take stock as they renegotiate these roles” (p. 45). Letting go of certain aspects of one’s former self and learning to function in a new capacity can be difficult for anyone, but it can be especially for female student veterans who are renegotiating several of their roles. A female student veteran may be redefining her role not only as a student, but also possibly as a wife, mother, employee, and ultimately, as a civilian woman. DiRamio et al. (2008) contended that those who are unable to negotiate and step into their new roles run the risk of mismanaging the transition and dropping out of school.

**Moving out.** Anderson et al. (2012) summarized moving out, the final stage of the three-phase transition model, “Moving out can be seen as ending one series of transitions and beginning to ask what comes next” (p. 70). Moving out will also signify that another transition will soon occur. After completing school, the next stage of a female veteran’s life may involve any of the following possibilities: applying for employment, moving to a new city, and thinking of new support systems to help them in their future environment. The moving-out stage for a female student veteran can also signify the complete achievement of postsecondary educational goals and a full transition

out of the military and into the civilian world. Arriving at this desired step encompasses assessing four components.

### **The 4S Model**

The coping mechanisms that an adult utilizes to deal with life transitions can profoundly impact his or her life, and the coping mechanisms that female veterans employ while transitioning from the military to college provide no exception. Diving deeper into the adult transition model, Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) presented the 4S model, consisting of understanding the situation, self, supports, and strategies for coping. These models demonstrate how female veterans can handle transitions from the military into postsecondary education and useful coping mechanisms to employ to successfully manage the transition phases to attain their degrees. This model can be a framework to understand and get through a transition by working through the four quadrants of the model (Anderson et al., 2012):

**Situation.** *Evaluating the specifics of the circumstances.* One must assess the environment that the transition entails. As Schlossberg et al. (1989) suggested, characterizing the type of transition taking place marks the first step. An individual may view an anticipated transition in a more positive light than an unanticipated transition.

**Self.** *Assessing the resources and deficits one has at his or her disposal to understand the situation.* Understanding the available resources can help an individual gain a clear understanding of the present situation. This will require conducting both a self-analysis and an evaluation of external resources to determine what assets and liabilities are available to continue to move toward outlined goals (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

**Support.** *What supports are available to aid in navigating the transition?* After assessing the available resources, actually accessing them may be necessary as one moves through the transition. Additionally, an individual may need to draft a plan of when and how to access specific resources in a timely manner. As Anderson et al. (2012) explained, “Social support is often said to be the key to handling success. Support, however, needs to be defined operationally because it comes in many sizes and shapes” (p. 94). The authors identified the types of support according to their sources: intimate, family, network of friends and institutional or community (Anderson et al., 2012). Some, if not all, of these support systems must be evaluated and incorporated when outlining a plan to manage the transition.

**Strategies.** *What actions can be used to manage the transition and the stress that may accompany the transition?* Drafting a plan can provide the female student veteran the opportunity to analyze the entirety of her surroundings. The strategies employed are a means of coping with the situations. As Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) concluded, “This is the plan of action for boosting net strengths and skills to cope with the particular transition” (p. 60).

### **Adaptive Military Transition Theory**

Built on the Schlossberg transition theory (Schlossberg 1981, 1984), the adaptive military transition theory examines the lived experiences of student veterans’ transition into postsecondary education. The model propounded in the theory also subscribes to a linear three-phase process that can be applied to individuals as they transition, “How the individual approaches and progresses through three phases of transition informs on their transition movement towards successful acclimation. . . . Throughout the transition

experience a unique arc shape will emerge as the individual's 'Transition Portrait'" (Diamond, 2012, p. 113). The arc has three points: adaptation, passage, and arrival.

**Adaptation.** This military veteran's adaptation phase represents ending his or her military career and moving toward embarking on a postsecondary education career. The many decisions to be made and the drastic changes to the veteran's environment usually result in this being the most turbulent stage. This phase also follows the Schlossberg model and falls into the moving-in phase. The veteran attempts to let go of military life and endeavors to adjust to the second phase of the process.

**Passage.** Leaving the former environment and becoming immersed in the new surroundings marks the transition into the passage phase. As Diamond (2012) pointed out, "While the 'Passage' stage is easy to reach or obtain, it is difficult to end or leave" (p. 114). At this point, veterans have adapted to the new environment; they have established routines and comprehended the expectations of being a student. They are able to access resources and have established support systems through fellow veterans on campus or through family and friends. At this juncture, the moving-through phase has become less tumultuous.

**Arrival.** The arrival phase involves the student feeling confident and fully transitioned and integrated into his or her student role, "Participants who were able to articulate their future plans, even if that meant their next class or degree were considered to be entering 'Arrival'" (Diamond, 2012, p. 114). This corresponds to the moving-out stage, and future plans can now be realized and discussed with confidence. The student veteran also apprehends the imminent transition from postsecondary education to other

aspects of the civilian sector. At this point, the veteran must stay motivated in order to keep moving through life's transitions.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

To understand the motivational factors that keep female student veterans pushing forward toward their program goals, an exploration of self-determination theory is necessary. It was first drafted as research on motivations surged exploring the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Deci and Ryan defined self-determination theory as follows:

A meta-theory for framing motivational studies, a formal theory that defines intrinsic and varied extrinsic sources of motivation, and a description of the respective roles of intrinsic and types of extrinsic motivation in cognitive and social development and in individual differences. (Self-Determination Theory, 2014, para. 1)

Fundamentally, three foundational components are needed for motivation to occur:

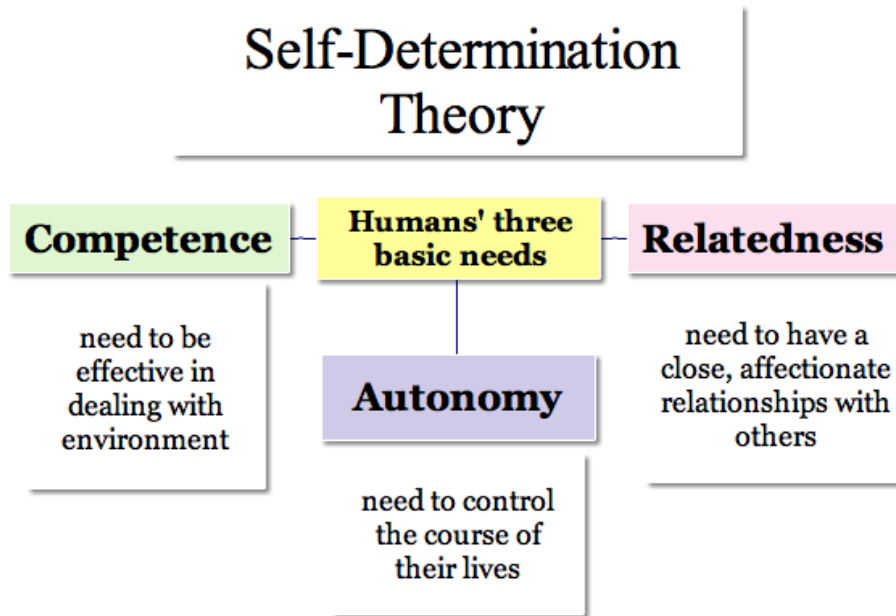
(a) competence, (b) autonomy, and (c) relatedness, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

#### **Competence**

Female student veterans must adapt to the college environment and demonstrate competence in managing the transition from the military to the college atmosphere.

Elliot and Dweck (2013) postulated,

Our analysis of energization of competence relevant behaviors is grounded in the premise that competence is an inherent psychological need of the human being . . . we view competence as a fundamental motivation that serves the evolutionary role of helping people develop and adapt to their environment. (p. 6)



*Figure 1.* The three fundamental components of self-determination theory. Competence, autonomy, and relatedness constitute motivation for a female student veteran to persist at the university level. From “Self-Determination Theory,” by Margaret, July 29, 2010, *Our Hot Topics*, retrieved from <http://ourhottopics.blogspot.com/2010/07/self-determination-theory.html>

Deci and Ryan (2002) concluded that competence is not “an attained skill or capability but rather is a felt sense of confidence and effectance in action” (p. 7). Competence in managing the transition, which involves orienting and assimilating into the new environment in order to move forward in the process, can be thought of as the first building block in the process of motivation.

**Relatedness**

Relatedness is defined as “the feeling of connectedness to those in the environment in which an individual exists. Relatedness reflects the homonymous aspects of the integrative tendency of life, the tendency to connect with and be integral to and accepted by others” (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 7) and represents the second key component in self-determination theory. For female student veterans, transitioning out of the

familiar camaraderie of the military and into postsecondary education leaves them having to build new support systems in an unfamiliar environment.

### **Autonomy**

As defined by Deci and Ryan (2002),

Autonomy concerns acting from interest and integrated values. When autonomous individuals experience their behavior as an expression of the self—such that even when actions are influenced by outside sources, the actors concur with those influences, feeling both initiative and value with regard to them. (p. 8)

Autonomy represents the last of the three foundational elements of self-determination theory. The alignment of these components sparks motivation and propels female student veterans forward in the transition process.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors impact how female student veterans perceive their circumstances and sway their decisions to persist in meeting their educational goals.

### **Intrinsic Motivation**

Ryan and Deci (2000) defined intrinsic motivation as “doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable” (p. 55). One is not motivated to participate in the activity or accomplish the task because of external rewards. The activity or task by itself is the reward that taps into the individual’s motivation, which is internally triggered. Being motivated to gain knowledge and skills can be intrinsic, as encapsulated by Bruner (1966),

The will to learn is an intrinsic motive, one that finds both its source and its reward in its own exercise. The will to learn becomes a “problem” only under

specialized circumstances like those of a school, where a curriculum is set, students are confined, and a path fixed. The problems exist not so much in learning itself, but in the fact that what the school imposes often fails to enlist the natural energies that sustain spontaneous learning. (p. 127)

Female student veterans may demonstrate the willingness to learn, but the postsecondary structure and curriculum can adversely influence intrinsic motivation to pursue and persist in their chosen educational pursuits.

### **Extrinsic Motivation**

Extrinsic motivation is thought to be the opposite of intrinsic motivation. Horyna and Bonds-Raacke (2012) maintained, “Contrasting with intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation is comprised of a wide range of behaviors that provide more of a means to an end, rather than simply being enjoyed for the sake of being enjoyed” (p. 711). Extrinsic motivation drives most individuals to meet specific goals. Female student veterans are no different; they can be extrinsically motivated to pursue postsecondary education as a means to gain employment or be considered for a future promotion. In such cases, the choice to obtain postsecondary education is internalized and integrated within the female student veteran. Ryan and Deci (2000) summarized internalization as “the process by which individuals more fully transform the regulation into their own so that it will emanate from their sense of self. . . . With increasing internalization come greater persistence, more positive self-perceptions and better quality of engagement” (p. 60). In examining female student veterans in educational attainment, while the end goal is extrinsically motivated, the value is internalized and energizes them.



## **Motivation to Pursue Postsecondary Education**

Female veterans are motivated to pursue college degrees due to the benefits of receiving such a degree, including acquiring skills that are helpful in gaining employment, getting promoted, and supporting one's family (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Acquiring new skills can help female veterans transition into the civilian sector.

### **Gain Employment**

The Business and Professional Women's Foundation (2007a) estimates that "150,000 veterans will transition out of the military in the next five years" (p. 1). Female veterans, like their female civilian counterparts, seek employment opportunities that pay wages that are comparable to males as well as give them equality in advancement opportunities (Business and Professional Women's Foundation, 2007a). In today's tumultuous economy, many employers are requiring employees to have college degrees. Female veterans "with college degrees have more success than younger veterans without college degrees and only limited military careers" (Foster & Vince, 2009, p. 47).

The military hierarchy provides women with equal advancement opportunities. Conversely, the civilian sector does not guarantee women the same equal advancement opportunities, placing female veterans in an unfamiliar set of circumstances. For female veterans, having a college degree is an approach to breaking the glass ceiling (Cooney et al., 2003).

### **Translating Military Skills**

Veterans leave the military and find that employers often fail to understand how military skills translate to civilian employment. It has been argued that some employers are hesitant to hire veterans out of fear of having to deal with mental health issues being

bought into the work environment. Until recently, women were banned from serving in direct combat occupations and thus should be viewed as less likely to have mental health concerns. Research, however, indicates that this is not the case, “Being barred from combat occupations, by definition women are more likely to serve in highly transferable military support specialties and yet they face a greater unemployment gap with their civilian peers than do men” (Kleykamp, 2013, p. 850).

The DoD provides each member with a Form 214 when they leave the military. This form contains “education, training received, positions held, awards earned, and eligibility for reentry in the military” (Clemens & Milsom, 2008, p. 253). The form is written in military jargon, which can be difficult for a potential employer to translate. The form is most often used as a foundational basis to generate a résumé. But without an understanding of the civilian sector and the skills and qualifications that civilian employers are looking for, veterans may be unable to craft an attractive résumé or may not be able to translate their skills into the civilian jobs they wish to hold. For example, upon entering the military, a service member may be assigned a job based on his or her aptitude score on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). The service member may have no interest in this job but will be required to learn and execute the assignment until he or she is eligible to retrain for a new job or until he or she leaves the military. In such an example, the qualifications for the military job will not render the veteran qualified for the civilian job he or she desires to pursue. The fact that the job skills critical to their success in their past employment in the armed forces do not translate to civilian employment forces many veterans to return to school in order to obtain new skills that will assist them in civilian employment.

## **Responsibilities of Supporting a Family**

In addition to the difficulty veterans often face in applying their military skills to civilian jobs, veterans may also be qualified for jobs in the civilian sector that have low earning potential and will not allow them to maintain or live a lifestyle they grew accustomed to while serving in the armed forces. This can be especially problematic if they have a family to support, which may require them to return to school in order to find employment that will better provide for their families. Foster and Vince (2009) painted this picture:

Women veterans face additional challenges of having families and small children, and being married to men serving in the military. Women are more likely to have a primary parenting role and generally shoulder the greater burden of domestic responsibilities. . . . When women come home, they are often expected to handle child care and work around the house, in addition to holding down a job. (p. 27)

The authors also proposed that female veterans “are more likely than men to be single parents: approximately 11 percent of women in the military are single mothers compared to four percent of single fathers” (Foster & Vince, 2009, p. 17). As the sole providers for their families, college degrees for these female veterans open more opportunities for gaining employment and raising their future earning potential.

### **Obstacles Encountered in Pursuit of Postsecondary Education**

Once a female veteran has decided to enroll in a postsecondary educational program, many obstacles still present themselves as she moves through the transition process. All the nuances that go along with being immersed in an unfamiliar environment can be confusing and overwhelming. Attempting to perform in various

roles such as student, mother, wife, and employee can also become burdensome and impact a female veteran's pursuit of postsecondary education.

### **Understanding the Education System**

Female veterans who transition into postsecondary education can be overwhelmed and experience a sort of culture shock; the college environment is extremely different than the military culture to which they are accustomed. As Ellison et al. (2012) explained, "A theme that was unique to young veterans was the military fostered a kind of dependency where you were not encouraged to ask questions and you could rely on commanding officers to be told what to do" (p. 214). Ackerman et al. (2009) concurred with this assessment. Participants in their study "described the structured life of the military and how difficult it was to move from a strictly defined structure to a loosely configured campus where there was no chain of command from which to get answers" (Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 19).

If the postsecondary educational institution does not have properly trained staff who can advise veterans on the application process, understanding the application process can be daunting for female student veterans. Bauman (2009) declared that veterans "often found themselves lost when navigating the GI Bill benefits process, other tuition assistance programs, scheduling, or other administrative tasks associated with college attendance" (p. 22). Female student veterans may find such services extremely pertinent as they attempt to address work-and-life-balance issues.

### **Work-and-Life-Balance Issues**

Female student veterans will step into many roles after they transition into postsecondary education. Female veterans transitioning into college are often parents

with children under the age of 18 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013), creating pressure to balance family, work, and college pursuits. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) stated, “For many female veterans who become college students and juggle multiple roles, the deeply rooted sense of a responsibility for others that they adapted to a combat situation will follow them into an academic environment” (p. 75). Often, many of these responsibilities existed prior to their entering college and must be delicately balanced to reach their goals (Wilson & Smith, 2012). These factors can persist throughout the postsecondary education journey and render fully transitioning and reaching their goals very arduous. In addition to outside pressures, the stress associated with the academic requirements imposed by the postsecondary institution can add another layer of difficulty in the transition process.

### **Obstacles After Transition**

#### **Financial Considerations and Constraints**

Attempting to complete their degrees on specific timelines with financial responsibilities presents an additional challenge for female veterans. Female veterans maximizing the GI Bill must use all of their funds by deadlines prescribed by the DoD. Other timelines can add pressure to completing a degree, including employment opportunities based upon obtaining a degree, family obligations, and the amount of monies available. Furthermore, to collect the maximum monies under the GI Bill, the veteran must enroll full time into college. These additional monies assist student veterans in paying for living expenses; however, many veterans attest to the insufficient nature of these funds to cover all living expenses for a single individual or a family (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

## **Relating to Civilians and Camaraderie**

Female veterans reveal their struggles relating to younger, nonveteran students with less life experience. Their sense of camaraderie is different as is their sense of what is important (Sander, 2012). Furthermore, DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) wrote,

The worldview and humanity veterans bring to the campus are vastly different from those of young Millennials, who depend on parental authority and whose need for approval may not extend far beyond acceptance in his or her organization of choice. For some older student veterans, additional campus challenges lie in apparent immaturity observed in typical nonveteran peers and their extended adolescent journey. (p. 36)

The above experience is not uncommon to female veterans, but male and female veterans do encounter differences in their respective college transitions. Both male and female veterans seek out and feel more comfortable around other veterans. But in the military, women especially seek the company of other women to help create separate identities to assimilate into a male-dominated organization. Ideally, a female veteran could find other female veterans to relate to in the college setting (Demers, 2013). However, female veterans are often difficult to identify on college campuses; some are not comfortable being labeled as veterans, and some do not wish to disclose their status as veterans to avoid any critical reactions to their military service. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) described the experience of one female student veteran who “found herself back in a college classroom hoping to ‘blend in’. She did not want to draw attention to herself as a veteran” (p. 75). Moreover, research indicates that men tend to have an easier time identifying other veterans. Sander (2012) postulated,

Once male veterans have traded their uniforms for civilian clothes, many joke about how easily they can spot one another on a college campus. It can be the haircut, boots, or posture. But that doesn't tend to work for women, who blend more easily. (p. A14)

Difficulty socializing with nonveteran female students due to age differences leaves many female student veterans struggling with feelings of isolation, and many express the desire to connect with other female veterans. Female veterans highly value support systems, and many note the companionship that comes from being around other female veterans, easing the transition into postsecondary education. The company of other women who have similar experiences in the military gives them the camaraderie they are accustomed to. Kathryn Wirkus, a retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel, is quoted as saying, "Finding camaraderie with fellow veterans who've gone through the ups and downs of being a female in uniform can be the key to a successful transition to civilian life" (as cited in Sander, 2012, p. A15).

### **Stereotypes**

Although the attitudes towards women joining the military have changed over time, many female veterans still express not garnering the same respect for their service to this nation as male veterans. Anchan, Hightower, and Caitlin (2013) provided the account of a female veteran in who recalls this conversation with a male veteran:

"What did you do over there?" some gray-haired male veterans in Akron, Ohio, at the Department of Veterans Affairs asked as they sized up her petite frame. "Did you sell Girl Scout cookies?" one asked. When Sandor's husband goes to the VA,

he gets handshakes and “Thank you for your service” accolades in the waiting room. (Skeptical doctors, para. 4)

This problem persists on college campuses as well. A 2009 California Research Bureau report found that female veterans “are hesitant to join campus groups because of negative reactions to women in the military, and networking opportunities are lacking” (Foster & Vince, 2009, p. 51). Other female veterans report feeling voiceless and uncomfortable contradicting things professors say about the military and its involvement in the war. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) provided the Holmstedt (2009) example of a female student in a philosophy class discussion about ongoing wars in the Middle East. As she attempted to provide a firsthand perspective of her experience being deployed, “No one seemed to want to hear her side” (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, p. 75). This is especially difficult for female veterans because male veterans are so revered. Catherine Morris, a veteran counselor at a northern California community college, made this observation, “Women often downplay their own experiences in the presence of male veterans because they feel that although they went through tough times in the military, it could not have been as bad as what the men went through” (Foster & Vince, 2009, p. 51). This is a societal perspective that some female veterans are also perpetuating, so hypothesizing that this perception would exist on a college campus is reasonable.

### **Gaps in Female Veteran Postsecondary Literature**

This extensive literature review revealed a scarcity of research on the methods that female student veterans employ to move in, move through, and move out of postsecondary education, “Although narrative and specific health-related data on female veterans exist, a gap remains in the literature on gender differences in how military



women and men readjust on their return to civilian life” (“Women Warriors,” 2011, p. 79). Investigative studies detail the need for support but describe neither what a female veteran defines as a support system nor how her support system contributes to reaching her educational goals. The need for coping mechanisms is also mentioned but there are no details regarding the specific coping mechanisms that female student veterans utilize to reach their educational goals.

Educational institutions could benefit from hearing a female veteran’s perspective regarding which resources prove valuable to female student veterans and why. Comprehending which resources were accessed and did not prove valuable as well as apprehending why there were not helpful would also be advantageous. Understanding this growing student veteran population will ultimately aid in drafting meaningful programs and policies that will prepare these individuals to be productive members of the communities in which they live.

This review of literature provided a basis to understand various issues female student veterans face when attempting to transition into postsecondary education. Using the Schlossberg (1981) theory of moving in, moving through, and moving out of postsecondary education an understanding of the transition process can be obtained, while apply the military adaptive model also provides a clearer view of how female student veterans manage this process. Chapter III examines the methodology used for this study. The design, data collection procedures, and analysis of the data are discussed. Chapter IV focuses on the findings of the study and Chapter V provides conclusions and recommendations for future studies.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter examines the methodology utilized to conduct the research study. The problem statement and purpose statement are restated, and the reasoning for choosing the methodology is described. The discussion provides an in-depth description of the research design, data collection procedures, and data analysis. The population, sample, study delimitations, and limitations are also examined.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to understand what factors motivate female student veterans to pursue postsecondary education. It was also the intent to uncover what common obstacles female student veterans encounter in pursuit of their degree and why they are able to persist beyond these obstacles. Finally, the information provided from the female student veteran's transition experience will be beneficial to other female veterans considering transitioning into postsecondary education.

The results of this research will assist postsecondary educational institutions in providing necessary resources to female veterans as they transition into the college culture on their respective campuses. Additionally, this research can enable postsecondary educational institutions to ascertain which resources female veterans feel contributed to the successful completion of their educational programs and which resources they did not find useful. The study may also provide insights regarding which additional resources are needed to further help female veterans successfully graduate.

### **Research Questions**

The five subsequent research questions guided the study in its exploration of the postsecondary education transitional needs of female student veterans. Understanding

these transitional needs highlighted the obstacles encountered by this population as well as the motivating factors that propelled these women to persist in their educational pursuits:

1. What factors motivate female military veterans to pursue higher education?
2. What obstacles do female military veterans face when pursuing higher education?
3. What factors motivate female military veterans to persist after enrolling in college?
4. What obstacles do female military veterans face after enrolling in college?
5. What recommendations do female military veterans who have successfully transitioned into higher education have for female military veterans who are considering higher education?

### **Research Design**

The research questions sought to acquire answers that are personal and full of description. As described by Creswell (2008), “Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). In this study, the words of the female student veterans were the guiding voices. Qualitative research consists of nine key characteristics: “Natural settings, Context sensitivity, Direct data collection, Rich narrative description, Process orientation, Inductive data analysis, Participant perspectives, Emergent design and Complexity of understanding an explanation” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 321). Some of the characteristics were more evident than others, but they all contributed to the constructing of this phenomenological case study.

Phenomenology seeks to understand the lived experience of an individual or group and examines how these individuals perceive and make sense of that lived experience (Patton, 2002). This study queried female student veterans to extract their lived experiences when they were transitioning into college environments, “To gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). These interviews relate the intricate details of the interviewees’ lived experiences to the audience in the interviewees’ own words. The descriptions provided by the female student veterans can aid other researchers in compiling future studies on this understudied population.

A case study was fitting in light of the research questions. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), “A case study promotes better understanding of a practice or issue and facilitates informed decision making” (p. 338). This study attempted to provide an understanding of the postsecondary transition experience of female student veterans. A case study “involves organizing the data by specific cases for in-depth study and comparison” (Patton, 2002, p. 446). This in-depth study was able to gather rich data from the perspective of female veterans who have experienced the very phenomena being studied. Patton (2002) claimed, “The case record is used to construct a case study appropriate for sharing with an intended audience, for example, scholars, policymakers, program decision makers, or practitioners” (p. 449). This study’s twofold significance lies in its potential to assist female veterans in planning the transition from the military to higher education while simultaneously providing a foundation for postsecondary institutions to enact valuable policies and programs to aid these women in their educational endeavors.

## **Population**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) defined a population as “a group of individuals or events from which a sample is drawn into which results can be generalized” (p. 129). The authors also stated that a population has key characteristics that can be used as the basis of the research study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Using the key characteristics, a target population can be identified. This study used female students with U.S. military service backgrounds as the target population. For this study, a female student veteran was defined as a female student who has served on active duty, reserve, or National Guard duty in the U.S. military and is considered a qualified veteran to receive benefits by the U.S. Armed Forces. It must be noted that students attending the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program cadets were excluded if they had not previously served on active duty.

## **Sample**

A subgroup of the whole student veteran population constituted this study’s sample. A sample is a small snapshot of the overall population being studied. Patton (2002) concluded that the same characteristics of a population are also present in a sample. A total of 37 participants in eight focus groups constituted the sample of this study. This study sought female student veterans that met three specific requirements:

1. served in the U.S. Armed Forces on either active, reserve, or guard status;
2. attended at least one semester of college; and
3. had not been out of college more than 4 years.

Purposive sampling was used to construct the focus groups. According to Patton (2002), “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich

cases for study in depth” (p. 230). Purposefully outlining specific criteria that the participants had to meet allowed the researcher to gather thoroughly detailed and in-depth experiences from the female student veterans. Snowball sampling was also used; as female student veterans signed up for the study, they were asked if they could refer any other female student veterans to participate in the study. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated, “This will provide the best chance that every member of the target population will be represented in the research study to yield unbiased results” (p. 131). Consent was obtained by presenting each of the participants with agreement forms prior to conducting the focus group sessions. In this research the veteran population is considered a protected class of research subjects, and it was with this in mind that advocates were recruited to be present for each of the eight focus groups.

Three advocates were used for the purpose of ensuring the veterans’ rights were explained during the focus groups and not violated. Each advocate was also provided a copy of the Participant’s Bill of Rights, consent form, and the focus group questions in advance. The rationale was to ensure that the researcher did not veer off course from the intended purposes of the research study.

The first advocate was a female veteran who served in the U.S. Army. She was an Apache pilot, a Gulf War veteran, and after separating from the military she earned a law degree. Based on her background and experiences, she was recruited to be an advocate for the focus groups as she would have a clear understanding of the culture and journey of the women who participated in this study. Prior to the focus groups, this advocate was instructed to intervene if boundaries were overstepped during the sessions. The second advocate recruited was a former district attorney and had previous experience

as an advocate and counselor for a protected group while working in the federal prison system. The third advocate was a female attorney with a business background, who provided pro bono services for a number of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrument chosen for this study was a set of qualitative questions. These standardized open-ended interview questions were developed by this researcher. As described by Patton (2002), “The exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance. All interviewees are asked the same basic questions in the same order. Questions are worded in a completely open-ended format” (p. 349). The rationale behind this approach was to solicit in-depth answers from the study’s participants. Following this format also allowed for follow-up questions that aided in obtaining the rich data of the female student veterans transitions. Patton (2002) stated, “Probes are used to deepen the response to a question, increase the richness and depth of responses, and give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired” (p. 372). Ensuring that the participants’ views and experiences were accurately documented reinforced the reliability and validity of this study.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability is a great concern in qualitative research studies and must be addressed throughout the research process. As Patton stated, “Any research strategy ultimately needs to be useful” (p. 51). The intent of this researcher was that the data the study yielded would be useful in helping the female student veteran population; however, in qualitative studies, the objectivity of the researcher can be questioned. According to Patton (2002), “One way to increase the credibility and legitimacy of qualitative inquiry

among those who place priority on traditional scientific research criteria is to emphasize those criteria that have priority within that tradition” (p. 544). The explicit outlining of the criteria for how participants were chosen for this study served to increase the study’s reliability.

Prior to launching the study, the researcher piloted the focus group questions with a group of female student veterans who were not included in the final study. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) attested to the importance of this step to ensure that any inconsistencies, ambiguity, or awkward phrasing of the questions could be revised when employed in the study. Upon completion of this critical stage in the qualitative research process, the researcher also consulted with “content experts to gather evidence for validity” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 204). In qualitative research, validity “depends on careful instrument construction to ensure that the instrument measures what is it supposed to measure” (Patton, 2002, p. 14). To ensure validity, this study capitalized on several of the enhancing strategies propounded by McMillan and Schumacher (2010): “(1) Triangulation in data collection and analysis, (2) Use of voice recordings to accurately document statements made by the participants, and (3) Participants’ review of researcher’s synthesis of interview data” (p. 330). To further establish this study’s validity, each focus group was asked the same sets of questions and concentrated solely on the topic of female student veterans’ transitions to and experiences in college.

### **Data Collection**

Securing approval from California State University at Sacramento, Sierra College, and American River College to conduct a research study on their campuses proved to be the first step of collecting data. To protect the privacy of students, the researcher asked



the institutions to send e-mails to the female student veteran populations on their respective campuses announcing the study. The e-mails explained the purpose of the study, the criteria for participating in the study, and the contact information to volunteer for the study. The e-mails also emphasized that the study was voluntary, no names would be attached to any information shared in the focus groups, and that there would be no penalties for backing out of the study if a student became uncomfortable. At the close of the registration period, which lasted for 2 weeks, additional e-mails were sent to the female student veterans who volunteered, reminding them of the date, time, and location of the focus group.

For those female veterans who did not attend any of the above institutions, a recruitment flyer was posted on Facebook. Through snowball sampling, volunteers contacted the researcher and were scheduled to attend a focus group. These female student veterans were from all over the United States and include overseas locations such as England, Italy, Portugal, and Korea. To interview these female student veterans, an online meeting room in Adobe Connect was set up and each participant was provided the information to gain access to the meeting room.

Data collection times, which began in the month of April and concluded in the first week of June, were selected based on the observation of Carol M. Roberts, author of *The Dissertation Journey*. She wrote, “In education there are several windows of opportunity when people are available. September, Christmas, and June are not the best times given the typical school calendar” (Roberts, 2010, p. 158). This was the first point to consider in data collection.

The employment of a data collection organization chart also helped to track and categorize the data. Roberts (2010) detailed the importance of such a resource, “To help you efficiently deal with organizing data collection, create a Source Data Chart. This chart keeps track of each data source in your study . . . it also organizes the data sources by your research questions” (p. 158). A reflective journal, used as a means to reference when data were collected and the specific details of each step of the process, also proved valuable throughout the data collection process.

Employing focus groups as this study’s instrument afforded the researcher the best opportunity to gather the most insightful data from the female student veterans’ transitional experiences. The study deployed three groups from the selected colleges that each consisted of four to six people. Female student veterans that met the criteria outlined in this chapter constituted each focus group. Patton (2002) posited, “In a given study, a series of different focus groups will be conducted to get a variety of perspectives and increase the confidence in whatever patterns emerge” (p. 385). The uniqueness of focus group interviews lies in the participants’ ability to listen to each other’s responses and provide further details and different perspectives on each theme that emerges throughout the interview. These emerging themes also allowed the researcher to organize and code the data into specific categories. This helped develop a holistic understanding of the transition experiences of female student veterans.

Extensive field notes, coupled with audio recordings of the focus group interviews, were also utilized. Additionally, the interviews were transcribed, and the data were coded and organized by the themes that emerged. The transcription of the interviews was verbatim, thus painting an accurate depiction of the female student

veterans' perspectives. The temptation to make all the sentences grammatically correct did present itself during the transcription process, but it was avoided. Altering the participants' exact words and phrases could have changed the meanings of the information that they provided (Patton, 2002). Resisting the temptation to change the sentences in any way ensured that the trustworthiness of the data did not come into question.

### **Data Analysis**

The thoroughly detailed nature of the focus group interviews produced a large amount of data to be analyzed. The researcher's highest concern was ensuring that the data collected was of quality (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). At this point in the study, organizing the data so that it could be coded was paramount. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) contended, "An essential early step in analysis is to organize the large amount of data so that coding is facilitated" (p. 369). Transcription of the audio recordings that were collected was required so that data coding can take place. The process of transcription is "of taking these notes and other information and converting them into a format that will facilitate analysis" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 370). Once the data were transcribed, the information was analyzed and placed into the proper categories for coding.

The coding process allowed for positively identifying themes that emerged. To further understand these themes, a logical cross analysis was employed to show connections and patterns. The logical cross analysis is a matrix that allows the data to be placed in categories and compared (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher then constructed a theme matrix for each researcher question. Under the research

question, subquestions are also utilized identifying not only themes but subthemes as well. These theme matrix charts (tables) are presented in Chapter IV.

### **Limitations**

The female veterans interviewed for this study represented only a small sample of the overall female veteran population. As a result, generalizing the findings to the larger population of female student veterans was difficult. Additionally, it was impossible to ensure that the female veterans who were interviewed accurately represented their actual transition experiences. A female veteran may have hidden information that made her transition to postsecondary education difficult due to the uncomfortable nature of discussing some personal and sensitive topics.

The size of the sample used was a limitation of the study. This study's sample was only a small snapshot of the overall female veteran population and therefore could prove problematic when attempting to construct generalizations regarding this population. Furthermore, this study was based on the transitional experiences as perceived by the study participants, potentially leading to difficulties in making generalizations about this population. One group of female veterans' transition experiences from the military to college cannot necessarily be generalized to every group of female student veterans on every college campus nationwide, especially given the variety of personal backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and family and friend support structures for each veteran. Additionally, this study relied on the participants' responses during the focus group interviews, and confirming that each student veteran was 100% honest during the focus groups was nearly impossible. There were some responses from the participants that were unclear, which prompted follow-up questions in an attempt to

gain clarity from the questionable responses. There were some instances where the participants were able to clearly express their responses during the follow-up questions, while in other situations the veterans were unable to articulate or expand on the answers they provided.

As a female veteran, the researcher had to consider and be mindful of any biases that may have been present. The researcher had previous interview experience and was able to capitalize on this skillset and employ it to remain objective when facilitating the various focus groups. The researcher compartmentalized the information as it was being presented and later, when reading the transcripts, was able to fully process what the participants shared.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to inform the reader of the qualitative phenomenological case study's methodology in detail. The target population was identified as female student veterans transitioning into postsecondary educational institutions. The sample used was examined, and the specific requirements that study participants had to meet were discussed. The research design was thoroughly examined through the discussion of data collection and analysis of the information yielded from the focus groups conducted. Finally, the delimitations and limitations were set forth and reviewed. The following two chapters present the major findings, recommendations for further research, and concluding remarks.

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

The number of female student veterans entering postsecondary education around the country is steadily increasing. With the 2012 Department of Defense policy changes allowing women to now serve in combat roles, more women are entering the military, which translates to more female veterans taking advantage of the educational benefits they earned through their military service. Blanton and Foster (2012) reported, “In 2009, women comprised eight percent of the veteran population. By 2020, they are projected to comprise 10.7 percent, and by 2035 are expected to make up 15 percent of the veteran population” (p. 1).

This chapter explores the transition experiences of female student veterans entering postsecondary education. Focus group sessions with female student veterans who transitioned to higher education revealed recurring themes that included a deep analysis of the motivating factors to enroll in college, obstacles encountered when pursuing a degree, reasons for persistence through difficult challenges, and how they overcame these obstacles. These veterans were also solicited for advice they would offer to other female veterans considering transitioning into postsecondary education. In this chapter, the purpose statement is restated along with the research questions, research methodology, and data collection methods utilized. The population explored and sample selected are outlined, followed by a presentation of the data.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to understand what factors motivate female student veterans to pursue postsecondary education. It was also the intent to uncover what common obstacles female student veterans encounter in pursuit of their degree and why

they are able to persist beyond these obstacles. Finally, the information provided from the female student veteran's transition experience can be beneficial to other female veterans considering transitioning into postsecondary education.

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following five questions:

1. What factors motivate female military veterans to pursue higher education?
2. What obstacles do female military veterans face when pursuing higher education?
3. What factors motivate female military veterans to persist after enrolling in college?
4. What obstacles do female military veterans face after enrolling in college?
5. What recommendations do female military veterans who have successfully transitioned into higher education have for female military veterans who are considering higher education?

### **Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures**

This qualitative phenomenological case study sought to understand female student veterans' transitions to college through their own narratives. Focus groups were the ideal setting to gather this information. As defined by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), a focus group is "a method of obtaining qualitative data from a selected group of individuals . . . to learn more about the needs and circumstances of the participants" (p. 440). A focus group questionnaire was drafted containing 21 questions. Prior to launching the study, these 21 questions were piloted with a small focus group, and the participants' feedback was solicited to make any necessary adjustments to the instrument.

Data were collected through face-to-face focus groups for the female student veterans who attended higher education institutions in the Sacramento, California, area.

For the other participants from across the United States, Europe, and Asia, the focus groups were held via Adobe Connect, using an Internet meeting room. A few women were unable to attend the scheduled focus groups due to military, college, or life obligations and opted to complete the focus group questions independently and e-mail them back to the researcher. All participants were provided a Participant's Bill of Rights and consent form and were advised that, for their protection, the advocate witnessing the study would intervene to ensure their rights were not violated. The audio for each focus group was recorded, with the participants' consent, and the recordings were later transcribed to identify common themes. This information provided insight into this population's transition into postsecondary education.

### **Population**

Female students who had served in the U.S. Armed Forces constituted the target population for this study. The female veterans who were invited to participate were either active or former active duty, reservists or retired, and represented all branches of the military. A portion of the participants were female student veterans from California State University at Sacramento, American River College, and Sierra College. From these postsecondary institutions, the female student veterans also included women serving in the Reserves and in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). The female student veterans who were members of the ROTC units were included due to their service on active duty prior to entering the ROTC program.

### **Sample**

A total of 37 participants interviewed through eight focus groups as well as four participants who independently completed the focus group questionnaire served as the



sample for this study. The female student veterans who participated in the study met three specific requirements:

1. served in the U.S. Armed Forces on either active, reserve, or guard status;
2. attended at least one semester of college; and
3. had not been out of college more than 4 years.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants met the requirements to be a part of the study, which allowed the researcher to gather in-depth and relevant information describing their postsecondary educational experiences. Through snowball sampling, the researcher was able to solicit experiences from female student veterans beyond the confines of California and the continental United States. As female veterans signed up for the study, they were asked if they knew of other female veterans who would be interested in participating, which enabled the recruitment of female student veterans from every military branch, of various ages, from all education levels, and at varying stages of life.

### **Demographic Data**

The 37 participants involved in this study represented every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces (see Table 1). Participants were asked to provide details about their years of completed education, the amount of time that elapsed since they separated from their military service, and their current location (see Tables 1-3). Participants were apprised that the demographic information would be used for statistical purposes only and not for the researcher's own personal interests. The end result was that participants were recruited from all of the United States and from England, Italy, Korea, and Portugal.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics: Years of Education/Study by Branch of Service*

Branch of service	n	Years of education/study						Location
		Fresh.	Soph.	Jun.	Sen.	Grad.	Doct.	
U.S. Air Force	19	3	5	2	2	5	2	AZ, CA, DC, HI, MO, OK, England, Italy, Korea, Portugal
U.S. Army	7	0	6	0	1	0	0	CA, TX
U.S. Navy	8	0	0	2	1	2	3	CA, HI, WA
U.S. Marine Corps	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	CA, WA
U.S. Coast Guard	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	CA

Table 2

*Participant Demographics: Years of Education/Study by Service Status*

Service status	n	Years of education/study					
		Fresh.	Soph.	Jun.	Sen.	Grad.	Doct.
Retired	5	0	0	0	0	1	3
Active duty	11	0	6	1	0	3	1
Reservist	3	0	1	0	0	1	0
National Guard	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 3

*Participant Demographics: Years Since Separation*

Branch of service	n	Years since separation		
		0-3	4-6	6-9
U.S. Air Force	19	9	2	1
U.S. Army	7	2	2	0
U.S. Navy	8	2	2	0
U.S. Marine Corps	2	1	1	0
U.S. Coast Guard	1	0	1	0

### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

The findings from the focus groups are reported through five major categories that correspond to the five research questions: (a) motivations for enrolling in higher education, (b) obstacles when pursuing higher education, (c) motivating factors to persist

in higher education, (d) obstacles after enrolling in higher education, and (e) advice to future female student veterans transitioning into higher education. Within each of the major categories, the themes that emerged are introduced and supported by quotes from the study participants.

The themes presented were based on the data collected and were selected based on the number of times the themes emerged from the individual focus groups. During the process of data analysis from each focus group, the data were compared and added to the theme matrices illustrated in this chapter. While analyzing the data, it became clear that there were several themes that were consistent in all eight focus groups. Other themes were more inconsistent in nature or were sporadic in the eight focus groups; however, if themes were mentioned by at least nine of the 37 (approximately 25%) participants, the themes were included in the matrices.

### **Research Question 1**

*What factors motivate female military veterans to pursue higher education?*

Subquestion 1 asked participants, “Why did you join the military?” Participants identified that they joined the military for the educational benefits. This was due to having a lack of funds to go to school or not feeling they were ready to attend college. Other reasons that emerged were also of a personal nature, such as patriotism, wanting to gain independence and to continue the family tradition of military service. These themes can be found in Table 4.

**Educational benefits.** Thirty-four of the 37 participants reported joining the military for the educational benefits:

Table 4

*Data Matrix and Narrative for Research Question 1, Subquestion 1: “Why Did You Join the Military?”*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Educational benefits	4/4	3/3	6/6	6/6	5/5	4/4	5/5	4/4
Not ready for college				4/6	4/5			4/4
Patriotism	4/4		6/6					
Independence	4/4			5/6	5/5	3/4		¾
Family tradition	2/4	2/3	4/6		3/5	2/4		

I knew I wanted to go to college, but I knew my parents could not afford to pay for college. So I decided to join the Air Force. It was not as easy as I thought it would be, you know, working full time and going to school, but I did it.

(Participant 29)

The military offered some of the women a career and educational benefits, as

Participant 12 described:

Well, I wanted to join the Army originally, but then I found out about the Reserves, and it [was] kind of the best of both worlds, so you can go to school and get the educational benefits at the same time. I thought this was really unique and something a lot of people do not get to do.

Participant 30 also echoed this sentiment: “I wanted to get out of the house and ultimately start college. I wanted to get some work experience, so I wanted to get out and into the world.”

**Not ready for college.** Twelve of the 37 participants in the study stated they were not being ready to attend college was a large part of their decision to join the military.

Participant 32 expressed, “I joined the military because I wanted to leave home and do

something different. I was not ready for college.” Participant 23 explained that her reasons also included feeling that college was not the right step for her at that time: “I joined the military after attending one term at the local community college. I didn’t feel that I was ready to go to school, and the military seemed like a good idea instead.”

Reasons for not feeling ready for college were not only academic but also psychological. Participant 5 uttered,

I was so sheltered growing up. I had no idea what I wanted out of life. The only thing I knew for sure was that I did not want to waste time and drift along until I figured it out. I figured the Air Force would give me a chance to grow up and figure things out, like who I was, and then I could go to college.

**Patriotism.** Ten of the 37 participants mentioned that the 9/11 attacks compelled them to join the military. Participant 11 related,

I know this is cliché, but I had a lot of strong emotions and memories of 9/11. My father was law enforcement, and I kind of just felt like it was my duty to serve my country, so I did.

Participant 3 echoed this sentiment: “I joined in December of 2001 in response to the 9/11 attacks. I really felt the need to serve.” Another participant, Participant 36, also associated feeling a sense to serve with the 9/11 attacks: “It was shortly after President Bush declared war that I wanted to fight for our country and make a difference in the world.” Participant 35 conveyed similar thoughts: “I actually joined the military after the 9/11 attacks. I was uninspired, going nowhere in life, and 9/11 happened and I figured I would join and help my country.” Participant 7 joined prior to the 9/11 attacks and added

this: “I decided to go the military route because I saw it as a step that was full of glory and prestige to serve my nation.”

**Independence.** Twenty of the 37 participants reported wanting to gain their independence and make their own way in the world. Many of the women revealed that they left home right after high school and needed a way to gain their independence. Others needed to gain control of their environment. The military offered them that opportunity. Participant 28, however, had a slightly different path to gaining her independence:

I joined the military because I dropped out of high school my senior year, and my mother proceeded to look for jobs for me every single day. I had to ride the bus, go to her office, and check in with her and then ride the bus all over town looking for a job. At the end of the day, I had to ride the bus back to her office and ride home with her. I did this every single day. I decided I was done. When she went on vacation to Florida to visit family, I joined the Navy. That was on a Monday. I actually shipped out the following Wednesday.

Participant 29 simply stated, “I needed to be independent and pay my own way through college.” Participant 6 needed to gain control of her life and offered this: “I was 21, a single parent working two jobs and trying to go to school. I did not want to depend on anyone else and continue to struggle.” All of these women joined the military to gain independence and the ability to chart their own paths in the world.

**Family tradition.** Thirteen of the 37 participants highlighted the importance of continuing the family tradition of military service. Participant 7 reiterated this theme with this story:

It runs in my family. My dad was in, my uncle was in, and my grandfather was in. My dad was Air Force, my Uncle was in the Marines, and my grandfather was in the Air Force in World War II and got shot down over France, so I grew up hearing stories about the military, and it was something that just seemed natural for me to do.

Participant 13 recounted,

Pretty much all of my family is military, except my mom and dad are like the first ones in the family not to go in. My grandfather was Air Force, and he would have been so proud of me going in too, although I joined the Army.

Participant 2 shared that her reasons for joining the military were twofold:

Honestly, I joined for the educational benefits, and it was a family tradition for a lot of the men in my family. It was something I always wanted to do, especially since my grandmother was the last woman to join the military in our family. So I wanted to honor her, so I joined the Air Force.

Participant 21 mentioned that she joined out of tradition and that she was used to the military way of life:

I grew up in a very structured home. Most of the males in my family were military, and they had a lot to do with my decision to join the Navy. It was a natural fit as the structure was familiar and was not a big change for me.

Subquestion 2 asked participants, “Why did you decide to enroll in college?”

The themes that emerged for deciding to enroll in college were gaining future employment as a result of obtaining a postsecondary degree. Also the monies provided for attending school was cited as an incentive. Additionally participants cited their

family as a driving factor for enrolling in college hoping that by earning a degree they could provide for their families in the future. These themes can be found in Table 5.

Table 5

*Data Matrix and Narrative for Research Question 1, Subquestion 2: “Why Did You Decide to Enroll in College?”*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Future employment	3/4	3/3	4/6	6/6	3/5	3/6	5/5	3/4
Living expenses	3/4	3/3	3/6	4/6	4/5	4/4	4/5	
Family	3/4	2/3	4/6	3/6	3/6			

**Future employment.** Thirty of the 37 participants reported that future employment was a motivator in enrolling in higher education and obtaining a degree. This was a common theme among those who were still on active duty as well as those who had already transitioned out of the military. Participant 2 explained,

Right now I am a psychology major because I realized I wanted to help veterans with PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder]. I had a cousin who deployed to Afghanistan for a year and a half with the Army. I saw what he went through when he got back, and I realized I wanted to work with military members suffering from PTSD. It is something I can see doing for the rest of my life.

Several of the active duty participants expressed the necessity of attaining a postsecondary degree to achieve their goals of becoming commissioned officers in the military. The active duty participants who were not seeking a commissioned officer position articulated that while they had no specific plans to immediately use their degrees, they all had a strong desire to be prepared to leave the military when the time came. Participant 21 explained,



Initially it started out as just wanting something outside of the Navy. I knew it wasn't going to be forever, and I wanted to be able to have something to fall back on, and it works both ways I guess because I was trying to make myself better for the Navy and also help myself to get promotional mobility within the military.

**Living expenses.** Twenty-five of the 37 participants identified living expenses as a motivator for enrolling in higher education. Many of the female student veterans attending college openly admitted that the money provided to them by the Post-9/11 GI Bill significantly swayed their decisions to enroll in postsecondary education. In addition to tuition, fees, and stipends, full-time students receive a housing allowance under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which covers a number of living expenses for these students.

**Family.** Fifteen of the 37 participant identified family as a motivator for enrolling in higher education. The participants expressed a need to provide a better quality of life for their families in the future. Ten of the participants were single mothers and reported they felt pressure to provide for their children. Participant 30 summarized,

My kids deserve a good life. It's not their fault me and their dad are not together. I don't want to struggle forever; going to school can help me provide them what they need and some of what they want.

A number of women who did not yet have children still expressed a desire to provide for their future families: "I started going to school to better myself so that I do not have a family living in poverty, as well as be a role model to my future kids" (Participant 29). Those who did have families also conveyed wanting to contribute to the family's finances, as Participant 11 voiced:

I don't know; my story is kind of different. My husband is a military recruiter, and he's getting out in 2 years and he still has no idea what he wants to do. We already know we're going to be forced to downsize because he's going to be getting out. We have a mortgage and bills and other things, so . . . I am taking as many classes as I can to try and hurry things up so I can be the breadwinner. He's doing a great job supporting us right now, but I know that is going to change, and I know I have to do this. I have to make it because we have kids to feed.

Family was a recurring theme throughout this study. The theme matrices that follow illustrate this point.

## Research Question 2

*What obstacles do female military veterans face when pursuing higher education?*

Subquestion 1 asked, "What information or services do you wish were available when you transitioned into college?" Based on the participant's answers the women expressed not being fully informed on the benefits they qualify for. Also when they go to campus counselors they are provided misinformation and this impacts the participants in a number of ways. These themes can be found on Table 6.

Table 6

*Data Matrix and Narrative for Research Question 2, Subquestion 1: "What Information or Services Do You Wish Were Available When You Transitioned Into College?"*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Lack of benefit awareness	3/4	3/3	4/6	5/6		4/4	3/5	4/4
Poor counseling	3/4	3/3				2/4	4/5	2/4

**Lack of benefit awareness.** Twenty-six of the 37 participants reported that they wished they had a better understanding of the Veterans' Affairs (VA) benefits they qualified for, as Participant 1 communicated, "It's hard because if you don't know your benefits, nobody offers you benefits, so it's kind of hard to transition if you don't know what you are entitled to." Participant 35 relayed, "I guess I am kind of ignorant to the services and benefits. I am not aware what I can use other than the Post-9/11 GI Bill." Participant 31 highlighted that her transition experience with the Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) did not help her comprehend her benefits:

TAPS was not a beneficial experience for me. I was in the regular separation group, but I was a special retirement case, which was abnormal for the rank that I was at the end, definitely for the amount of service that I had put in at my age. So I just got put into this class where only half of it was really what I needed to know, so my retirement benefits—I am still not sure if I ever found out all of them.

The study participants noted not apprehending all of their benefits. This issue was also related to counselors who were not fully informed on how to aid veterans with their scholastic needs.

**Poor counseling.** Fourteen of the 37 participants reported that misinformation from an educational counselor adversely affected their college journeys. Participant 30 voiced,

For my education plan, there was chaos no matter what I did. The very first counselor I saw, the very first face I met at this school, they had me taking 2 years' worth of classes in a short amount of time. I felt like they were wasting my

benefits. I took it personally, and it really bummed me out. Three counselors later, I finally found someone that took the time to really help me. In my opinion, the first counselor might have been a lack of knowledge. I felt like it was just apathy; they just wanted to get me out of there. I felt rushed, like they really didn't care.

She went on to discuss the specific impact the misinformation from her counselor had on her college journey:

I felt the counseling was a huge obstacle. Luckily, I caught it pretty early, but I am in a class right now that I don't need, so it's kind of disappointing. I have to talk myself into going to this class every day. I am so not motivated to finish this class because I know I don't need it. (Participant 30)

A participant pointed out that the staff at her institution seems to neither understand the VA system nor take the time to answer questions the student veterans have. Participant 35 uttered,

Recently I asked my counselor about the Yellow Ribbon program. The counselor told me I was not a part of it and I needed to call the VA to enroll in the program. So following her instructions, I called the VA, and after a 40-minute wait on the phone, the VA rep informed me that I was already enrolled in the Yellow Ribbon program and had been for the past three semesters.

Participant 36 offered insights as to the difficulties she faced when trying to deal with misinformation and poor counseling:

Since attending this school, I have had great difficulty with some of the staff and their not being able to keep up with their end of my finances and agreeing on how

many credits are needed to finish my degree. The entire 2 years of me being here, my account has been on hold, and I have had five ed. plans!

Poor counseling was a cited obstacle, but many participants also declared that this compelled them to learn the system independently, overcoming the barrier and continuing on their paths to degree attainment.

### Research Question 3

*What factors motivate female military veterans to persist after enrolling in college?*

Subquestion 1 asked, “What motivated you to keep going?” As these female student veterans encountered obstacles they cited several reasons that kept them from dropping out. Their family members motivated them to push through these difficult times. Staying motivated was also based on remembering what the ultimate goal is to graduate, have their ideal job, and provide for their families. Also many expressed that they never entertained quitting. Table 7 displays the themes that emerged.

Table 7

*Data Matrix and Narrative for Research Question 3, Subquestion 1: “What Motivated You to Keep Going?”*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Family	3/4	3/3	5/6		4/5			4/4
Big picture				6/6	5/5	3/4	3/5	4/4
Failure not an option (pride)	4/4	3/3	5/5	6/6	5/5	4/4	5/5	4/4

**Family.** As previously noted, the female veteran participants in this study recognized their families as main motivating factors for enrolling in college. Twenty of

the 37 participants cited that their families helped motivate them to endure when they encountered major obstacles. Participant 34 expressed,

Honestly, what kept me going was the desire to get my commission and serve. On July 17th, my husband's brother was killed in Iraq, 9 days before he was to return home. My husband and his brother were close. They were battle buddies. I felt that I needed to be there for him, to be his battle buddy. That is what kept me going. I wanted to honor my brother-in-law and help my husband keep going.

Participant 3 voiced similar thoughts:

My son is my biggest motivation. I do it for him. He tells me he is proud of me every day when we do our homework together. I feel that I have to set an example for him. If I quit, how can I ever tell him he can't quit something?

Participant 36 credited her family with keeping her motivated but expressed that she received encouragement from many others who she felt were part of her extended family:

I am the first in my family to go to college. If I don't finish, I feel like I would let my family down. They are so proud of me and tell me every chance they get. Where I am from, the entire community is like a family. It is a small town, so when I say family, it goes beyond my immediate family. When I go home for a visit, I feel like a celebrity; everyone who comes up to me at church shakes my hand and tells me how proud they are of me. That is important to me. I cannot disappoint them.

**Big picture.** Remaining focused on the end goal of completing their college degree work surfaced as a motivating factor for participants to persist in college.

Twenty-one of the 37 participants referred to this as the “big picture.” Participant 13 outlined her big picture as one day becoming a nurse:

The military trained me to work in the medical field. I fell in love with the hospital environment. Once I got out of the military, I decided I wanted to get back in that environment, but as a nurse. I am taking 17 units and it is exhausting, but I envision my first day of work as a nurse and know that this is only temporary.

Participant 18 had a vision of what the future may hold for her, but she must obtain a bachelor’s degree in order to become a commissioned officer in the military:

My career choice could take me to interesting places. When I found what I was interested in, it helped me get motivated to move forward no matter how hard things get. I always have the bigger picture in my head, so I knew this was something I have to finish.

Participant 29 expressed her desire to be a social worker based on her less-than-desirable childhood. Since leaving the military, she also envisioned possibly working with veterans:

I want to get into social work because of my situation with my parents. If I can help children be placed in safe and loving homes, then I would feel that I have made a difference in this world. Who knows what these kids could grow up to be? To do this, I need to get my degree and become a social worker. I must admit I go back and forth though; I could see working to help veterans and their families that need social work done for them as well. I don’t know. All I know is I just want to help people.

Participant 35 was discharged for medical reasons and voiced a desire to be part of something meaningful. She identified her calling in life and knew that an education was a way to reach her goals:

I plan on being a lawyer. I haven't decided exactly what type of law I want to practice, but by the time I get out of law school I will be 100% disabled, and it is service connected, so I won't really need as much money as others. So I feel like I want to give back to the community. Because I am no longer in the military defending people, I want to do something worthwhile. So when I get out of law school, I want to either be a human rights activist lawyer or something like that. I just feel the need to give back. I really have a hard time feeling like I'm not a pillar in the community anymore.

**Pride.** Each participant was asked what kept her from dropping out of college, and all participants (37 out of 37) reported that failure was not an option. The military taught these women determination and pride, which was cited as a reason for not dropping out. Participant 32 stated this succinctly: "As far as me dropping out, that is no longer an option for me because I am 32 not 22 years old. I will earn my degree, and I will not quit." A number of women echoed this point in various ways. Participant 22 simply declared, "At the end of the day, I am not a quitter." Nearly every participant made such a statement. Participant 6 uttered, "Dropping out was never an option."

Subquestion 2 asked, "Who would you identify as being a part of your support to help you through college?" The participants identified what they use as a support system to make it through their postsecondary journey. A large majority of the participants cited their families as their support system but also include external sources such as the



veteran’s center. Some participants also cited themselves as the support system for various reasons. Table 8 shows how these themes emerged among the participants.

Table 8

*Data Matrix and Narrative for Research Question 3, Subquestion 2: “Who Would You Identify as Being a Part of Your Support to Help You Through College?”*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Family/ significant other	3/4	3/3	5/6	4/6	4/5	4/4	5/5	
Self			3/6			4/4	3/5	
Veteran center	4/4		5/6	6/6	3/5	4/4		

**Family/significant other.** Twenty-eight of the 37 participants noted family and significant others as their support systems through their postsecondary experiences. Participant 18 stated that her family and boyfriend have supported her and helped her get through college:

My family definitely have been there for me. My mom and my sisters have helped me anytime I need it. Even when I don’t ask for help, they come over, cook, clean, and keep me on track. My boyfriend keeps me going; he has helped me with my homework so many times. He reads my papers, edits, and sometimes types my notes for me. It’s nice to have such a great support system.

Participant 4 offered her thoughts on her husband as her support system:

I would have to say my husband is my support system. When I had our daughter, someone had to watch her. So he was a big, big supporter, especially late night trying to do homework, before I go to work or when I get home and need to do homework, he takes care of many of the household duties.

Participant 23 also credited her husband with being her biggest supporter: “My husband 100%. He has taken care of everything so that I can do assignments and has provided the emotional support needed when I am flipping out and think I am going to break.”

Participant 21 identified her daughter as her support system, stating,

I would have to say that my daughter is my support system. A lot of times she helps me keep that focus. She’ll call me and say, “Mom, what are you doing?” She’s 23, so she has a family of her own, but she will call and ask how I’m doing. She makes sure I am focused and getting it done.

The theme of family stretched throughout all of the focus groups. However, not all of the participants had families and other supports that they relied upon to get through their college journeys.

**Self.** Ten of the 37 participants related that they had to rely on themselves to get through college. Some of the participants were active duty and were far from home; they had become accustomed to being self-reliant. The same was true for a number of the women who had fully transitioned out of the military. To attend the school of their choosing, they had to move away from their immediate families. Participant 36 saw herself as a self-starter: “I am a high energy person and very self-propelled and self-motivated; that’s just how my personality is.” Participant 35 expanded by stating,

I don’t have to go to school, but once I separated from the Air Force, I will admit I was going through severe depression. One of my psychologists suggested I make a life plan because they did not know what was going to happen with my leg. I made this life plan and like just zoned in on it. So now I’m going to do it. I

have this drive, and I am not a victim. I'm going to accomplish what I set out to do.

Participant 8 offered the following:

I feel the need to prove myself to everybody. Just because somebody separates themselves from the service doesn't mean they're going to work at Walmart. They're going to be able to succeed in life. So I feel like that is enough motivation to keep me working.

Participant 24 was an active duty veteran who identified herself as her own support system by sharing this:

I have to be my own support system because I never know when the Air Force is going to deploy or PCS [permanent change of station] me. I have worked out a system that works for me. The school I am attending is flexible, so I take a few classes back to back, and then take a month break to let my mind relax. With all that the military puts you through, I had to learn how to teach myself through online classes and really how to stay self-disciplined.

Each of these participants found that she had to rely on their own strengths to get through her college journey.

**Veteran center/counselor.** Twenty-two of the 37 participants identified as a consistent support system either a veteran center or a counselor who helped them navigate the college landscape. Participant 20 saw the veteran center at her institution as a big help.

It was a one-stop shop for everything—GI Bill, counseling—and that is how I found out about the work study program, which allowed me to earn money to help me survive while going to school.

Participant 11 also expressed how the veteran center positively impacted her college career:

I attended some online classes when I first got out. I actually went here for two semesters before I found out about the Veteran Resource Center. I was just doing general ed. classes and did not have any clue how college worked, so I was getting through, but just barely. When I discovered the Veteran Resource Center, it made such a difference. They spoke my language and showed me additional benefits I qualified for as a veteran.

Participant 30 was also impressed by the veteran center on her campus and felt the center helped her transition into the college culture:

This is actually my first college, and this is the first place I came; the veterans' services office was my first stop. I was really worried about money, and I was in the Reserves and I wasn't sure how I was going to pay for everything. I was really nervous, but when I came here everything came together as far as me accessing available benefits. It was very helpful. They had a lot of information and resources, and they really made me feel comfortable about what I was doing.

Participant 29 also used the same veteran center and felt comfortable approaching the staff with questions. She stated,

It's just like family. They know and understand what I have been through. Even if I wasn't using my benefits, I could go to them and say, "What's next for me?"

And they never have a problem of telling me what I should do next. If I was having problems with my benefits, I was immediately offered help. Eventually they offered me a work study position, and now I get to help other veterans understand the system.

Participant 7 stated that the institution she attended did not have a veteran center, but she wished she had this resource available to her:

It seems like veteran centers have started to pop up in the last 2 years. I wish that there was somewhere I could have gone that understood I was not like the traditional students. It would have been nice to have someone to reach out to that could have helped me sort everything out and help advise me on how to qualify for additional benefits.

Veteran centers staffed with individuals who are knowledgeable on veterans' issues were identified as an invaluable resource to the female participants.

#### **Research Question 4**

*What obstacles do female military veterans face after enrolling in college?*

Subquestion 1 asked, "How do faculty and staff react to finding out you served in the military?" The participants shared that the reactions have been both positive and negative to finding out about their veteran status. They provide specific examples of each in the following paragraphs. Based on some of their experiences a number of the women pick and choose when they share their veteran status. Table 9 displays these themes.

Table 9

*Data Matrix and Narrative for Research Question 4, Subquestion 1: “How Do Faculty and Staff React to Finding Out You Served in the Military?”*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Negative reaction	3/4		5/6			2/4	4/5	
Positive reaction	2/4		4/6	5/6	5/5	3/4	3/5	4/4
Do not share veteran status		3/3	5/6			3/4		

**Negative reactions.** Fourteen of the 37 participants reported encountering individuals who had adverse reactions to their veteran status, and some provided examples of negative reactions by faculty/staff upon finding out the participants were veterans. Many of the following examples were based on direct interactions and conversations with faculty/staff. Participant 29 divulged that upon asking to be excused from class early to take care of a work-related issue, the instructor looked at her and said, “I don’t give a f\*\*\* if you are a veteran. I don’t give a f\*\*\* that you served. I don’t give a f\*\*\* that you went to war. I will not be making any exceptions for you.”

Participant 7 also encountered an issue with a professor, who was openly speaking negatively in class about veteran students. She recounted,

I had one professor in my doctoral program who seemed to be very understanding, although it turned out later that he basically, well, he did not [say] it directly, but I got the impression that he did not like veterans. I feel like he had a bad experience with one or two, and the moment he found out I was a veteran, the dynamic between us changed. He was saying some awful thing about veterans and I spoke up, letting him know I did not agree with him. He clearly

did not appreciate me challenging him. I don't know, it was an eye opening moment for me. I didn't realize I would have to deal with that as a veteran.

Participant 35 also had such an experience in class with a professor:

It wasn't because I was military; it was because I deployed to the Middle East.

She did not approve of the war we are in, and so when I spoke up, it seemed like she wanted to argue over it. She was my communications teacher, and we did a lot of group projects in her class. I took home a C on a group assignment while everyone else got a B+. I was not okay with that and took it to the dean, where I was told it was clear I did not put in as much effort as everyone else. I have always earned A's, so I found this situation ridiculous and left that college.

Participant 23 declared that she was told by one of her dissertation committee members that "she was surprised that I was in the military since I seemed very professional and well versed. . . . What, does she think military people are not professional?"

The above quotes illustrate a few examples of the most specific negative reactions that the participants experienced; however, many of the female veterans recalled sensing a change in the dynamics with their peers after they identified themselves as veterans.

**Positive reactions.** Twenty-six of the 37 participants voiced that they also had positive experiences when disclosing themselves as veterans and that the reaction from faculty and staff was also positive. Participant 22 communicated, "The faculty members at my school were used to having military students; they were impressed but also expected more from me because they knew I already have discipline and leadership skills."

Participant 6 was active duty Navy and expressed that her instructors were very understanding of her military service:

They are helpful in that when I'm out on sea duty, they generally will work with me when it comes to timeliness and methods of turning in homework, especially due to the sporadic connectivity aboard the ship.

Participant 3 was finding difficulty getting motivated and studying some of the course materials. She decided to have an honest discussion with her professors about her struggles in finding areas of interest and motivation with the course materials. She noted, "Two of my professors were very understanding and found additional readings and assignments that they felt comfortable assigning me to meet the goals of the class," which helped her stay on task and encouraged her to approach her instructors when she was experiencing difficulty.

Participant 10 summarized her experience in the following way:

When a professor knows there are veterans in class, they often call on them because they have a unique perspective and more life experience than many of the other traditional students in class. It makes me feel that they value what I have to say as a veteran. I really like it.

**Do not share veteran status.** Eleven out of the 37 participants expressed that they were reluctant to identify themselves as veterans. Participant 9 shared her thoughts on this theme by stating,

I don't even say I am a veteran. Things seem to change with every generation of students, and sometimes they say insensitive things like, "Have you killed



anyone?” It is just uncomfortable. So I just avoid it by not telling people I am a veteran.

Participant 30 revealed that she had a different reason for not divulging that she is a veteran:

I struggle with calling myself a veteran. I mean I know I am considered a veteran, but I know being Air Force we are considered pampered, and I never saw combat, so I don't see myself as a veteran. Because of that, it is hard to talk about it or tell others that I am a veteran when I am not sure where I am on that subject.

Participant 7 also demonstrated discomfort revealing herself as a veteran to others:

For about three or four years, I did not identify myself as a veteran. When I got out of the Air Force, I completely disassociated with anything military. I had depression and anxiety issues that I did not want to deal with. I was numb and pushing a lot of things down. Eventually that caught up with me. I was referred to a counselor that helped me cope with all of my issues.

Participant 28 also stated that this label was uncomfortable for her:

Yes, it is an uncomfortable word for me, the word *veteran*. I don't like it when people tell me, “Thank you for your service”; it's just uncomfortable. It's not that I am not proud of my service. It is just weird, and I never know how to reply.

Subquestion 2 asked, “After you assimilated into the college culture, did you encounter any additional obstacles?” Many of these women work and attend school so they cite attempting to take care of all of their obligations can be daunting. The participants stated this as an obstacle as well as the strain going to school put on their personal relationships. Table 10 shows these themes.

Table 10

*Data Matrix and Narrative for Research Question 4, Subquestion 2: “After You Assimilated Into the College Culture, Did You Encounter Any Additional Obstacles?”*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Juggling responsibilities	4/4	2/3	6/6	4/6	5/5	4/4	3/5	3/4
Strain on personal relationships		3/3	4/6		3/5	4/4		2/4

**Juggling responsibilities.** Twenty-seven of the 37 participants expressed difficulty maintaining all of their life obligations while pursuing college degrees. Participant 3 provided a rundown of her day to express how she juggled her responsibilities:

Well, I am a single mom. I have a 7-year-old. My day starts at 6:00 in the morning, and I usually don’t get home until 6:00 or 7:00 in the evening. At night all I do is study and help my son study, and then you know the day kinda ends, then it just starts all over again.

Participant 23 offered this on juggling all of her responsibilities:

Finding time to attend. Most of my learning has been online, and many times it was completed while my husband was overseas and I was left to care for five children while working full time in the Air Force. I didn’t want to infringe on their time, so I would wait until they went to bed at night to do my assignments. This was very difficult, but I reminded myself of the positive role model my attendance as a student was creating for my children and pressed through the difficult times.

Participant 10 and her spouse were both full-time students. She related,

For me, it's really been challenging. My husband and I both are in school full time. We have two small children; it has been hard trying to balance it all. The kids want [to] play and I am able to do a lot with them, but we have to be on the ball every day. We do take a few minutes for ourselves. With my husband, we take time every day to just ground ourselves and talk. Doing this—it keeps us on the same page and moving forward.

**Strain on personal relationships.** Sixteen of the 37 participants voiced that they felt college impacted their ability to maintain personal relationships. Participant 21 articulated,

Well, when I started out I was engaged. And I'm not engaged anymore, but I'm happier. Everyone that starts the journey with you is not meant to finish the journey with you. My ex-fiancée is the one who talked me into finishing my doctorate.

Participant 7 also relayed “an 8-year relationship breakup . . . and I had a miscarriage. I also nearly lost my job. I just kept piling on and not asking for help.” Participant 17 explained that she had to talk with family and friends about spending less time with them; some understood, but others did not:

I had to tell my family and friends that I would not be able to go out and hang out like I used to. At first, everyone said they understood, but eventually some of my friends seemed resentful. Even my husband would get irritated when I did not sit and watch our favorite shows together. I felt really guilty, but I just explained that this would be for a little while.

Participant 30 expressed that attending college impacted her relationship with her boyfriend:

My boyfriend is supportive, but he is not in school, so I don't think he really understands what it's like. Like when it's finals time and I am really trying to study, he gets upset because I am spending less time with him. After I get through finals, I try to make it up to him, but we both know in 16 weeks it is going to happen again.

These women felt the weight of multiple responsibilities and commitments but continued to endure in college.

Subquestion 3 asked, "How did you overcome these obstacles?" These determined women overcame all the previously cited obstacles. Many of the study participants shared they initially took on too much and eventually had to rethink their approach. Some of the women even found resources that eased some of the pressures they were experiencing. Table 11 displays these themes and is followed by a discussion of the themes.

Table 11

*Data Matrix and Narrative for Research Question 4, Subquestion 3: "How Did You Overcome These Obstacles?"*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Set realistic goals			4/6	5/6	3/5	3/6	5/5	3/4
Utilize available resources	4/4	3/3	5/6	5/6	3/6	3/4	3/5	4/4

**Set realistic goals.** Twenty-three of the 37 participants reported that they had to reevaluate and prioritize their goals. Participant 21 stated that she was her own obstacle:

I know when I first started going to college I was my own obstacle because I wanted to have my cake and eat it too. I was trying to juggle everything, and I was trying to be superwoman, but when you try to juggle everything, something is not going to get your attention. I had to sit down and do some self-evaluation. I really had to prioritize what's most important, and when I started out, I was a lot younger. I had to sit down and write everything down, all my goals and responsibilities. I had to be honest with myself and realize I can't be superwoman all the time.

Participant 18 also had to reevaluate her major and course correct her goals:

I started out as a computer science major, and no one stopped me. I was taking too many hours, and it was becoming extremely difficult. Plus, I realized I had no interest in computer science. That is when I decided to change my major.

Participant 6 revealed,

I had to come to terms with the [fact that the] ideal timeline I had in my head may not be realistic. Especially as things kept happening in my life and I had to keep adjusting my school schedule. Once I decided that I could not just run through college, that I was going to have to take my time, then it all fell into place, and I was not longer stressed out. I began enjoying college.

**Utilize available resources.** Twenty-eight of the 37 participants reported that using available resources helped ease their transitions and aided them in progressing through college. Participant 31 uttered that learning about the resources helped her assimilate into the college culture:

The more I started digging to find out what benefits could help me, the more things I was able to sign up for or enroll in. In the end, it made being a full-time student a little easier. Many of the things that I was worried about, like medical, rent, books, and other things, were taken care of. It made attending school so much easier. For instance, I needed a computer for school, and someone told me that if I qualified for vocational rehab they could help me get one. So I did qualify, and now I have a computer. I found out about this by accident, and it has been a big help.

Participant 5 recognized that one specific resource was a great help to her:

I did not know about voc. rehab. and was going to school on my GI Bill. But I found out about voc. rehab., which does not expire like the GI Bill. I can transfer my GI Bill to my kids and still continue my education.

These women overcame these challenges by establishing realistic goals and using the resources available to them. The need and willingness to make adjustments as needed enabled these women to keep moving forward toward their goals.

### **Research Question 5**

*What recommendations do female military veterans who have successfully transitioned into higher education have for female military veterans who are considering higher education?*

Subquestion 1 asked, “If you were mentoring a young female veteran about to get out of the military and enter into college, what advice would you offer her?” The female student veterans of this study offered advice to potential female veterans considering entering into postsecondary education. The advice centers on what they have learned as

they learned the college system and advice they wish was provided to them when they were transitioning into the college culture. Table 12 displays the themes that emerged based on their advice.

Table 12

*Data Matrix and Narrative for Research Question 5, Subquestion 1: “If You Were Mentoring a Young Female Veteran About to Get Out of the Military and Enter Into College, What Advice Would You Offer Her?”*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Plan	4/4	2/3	6/6		3/5		5/5	4/4
Be your own advocate	3/4	3/3	5/6	6/6	5/5	4/4	3/5	4/4
Seek out other veterans		3/3	3/3	5/6		4/4	5/5	3/4

**Plan.** Twenty-four of the 37 participants reported that they would advise a female veteran to have a comprehensive plan for successfully transitioning into the college culture. Participant 15 had this advice to offer:

Make sure she has a plan and a backup plan to that plan. I’ve seen so many people get out and say they’re going to school, but then life happens and they don’t finish school. I think a lot of young people get used to the amenities of the military and then get shocked when it goes away, especially if they don’t plan for it.

Participant 22 would advise a female student veteran in this manner: “Have an emergency fund for unexpected expenses, have a plan for after school, and be sure to alter your plans when needed.” Participant 35 offered,

I would let her know it would be a good idea to get a thorough game plan together. If you need to use vocational rehab or figure out your timelines if you

are going to use the GI Bill. Try to get the best bang for your buck when using your resources.

Participant 4 also agreed that having a plan is the key to this transition:

Make a plan and stick with it if it is something that you really want to do. Write that plan down. Put it somewhere you can see it every day so you can be reminded of how you are going to reach your goal.

**Be your own advocate.** Thirty-three of the 37 participants expressed the importance of a prospective student veteran being her own advocate. The world of benefits available to veterans is vast; however, in order to fully understand the benefits available, the veteran will have to research all applicable benefits. Participant 31 offered,

You have to be your own advocate because no one else cares about your future more than you. It's your future, and if you don't advocate for it, no one else will. I would advise her to knock on every door until you find what you need.

Participant 30 stated the advice she would offer a transitioning female student veteran:

The biggest thing that I would say is college is really different from the military. In the military, you don't have a lot of choices. In the military, they tell you what to do, and a lot of things are taken care of on your behalf. But when you're out, everything is up to you, and if something doesn't get done, it is going to impact you. So if you want or need something, you have to knock on doors and find out what you need and how to make it happen.

Participant 2 suggested that she would advise a transitioning female veteran to do some research before enrolling in a college:



Make tons of phone calls to potential schools. Ask if the school has additional benefits that the VA does not offer for veterans. I did not know my school offered a book voucher until I was browsing the library and saw this is what they offered military students. You have to make it your business to find out what you are entitled to.

Additionally, Participant 7 suggested specific considerations that a transitioning female student veteran should take into account before starting school:

My main piece of advice would be to start early, so if you know that you want to go to college within the next year, start applying for benefits, start researching colleges. Check on the accreditation of the colleges you are interested in. Make sure it's not a proprietary school that will suck up all your GI Bill benefits and screw you over by leaving with a nonaccredited degree.

**Seek out other veterans.** Twenty-six of the 37 participants reported missing the camaraderie that they had become accustomed to in the military culture. Traditional students tend to be younger and possess less life experience, making female student veterans feel somewhat alienated due to the differences in ages and life experiences.

Participant 32 described how she dealt with this:

I feel disconnected to my fellow classmates. We see the world so different.

When I first started visiting the veteran center that is here, I found others that had the same worldview, and I felt more connected to them.

Participant 22 also found that she did not have much in common with the younger students in nursing school:

Many of the students were straight out of high school, and it was hard to talk to them about things outside of nursing. I found myself missing the camaraderie that I was used to in the Army. Finding other veterans was helpful in making me not feel so lonely on campus.

Participant 1 was thankful for the veterans whom she found on campus after realizing how different she was from traditional students:

Being almost 39 and going back to college with 19- and 20-year-olds—it's a bit difficult. Seeing a complete lack of respect to the professors was shocking. When I discovered other veterans in class, we banded together and helped each other through.

Participant 14 voiced similar thoughts:

At college I was just another person, and it was hard trying to fit in with the younger college students. . . . My campus had a Veteran's Success Center, and the center was also a place to meet up with other veteran students and have a place where we could feel normal. There we fit in and didn't feel ostracized.

These women repeatedly attested to the comforting nature of meeting other veterans, which made them feel they were connected to the campus. Meeting other veterans also filled the camaraderie void most of them felt upon transitioning into college culture.

### **Summary of Dominant Themes and Patterns in the Findings**

This chapter examined the major themes that emerged from the focus group interviews. Following are summaries of the major themes derived from the data.

## **Theme 1: Motivations for Enrolling in Higher Education**

All of the participants expressed different reasons for joining the military, but joining for the educational benefits surfaced repeatedly in all eight focus groups. A number of the women explained they were not ready to attend college immediately after high school and felt the military would provide them an opportunity to go to school when they were better prepared for that transition. As Participant 8 recalled, “My mom told me she would pay for high school, which was a private boarding school, but college was on me. So I joined the Air Force to pay for college.” A strong sense of patriotism following the attacks on 9/11 also spurred many to join the military. Participants 3, 11, and 35 expressed feeling a strong urge to join based on patriotic emotions related to 9/11. Participant 36 stated that she “want[ed] to make a difference in the world.” Other participants noted that they joined the armed forces because they wished to carry on the family tradition of military service. For Participant 7, joining the military seemed like a natural next step as she recalled growing up “hearing stories about the military” from many of her veteran family members. All of these reasons encouraged the female student veterans who were interviewed to join the military. Joining the military laid the foundation for preparing to enroll in higher education.

The motivating factors for enrolling in higher education also varied. Future employment consistently surfaced as a primary reason for enrolling in higher education. Many of the participants voiced having dream jobs and acknowledged the necessity of achieving a degree to fulfill their dreams. For Participant 2, witnessing the difficult time of a family member battling posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after returning from Afghanistan prompted her to take psychology classes. That experience made her realize

that she “wanted to work with military members suffering from PTSD.” This was something she envisioned doing for the rest of her life. Living expenses represented another reason for going to college. The additional money from the GI Bill provided the participants with a means of supporting themselves and being able to go to school full time. For many of the participants transitioning out of the military, this was an extremely attractive reason to enroll in college. A few participants expressed that they initially enrolled for the money but were unsure exactly what their majors would be. This sentiment was expressed by Participant 29, who said, “Without the extra money, I could not be a full-time student. I would have to work just to survive.” Participant 1 echoed this by stating that the basic allowance for housing (BAH) allowed her to contribute to the household financially even though she was not working.

The participants attested to the importance of providing a comfortable future for their families. Some participants specifically noted that they no longer wanted to struggle or work multiple jobs to make ends meet, which especially arose from the participants who were single parents. Participant 30, a single mother, stated, “I don’t want to struggle forever.” She went on to state, “I want to give them [her children] what they need and some of what they want.” Improving the quality of life for their families repeatedly emerged as a major theme for participants’ enrolling in college.

## **Theme 2: Obstacles When Pursuing Higher Education**

Poor educational advisement and academic counseling represented a tremendous hurdle that the participants encountered and were forced to overcome. Many voiced that they were discouraged by the constant changing of education plans due to counselors not properly advising them on a clear path toward achieving a degree. The most glaring

example of this was provided by Participant 30, who was enrolled in a class at the time of the focus group that she did not need. She expressed frustration and found it difficult to be motivated to go to a class that she knew she did not need. Also, counselors were not well versed on veteran issues or benefits and often appeared impatient when required to assist veterans in developing an education plan. Participant 36 expressed having had “five educational plans in 2 years” of attending her institution because of misinformation from counselors. The participants of this study found the above issues frustrating, leading to a lack of motivation and adversely impacting their educational monies.

### **Theme 3: Motivating Factors to Persist in Higher Education**

The core reasons the participants cited for continuing on with their education despite the obstacles they encountered along the way revolved around the support of their families. The examples these women provided included husbands who took care of the children and household duties while the female student veterans attended school, and family members simply telling them how proud they were of the female student veterans provided motivation to persist. Participants 13, 18, 29, and 35 each expressed that being able to envision the future and keeping that in mind provided motivation to continue to move forward toward their degrees. These women also reported that keeping the “big picture” in mind and reemphasizing to themselves that the college experience was only a temporary situation on their way toward achieving their goals helped keep them going. This group of female veterans not only consistently stressed that failure was not an option, but they outright refused to discuss the topic. Participant 11 concisely answered, “Failure is not something I think about because it is not an option for me.” These women

explained that they treated college like it was their job, and they used the motivational skills learned in the military to face this challenge.

The support systems used included family, but some of the participants discovered they had to learn how to function as their own support systems. Those who had access to veteran centers credited the centers with being an integral part of their great support system and instrumental in helping them assimilate into the college culture. Participant 14 stated that the Veteran Success Center employees “were able to petition the college on my behalf to accept my credits earned in the military that they would not normally accept.” She further credited this center with being a place for veterans to meet and feel normal among each other. This new culture was not always welcoming, as some of the women learned, and several provided examples of negative reactions they encountered on campus. The most memorable example of such a negative reaction was provided by Participant 29, who asked to be excused from class early. The instructor replied, “I don’t give a f\*\*\* if you are a veteran. I don’t give a f\*\*\* that you served. I don’t give a f\*\*\* that you went to war. I will not be making any exceptions for you.” Negative reactions also made some of the participants hesitant to share that they were veterans. However, they also cited positive reactions they received on campus and furnished examples of professors who would intentionally ask female veterans their opinions on discussions in class.

#### **Theme 4: Obstacles After Enrolling in Higher Education**

The veterans related attempting to juggle many life responsibilities as a major obstacle while pursuing postsecondary education. This study included 10 single parents, who all stated that it was difficult to keep up with personal obligations and school

obligations. School obligations also put a strain on their personal relationships, which made these women reevaluate their systems and goals. Participants 7 and 21 acknowledged having long-term romantic relationships fail during their time in college. Participant 17 had to inform family and friends that her time with them would be limited as a result of her commitment to going to school. She also admitted that her husband had difficulty with spending less time with her. Utilizing the available resources was a catalyst for helping to ease some of the pressure these women were under. Specifically noted by Participant 31 was being able to access resources such as vocational rehabilitation, which provided her with a personal computer for school. She credited this with being a tremendous help.

#### **Theme 5: Advice to Future Female Veterans Transitioning Into Higher Education**

Finally, the participants advised future transitioning female veterans to make a plan but to be willing to modify the plan as needed. Participant 4 would encourage a prospective female student veteran to write her plan down and then place it somewhere that can be seen on a daily basis. Future female student veterans were encouraged to educate themselves on the benefits available to them and to act as their own advocates. The participants related that no one will work as hard for female student veterans as those women will and that they have to plot their own courses to success. Participant 31 added, "It's your future, and if you don't advocate for it, no one else will." Lastly, the participants encouraged future veterans to seek out other veterans on campus, expressing the support, camaraderie, and comfort that comes with finding other veterans on campus. Some veterans expressed difficulty in relating to the younger students on campus, but

finding other veterans on campus could reduce feelings of seclusion while attending college.

### **Overview of Major Theme Categories**

This chapter presented a summary of the major theme categories (motivations for enrolling in higher education, obstacles when pursuing higher education, motivating factors to persist in higher education, obstacles after enrolling in higher education, and advice to future female veterans transitioning into higher education) that emerged from the focus group interviews conducted with the female student veterans.

#### **Motivations for Enrolling in Higher Education**

The participants reported that their main reasons for working toward obtaining a college degree involved preparing for the future, specifically future employment. The transition from military service to civil sector acted as a catalyst fueling their need to prepare for the future and the next chapter of their lives. Those serving on active duty voiced that they had specific reasons for pursuing higher education, such as a desire to be promoted to a commissioned officer or to prepare for life after the military. Ensuring that the participants would be able to provide for their families also repeatedly surfaced as a theme.

#### **Obstacles When Pursuing Higher Education**

A lack of understanding pertaining to the participants' educational benefits and the veterans' benefits system arose as an overwhelmingly consistent obstacle throughout the various focus groups. Specifically, the most difficult and confusing time during the participants' college transition processes involved being faced with the associated paperwork, deadlines, and educational planning. The educational counselors, who are



employed to guide and create educational plans for these female student veterans, also displayed an inability to assist the student veterans due to the complexity of the veterans' educational benefits system. The participants in the focus groups who had already transitioned out of the military conveyed that the TAP failed to provide in-depth information on the educational benefits process.

### **Motivating Factors to Persist in Higher Education**

The theme of family support surfaced as a major motivating factor for participants' continuing to persist in higher education even when faced with significant obstacles. When participants were asked, "Who was a part of your support system?" family consistently emerged as the leading answer. Those participants who attended an institution with a veteran resource center reported that the center's services helped them considerably in better apprehending the college culture and the additional resources available to them as veteran students. Viewing their collegiate careers as their new full-time jobs frequently arose as another theme describing the reasons female veterans persevered through the college transition process. This approach reportedly helped the veterans "see the big picture" and motivated them to continue to work toward their goals of degree attainment.

### **Obstacles After Enrolling in Higher Education**

A significant portion of participants related the burdensome nature of juggling a number of personal responsibilities, which presented major obstacles while attending college; mastering time management was conveyed as being critical in order to face this challenge. The study subjects also experienced negative reactions from faculty, staff, or fellow students after identifying themselves as veterans. Some female student veterans

related that the college experience lacked the camaraderie that they grew accustomed to in the military. The negative reactions to their veteran status further added to the participants' yearning to be around other veterans. The above experiences also contributed to the theme that these women had difficulty relating to traditional students, as they tended to be much younger and did not possess the same life experience as female student veterans.

### **Advice to Future Female Veterans Transitioning Into Higher Education**

The female student veterans who participated in this study believed that any female veteran entertaining the idea of enrolling in higher education must comprehend the importance of being her own advocate. Unanimously, the women interviewed voiced that they would encourage potential female student veterans to educate themselves on all affiliated veteran educational benefits before enrolling in an institution. Additionally, it was recommended that future female student veterans research potential schools' understanding of the veteran benefits and identify which schools have skilled counselors in this area and which ones do not. Lastly, future female veterans were advised to develop a comprehensive plan for college that includes a contingency plan for dealing with obstacles.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the data produced from the focus groups and identified the major themes that materialized. The major findings of this study were placed in five major categories: (a) motivations for enrolling in higher education, (b) obstacles when pursuing higher education, (c) motivating factors to persist in higher education, (d) obstacles after enrolling in higher education, and (e) advice to future female veterans

transitioning into higher education. Chapter V includes a detailed analysis of the data as it relates to the theories presented in the review of literature. Chapter V also addresses the conclusions and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides a summary of the research study about female student veterans' college transitions and associates the reported data from Chapter IV to the related literature. A synopsis of the major findings and prevalent themes is analyzed by research question. A discussion of the unexpected findings is also addressed followed by the conclusions that were drawn based on the literature related to the major findings, which will provide an understanding from the researcher's perspective. Implications for actions suggest measures colleges and universities can take to further meet female student veterans' needs. This chapter contains recommendations for further research and concludes with remarks and reflections.

This study investigated female student veterans' transition experiences into postsecondary education. Identifying what factors motivated them to enroll and persist beyond the obstacles they encountered can potentially assist future female student veterans in obtaining degrees. To gather this information, the following five research questions guided this study:

1. What factors motivate female military veterans to pursue higher education?
2. What obstacles do female military veterans face when pursuing higher education?
3. What factors motivate female military veterans to persist after enrolling in college?
4. What obstacles do female military veterans face after enrolling in college?
5. What recommendations do female military veterans who have successfully transitioned into higher education have for female military veterans who are considering higher education?

This study employed a 21-question survey instrument with open-ended questions to elicit rich data to encapsulate this population's lived experiences. Some of the focus groups were conducted in person, while others occurred in an online meeting room. The audio for each focus group was recorded and later transcribed, allowing the researcher to review and isolate common themes among the groups.

Female student veterans pursuing postsecondary education constituted this study's population. Specifically, female students who had a military service background were targeted to engage in the study. The participants were either active duty, reservist, National Guard, retired, or one of the previous statuses, making them eligible to receive benefits from the VA. For this study, female student veterans in the Sacramento, California, area were interviewed in person. The researcher availed participants outside of the Sacramento area with the option to join the focus groups online via Adobe Connect.

The sample for this study represents a snapshot of the female student veteran population. The study solicited 37 participants' transition experiences. The participants met the following criteria:

1. served in the U.S. Armed Forces on either active, reserve, or guard status;
2. attended at least one semester of college; and
3. had not been out of college more than 4 years.

This study utilized purposive sampling to recruit and construct the focus groups. Snowball sampling was also used to garner more female student veterans to be a part of this study, which resulted in the study area expanding beyond both the State of California and the continental United States to multiple foreign countries.

## Major Findings

### Research Question 1

*What factors motivate female military veterans to pursue higher education?* A number of key findings repeatedly surfaced when the data collected from female student veterans' motivations to pursue postsecondary education were reviewed. Female student veterans cited that their motivations for joining the military varied, but ultimately educational benefits signified the key reason. The reasons for actually enrolling in higher education were also varied, but ultimately these women were preparing for the future in an effort to better the quality of life not only for themselves but also for their families.

**Social clocks.** Neungarten (1977) explained, "There exists a social prescribed timetable for the ordering of major life events and most adults have built in 'social clocks' by which they judge whether they are on-time or 'off-time' with respect to those life events" (as cited in Schlossberg, 1981, p. 9).

These women recognized that they were transitioning into adulthood and understood that the socially prescribed next steps usually involved attending college or joining the workforce. Some of the women recounted that various reasons for graduating high school and not subsequently attending college were based on the lack of funds available to enroll in school, not feeling ready to attend college, and the need for independence. These factors required the women to take stock of their situations and decide how to continue. The military provided a logical means to proceed personally while securing educational opportunity for the future.

**Moving in.** The participants reported joining the military to transition between phases of life, from adolescence to adulthood. This transition aligns with the adult

transition theory put forth by Schlossberg (1981, 1984). The first phase is moving in, and in this case, these women sought a means to help them transition into adulthood. In addition, they wanted to be able to support themselves, attend college, satisfy patriotic emotions, acquire independence, and follow family traditions. Anderson et al. (2012) argued that a person's perceptions of a transition are key to negotiating the moving in phase, "One's appraisal will clearly influence how one feels and copes with the transition" (p. 57). These women perceived joining the military as a positive progression, which provided them the opportunity to pursue education and fulfill other prevalent personal and economic motivations. Additionally, in the moving-in phase, these participants had to employ the 4S model to determine the necessary steps to move them closer to their goals of educational attainment. This finding is consistent with and is an extension of the "social clock" issue described in the previous section.

**4S model.** The 4S model consists of deploying a means to cope with transitions, "The 4S Model of Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies describes factors that make a difference in how one copes with change" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 73). These women had to assess what resources they had at their disposal to achieve their goals of pursuing a college degree. As described by Sargent and Schlossberg (1988), each transition has assets and deficits that must be weighed when attempting to transition into postsecondary education. These assets and deficits determine the feasibility of moving forward in a transition. In this case, the 4S model highlighted these women's insufficient resources to attend school, so the military offered the means to acquire the necessary resources to eventually transition to college.

## **Research Question 2**

*What obstacles do female military veterans face when pursuing higher education?*

The journey of obtaining a college education is not without some difficulty.

Comprehending the college system and the requirements to obtain a college degree often proves problematic and is further compounded when these women lack all the pertinent information for their educational benefits provided by the VA. Adding to this problem, many of the individuals charged with providing guidance and counseling to these women are not well versed on the benefits system and consequently offer misinformation to student veterans, as this study's participants attested. The study subjects referenced this as the largest obstacle; however, this challenge did not deter these women from continuing to persist in getting a college education or further seeking information regarding their educational benefits. They are intrinsically motivated to reach their goals. Intrinsic motivation does not involve pursuing a goal because of external rewards; the reward is triggered internally, which incites motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Attempting to enroll in postsecondary education can be a minefield that can make or break one's aspirations to obtain a college degree. As DeSewal (2013) stated, "Veterans and service members appear to be entering college with the skills and dedication to succeed, even though their initial experience can be complicated by numerous transitional challenges" (p. 91). Participants frequently cited ignorance of the totality of their available benefits as a prevalent obstacle. The participants knew they qualified for some educational benefits, but they did not possess knowledge beyond the basics of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Montgomery GI Bill, or tuition assistance offered to those on active duty and emphasized the need for assistance to help them navigate through the



veterans' benefits utilization process. Anderson et al. (2012) summarized the need for assistance during difficult transitions:

Adults in transition are often confused and in need of assistance. . . . When they are able to explore the issue more fully, understand the underlying meaning and develop a plan, they are more likely to be able to cope effectively and resolve the problem. (p. 51)

Female student veterans reported going to education counselors to comprehend the educational benefits and the overall process; however, they consistently relayed that the counselors become yet another obstacle in many instances. The counselors' lack of understanding of the systems and benefits for veterans combined with the counselors' drafting flawed education plans proved to be major barriers for a number of the participants. When these challenges present themselves, participants become vulnerable and experience undue stress due to unexpected setbacks in their progress. To overcome these obstacles, female veterans must quickly adapt and correct their course of action when experiencing such misinformation. The adaptive military transition theory (Diamond, 2012) describes this as the adaptation phase.

The military adaptive model (Diamond, 2012) also proposes that each student veteran will move through the phases at different rates. In this adaptation phase, some of the members quickly adapted to their new collegiate environments and understood the need to seek out information independently, while others were still getting used to having to search for answers and comprehend the benefits system. Those who were able to adapt quickly were able to move to the passage phase of the military adaptive model; in the passage phase, the member establishes routines and becomes more acclimated to her

environment. Those who were unable to adapt had to continue to function in the adaptation phase until they were able to assimilate and move into the passage phase.

### **Research Question 3**

*What factors motivate female veterans to persist after enrolling in college?* Their families, the goals they had set for themselves, and the notion that failure was not an option represented significant motivating factors that allowed the female veterans to continue on their journeys after encountering obstacles while in college. These support systems acted as a foundation for these women to help them overcome many of the obstacles encountered along their journeys.

The data revealed participants' intrinsic motivation to continue through college even after experiencing obstacles and setbacks. According to the self-determination theory (2008), intrinsic motivations are the integrating of value, and the reward is the activity itself. In the quest to gain knowledge that will lead to degree attainment, these women have taken extrinsic motivational factors and internalized and integrated them into their value systems thereby converting extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation, which drives them to persevere at any cost. This aligns with Ryan and Deci (2000), who asserted, "To be motivated means to be moved to do something. . . . People have not only different amounts, but also different kinds of motivation" (p. 54). Female student veterans' intrinsic motivations are also driven by family, the big picture, and pride. All of these factors further help motivate these women.

Enduring through the transition process leads to the passage phase of the adaptive military theory put forth by Diamond (2012). In this phase, the female student veteran has become acclimated to her new environment and has established support systems that

aid in moving toward reaching her goals. This also aligns with one of the foundational elements of the self-determination theory, competence, wherein she demonstrates her ability to access resources, which is evidence of her competence. Competence allows the female student veteran to manage the transition by acclimating into the college atmosphere.

Another key element of self-determination theory is relatedness. While the participants did express difficulty in finding common ground with many of their younger classmates, they overcame this by seeking out and befriending other veterans on campus, which Deci and Ryan (2002) defined as relatedness. Reaching out to and finding others with similar backgrounds and perspectives of life allowed them to feel connected to the campus and less isolated. Relatedness also allowed participants to tap into the camaraderie that they had grown accustomed to while serving in the military environment.

This study also unveiled that because participants were used to the military, a hyper masculine culture, they naturally pushed past obstacles and continued to work hard. This point is argued throughout the book, *Camouflage Isn't Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality and Women in the Military*, in which Herbert (1998) contended that women functioning in a masculine environment, such as the military, often deploy strategies to assimilate into their male-dominated surroundings. These adaptation skills were necessary to combat the stereotype that “in the military all women are weak until proven otherwise” (Herbert, 1998, p. 75). This hard-charging spirit was instrumental in women pushing through obstacles while attending college. They did not view going to school and balancing other life issues as a deficit; they viewed college as their current job.

#### **Research Question 4**

*What obstacles do female military veterans face after enrolling in college?* In addition to the typical obstacles all college students face, this group of women encountered some specific difficulties related to their military affiliation. Some women realized that, unexpectedly, not everyone was appreciative or sympathetic to the sacrifices associated with military service. Also, the continuous juggling of responsibilities and college courses had detrimental impacts on personal relationships in some cases. Furthermore, counselors providing misinformation and poor advice for their educational plans led these women to enroll in unnecessary classes, through which they found it difficult to stay motivated and put forth the required effort to complete the unneeded course.

A number of the participants related stories of others' negative reactions when they discovered their military service. Specifically, most examples cited were exchanges between the participants and college faculty/staff. The female veterans dealt with the challenge by taking stock of the situation and deciding what the appropriate reactions should be. One participant reported leaving her educational institution after an awkward exchange with a professor, which had a negative impact on her grade. Other participants with similar interactions stated that they decided to not push the issue any further as they did not want to impact their grades. Again, the 4S model was employed to overcome these obstacles; the self, situation, support, and strategies were addressed. Despite the negative reactions the female student veterans encountered, they did not allow these issues to prevent them from moving forward through their college journeys. As Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) posited,

People bring a combination of assets and deficits to each transition. The process of identifying those resources and lacks will do two things: first, the person will see whether he or she has enough resources to get through a particular transition successfully; and second, he or she will discover how to strengthen the areas of weakness. (p. 60)

Although not a barrier, for as many negative reactions that participants cited, many of the female veterans also had numerous positive experiences with other members of their institutions' faculty and staff. These positive experiences assisted the participants in overcoming the difficulties created by the negative reactions, which corresponds to accessing the assets and deficits in the 4S model. For most participants, the inventory of their assets and the positive reactions outweighed the negative reactions/deficits, which allowed the female student veterans to reconcile the situation and persist. The above experiences also explain the hesitancy in sharing their veteran statuses with faculty or fellow students in an effort to avoid any possibility of negative reactions. For some of the women, being identified as a veteran was thought of as a deficit in the college environment, and consequently, concealed their veteran status or only revealed their affiliation in certain situations.

The challenge of juggling multiple responsibilities frequently arose as a common theme for these participants. Many voiced their attempt to "do it all" in struggling to handle their life obligations. Other participants referred to themselves as trying to be "superwoman" by trying to balance education, life, and family obligations. In the transition process, Schlossberg (1981) postulated that when people view the transition as temporary, they are usually more likely to see the transition in a positive light and work

harder to reach their goal. With juggling so many responsibilities at once, many participants noted that their personal relationships suffered considerably.

While the participants described being able to handle the transitions, many expressed that their significant others struggled to transition into their new routines, which may have required household roles and responsibilities to be reassigned to their significant others. With so much time being devoted toward pursuing a degree and upholding their school obligations, many of the participants said their relationships were strained. While participants related that friends and family were generally supportive, they also mentioned that they likely did not fully understand all of the requirements and stresses associated with getting through school.

Anderson et al. (2012) concluded that “differing values” or “dissimilarities” can prove to become an issue in personal relationships. As previously mentioned, the intrinsic motivation these women displayed resulted from their goals becoming part of their value systems; however, the veterans’ families and friends did not necessarily integrate the veterans’ goals into their value systems. The authors also pointed out that family and friends can oftentimes “be both an asset and a burden” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 135). Aligned with this reason, a number of the participants expressed that the strain on their personal relationships led to significant others and friends deciding to end the relationship.

This constant juggling act required the female student veterans to consistently reevaluate their situations. Some of the participants had to assess the goals they outlined for themselves and let go of the “do it all” mentality. Many stated that they had to set goals that were more realistic and feasible to their current situation. Upon first entering

college, they were wide-eyed and ambitious, some even stating that they were overly ambitious and enrolled in too many classes out of sheer excitement for working toward obtaining a college degree. As Anderson et al. (2012) maintained, “Assets may outweigh liabilities, making adjustments relatively easy, or liabilities may now outweigh assets, so assimilation of the transition becomes more difficult” (p. 73). The constant evaluations of assets and liabilities prompted the female student veterans to adjust as needed to ensure they could continue on the path to degree attainment.

### **Research Question 5**

*What recommendations do female military veterans who have successfully transitioned into higher education have for female military veterans who are considering higher education?* Regardless of the deterrents they experienced, these women are resilient and continue to adjust their plans when necessary. Based on their experiences, they had advice they would offer to future female student veterans who were considering transitioning into higher education. While their advice is intended for future female student veterans, those who work with this population can also benefit and possibly learn how to apply this information to their institutions. The suggestions are offered from the perspectives of individuals who according to the military adaptive model (Diamond, 2012) are moving out of the passage phase and into the arrival phase. They are able to reflect on their experiences and offer insights to future female student veterans considering transitioning into postsecondary education. In the arrival phase, as Diamond (2012) explained, “‘Arrival’ can be described as acceptance or integration” (p. 114). As the female student veteran recognizes that she is comfortable and integrated into the

college culture, she is also confident enough to offer counsel to prospective student veterans.

The advice offered begins with recommending that a female veteran who is considering transitioning into postsecondary education should construct a plan. This plan is simply a guide for charting her path through college; however, it is not all encompassing. The need will arise to make adjustments to the plan as a means to address challenges that will present themselves. Second, in the military, authorities determine one's choices and actions. There is not much ambiguity or room for fault. This is a stark contrast to college life, where she will have to make many decisions on her own. The participants of the study voiced that in order to transition into the college culture, a prospective female student veteran must become her own advocate. It would be inadvisable to assume others will take care of and inform her about the next steps or how to go about taking care of all her postsecondary needs.

Part of being her own advocate entails needing to educate herself on what benefits she has and what additional benefits she qualifies for. Also, educating herself requires doing her own research when attempting to understand the benefits system. A major source of gathering information is seeking out other veterans who have experience in and understanding of the benefits system. Meeting and networking with other veterans can also function beyond learning the benefits system; it can even function as adding to one's support system and filling the camaraderie void that many veterans miss once they enter into college culture.



## **Unexpected Findings**

Female service members sincerely felt that their military service was not appreciated like that of their male counterparts. Furthermore, the male veteran counterparts would also discount and diminish the female veteran's service in the armed forces. The participants conveyed that they expected such behavior from civilians, but the impact was much greater when male veterans treated them as if their service did not matter. This topic was not included as a major theme, however, because it did not impact these women's college journeys or ability to persist.

Also surprisingly, the female student veteran participants did not feel that they required any additional/special needs simply because they were female; however, two single moms later said they wished childcare was offered on campus and that this service would have been beneficial to them. A suggestion for further study on this population is recommended at the end of this chapter.

Additionally, the women expressed not feeling that they had different transitioning needs when compared to their male counterparts; however, seeing the women get to know one another and share information signified that associating with other female veterans was a welcomed opportunity. The group interview sessions revealed that they used this opportunity to share benefits information, answer each other's questions and relay tips on applying and qualifying for certain benefits. One participant even expressed feeling at ease in the group session and felt she was able to say what she was feeling among the group because she knew the other women knew exactly where she was coming from. The immediate networking that resulted from conducting

the focus groups, although not a purpose of the focus groups, reinforced the need for networking among the female veterans.

In summary, while the female veterans may not feel they have unique needs, it was apparent that being able to meet with other female veterans was a positive experience and was a much-needed step for some of the women. The participants expressed that this made them realize they were not alone in their emotions and experiences. Also, one institution had a female veteran in charge of the veteran resource center, and those participants seemed to have had a better transition experience than participants who attended colleges whose veteran centers did not have a female veteran on staff.

### **Conclusions**

The study allowed the researcher to reach several conclusions regarding the female student veterans interviewed. The conclusions about this population are rooted in the theories on which the study was built.

#### **Research Question 1**

*What factors motivate female military veterans to pursue higher education?* The conclusions drawn from the factors that motivated these women to pursue enrolling in higher education were rooted initially by their desires to go to college in their early transition into adulthood but due to various reasons they were either not afforded the opportunity or were not ready to attend college after completing high school. As Caspers and Ackerman (2013) concluded, “Research suggests that young adults join the military in response to various motivations, but among those is to receive the educational benefits attached to having served” (p. 44). Joining the military offered not only a means to get a

college education, but also gave these women veterans problem-solving skills and the strength to take on even the most difficult of tasks.

## **Research Question 2**

*What obstacles do female military veterans face when pursuing higher education?*

The obstacles these women encountered were largely associated with not fully comprehending the college system in which they were attempting to immerse themselves. While this obstacle proved to be extremely difficult, these women demonstrated extreme resourcefulness and kept trying different avenues to get through “red tape.” Caspers and Ackerman (2013) deduced, “Student Veterans who joined the military to earn educational benefits may become frustrated as they attempt to navigate the bureaucracy that administers those benefits” (p. 44). Furthermore, the education counselors charged with helping student veterans were uninformed and did not fully comprehend the VA benefits system. Again, these women have learned to adapt and overcome; even when the advice they received led to a flawed education plan, they still rallied the strength to stay motivated. Steele, Salcedo, and Conley (2010) also reiterated this point, “The focus, discipline and drive to overcome obstacles, to improvise as needed, and to succeed in an academic setting” (p. 10), incited these female student veterans to begin to do their own research on the benefits and refuse to take all advice at face value. They became even more determined and involved in understanding the benefits system and in becoming their own advocates. They would call the VA on their own to check and verify any information provided to them from counselors to ensure they possessed all their benefits information.

### **Research Question 3**

*What factors motivate female veterans to persist after enrolling in college?* The findings from the study engender the conclusion that these female student veterans are extremely self-motivated to reach the goals they have set for themselves. These goals, as many of the participants referred to as the “big picture,” were all encompassing, which included family well-being and future employment goals. They have a vision of what they want their future to look like and they were willing to make temporary sacrifices for long-term rewards. The excitement of what the future could bring upon obtaining a college degree was a driving force for them to continue on the path to degree attainment. A number of participants stated that they did not want to struggle financially and that obtaining a degree was a solid step toward securing their ideal futures.

### **Research Question 4**

*What obstacles do female military veterans face after enrolling in college?* These challenges varied. A wide variety of personal obstacles surfaced most frequently. The stress of transitioning from the military along with the stress of starting college life, both socially and academically, created numerous problems. However, the data revealed that these women did not feel any obstacle was insurmountable. One participant in particular shared that her second marriage dissolved during her college experience, leaving her as the sole provider for two autistic children. She added that her father committed suicide 4 days before finals and 2 days before her birthday; her mother subsequently moved in with her, leaving her to also care for her mother physically and emotionally. She expressed never even contemplating taking time off from school.

These women were motivated to overcome any challenges no matter how big they may be.

The data from the female student veterans also divulged that institutional counseling and advisement are often erroneous and ultimately lead to the conclusion that neither colleges nor the military have placed adequate emphasis on providing veteran-based, competent counseling and advisement for female veterans. This finding may likely also apply to male veteran students and is a possible topic for further study.

### **Research Question 5**

*What recommendations do female military veterans who have successfully transitioned into higher education have for female military veterans who are considering higher education?* The advice these women suggested to other female veterans wishing to transition into college is rooted in tried-and-true strategies that the women themselves employed. These women's opinions are credible because they know and understand the college terrain and in reflecting on their experiences now know where the pitfalls lie. They also feel connected to their respective campuses, which is a key issue for student veterans. This is clear by their advice to seek out other veterans early, which leads to the deduction that connecting with other veterans earlier in the transition could ease many future prospective student veterans' transition obstacles. The conclusion is that the experience of other female veterans, both in informal networks and in formal advisement, is the best source of accurate information and appropriate counsel.

## **Implications for Action**

### **Female Veteran Networking**

When attempting to launch this study, it became obvious that many of the institutions had no way of reaching out to only the female veterans on their respective campuses. Contacting female veterans through formal contact with the colleges proved less effective than contacting them through informal networks. Higher education institutions should consider hosting events specific to female veterans to create stronger networks for them. This would be beneficial to female veteran students, especially for those who are military sexual assault victims. One Military Sexual Trauma (MST) participant stated that she would like to reach out to female veterans for support but had no interest in being around male veterans. Offering female veteran school orientations led by a fellow female veteran is imperative for serving this population. These women should not have to be forced to be placed in situations that are truly uncomfortable and may trigger past haunts. A clear network for communication and support is an important step in helping female veterans succeed. Contact with other female veterans would provide support in addressing the personal issues identified in this study as well as the institutional issues identified. Both colleges and the military should take steps to establish such networks on the campuses.

Colleges should employ female veterans on campuses who could mentor and aid other female veterans who are trying to successfully complete their college experience. The VA, which provides educational benefits to veterans, should fund counseling and advisement services staffed by veterans who can establish veteran networks. Colleges are unlikely to fund these types of services without some form of financial incentive. The

military should provide that financial incentive. Such a partnership between the military and the colleges could plug the current glaring holes in this system. Also, a web-based refresher should be available and counselors should be required to log in quarterly to ensure that their knowledge of the benefits system is up to date. This web-based training should also require the counselor to pass a knowledge-based exam with the scores being sent to the VA. If a counselor does not receive a passing score, the VA should subsequently mandate that they complete a remedial benefits training seminar.

As previously stated, the campus that had a female veteran on staff at the veteran center appeared to have made a big difference for the women who transitioned into that institution, leading to feelings of comfort produced by her knowledge of their journeys. Therefore colleges and universities need to hire veterans when staffing veteran success centers. The staff should reflect the population that it serves.

### **Female Veteran Healthcare**

These women also mentioned healthcare concerns. College campuses need to comprehend and provide resources that can help female veterans access healthcare while attending school. An often-overlooked aspect of being a student veteran is how the VA schedules appointments. In most cases, the VA mails the veterans letters with a scheduled appointment date and time. The VA is not concerned with the student veteran's college schedule, and if there is a conflict with the scheduled VA appointment, rescheduling may take months and could jeopardize the veterans' compensation or benefits. This issue is not exclusive to female student veterans, but it did arise in conversations with some of the participants. Colleges and universities should make

exceptions for these students who need to miss class to attend these types of appointments.

### **Counseling and Advisement for Female Veterans**

The women consistently expressed frustrations over the lack of benefit awareness and poor counseling both prior to entering college and then during their college experiences. This type of misinformation severely disadvantages the female student veteran. The study illustrated that the institutions that had veterans working in key positions, such as benefit advisor or academic counselor, had fewer problems with this type of misinformation. Colleges and universities should hire veterans for these positions and send these individuals to workshops and seminars as necessary to keep up with changes that these benefits systems seem to constantly have. The VA should consistently fund and offer these workshops to ensure that the monies they are paying out for veterans to attend college are being properly utilized. This study evidences the vitality of colleges seeking and securing the services of veterans, using financial support from the military, to offer counseling and advisement services to female veterans because veterans have the background, experience, and knowledge to not only provide academic counseling but also to understand the challenges female veterans face.

Additionally, when an institution's education counselor provides misleading information and/or misinformation, which results in the veteran taking unneeded classes, then the veteran should be reimbursed those GI Bill funds or allowed to take a class without charge. Both the VA and educational institutions should be monitoring the number of times these situations occur. The VA should be interested in this to ensure veterans are in fact getting quality educational counseling and the monies are being used



to help the veterans work toward degree attainment. This could also keep schools from fraudulently providing misinformation to veterans for the purpose of collecting the guaranteed GI Bill dollars without any benefit to the veterans.

There are a number of female veterans' advocacy groups on both the national and regional levels. Colleges and universities alike need to become familiar with these types of advocacy groups and encourage their counselors as well as female student veterans to utilize the groups' resources. The institutions could also benefit from the information these groups provide with regard to trends and needs of female veterans.

### **Discrimination Against Female Veterans**

Participant 29 relayed a most drastic example of a negative reaction by a faculty member, who stated he did not "give a [strong expletive]" that she was a veteran. This was not an isolated example and these encounters are deeply disturbing. Student veterans need to feel that they can safely disclose their veteran status to people free of judgment. This includes faculty, staff, and other classmates. While it is impossible to stop everyone from having negative personal views on the military, those views cannot be directed at veterans and nor can veterans be discriminated against based upon an individual's views. Veterans are a protected population and must know that, just as any other protected populations on campus, they can report such individuals and expect action. As Hawthorne, Bauman, and Ross (2013), reported, "It is important to separate politics, political opinions and personal perspectives on war and military conflict from the individual; student veterans have (and many continue) to do the jobs they are told to do" (p. 246). Both the military and colleges must provide clear and direct recourse to address instances of discrimination against veterans.

This advice must be applied on campuses everywhere. Colleges and universities, in partnership with the military, should offer training for individuals that will teach or counsel student veterans. Grasping the military culture is key to understanding this segment of the student population. Certain military social cues and norms must be observed when dealing with veterans.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The following are recommendations for future research on female student veterans:

#### **Recommendation 1**

The data from this study reflect that those who transitioned into higher education on or close to a military installation experienced a much smoother transition than those who transitioned into an institution that did not have a large military culture. A study could be conducted to compare and contrast how a student enrolling at an institution with veteran professors who understand and speak the language of veterans compares to student veterans who enroll at a school with little to no familiarity of military culture. A comparison of graduation rates could be examined.

#### **Recommendation 2**

The interviews yielded a wealth of information regarding this population, and nearly a third of the participants of this study were single parents. A study on what specific needs this segment of the student veteran population has may provide an understanding of single parents' college transition struggles and what resources specifically help student veterans continue to attend college while caring for their families.

### **Recommendation 3**

Many female veterans do not feel that their service to this nation is taken seriously. A study ascertaining why this occurs and how prejudice can be mitigated may prove prudent. A number of the participants of this study struggled with the label “veteran” or what conditions one must endure in order to earn this title. Also, some were not accessing benefits outside of their Post-9/11 GI bill because they felt others needed the services more than they did.

### **Recommendation 4**

A study on the identity construction of female veterans could further help in assisting this segment of the population. While a theoretical typology model on student veterans exists, adding to this research could prove beneficial to understanding where these individuals are with regard to their transition into college. If an instrument could be developed to identify where veterans are in their transition identity, providing the proper resources to get them fully acclimated to their new environments may be easier.

### **Recommendation 5**

This study yielded several unexpected findings. First, a scarcity of female veterans working in healthcare is apparent. While female student veterans felt their needs were being met while attending college, the consensus was not the same regarding use of their health benefits with the VA. Many expressed that the male healthcare providers did not seem to take them or their conditions seriously, citing that they had not “served in combat.” As a result, their symptoms were downplayed or all together disregarded. Specifically, conducting a study regarding the treatment of female veterans when attempting to access medical services may illuminate and alleviate their struggles.

**Recommendation 6**

This study addressed female veterans who are current college students. It did not address female veterans who started but did not finish college. A study could be conducted to interview and determine the factors that caused these former students to terminate their college experience. Those findings could be compared to the findings of this study to see what factors are most prevalent overall and which were most influential in terminating a female veteran's college experience.

**Recommendation 7**

To further understand the female student veteran postsecondary transition, an additional study could examine the diverse ethnicities within this population. This information could provide in-depth insights into the demographics of the student population and may highlight unique needs of the identified ethnic groups, which may contribute to their successful completion of degree programs.

**Recommendation 8**

This study could also be replicated with male student veterans. Contrasting the female student veteran transition experience with that of male student veterans could also demonstrate if the obstacles discussed in this study are unique to female student veterans or are experienced by male student veterans as well.

**Recommendation 9**

An additional recommendation for future research would be to study institutions that offer courses on veteran success in college and explore if this type of class is truly beneficial to the student veterans who attend such a class.

### **Recommendation 10**

Part of military culture is moving to several locations over the course of one's military career. While this has specific implications for the military members' educational endeavors, a study could explore the impact this has on the military members' children in Grades K-12. Examining the constant transitioning in and out of different school systems could be beneficial in understanding what these children go through and what can be done to support these veteran-dependent children.

### **Recommendation 11**

A study examining the veterans who transitioned out of the armed forces and directly into the workforce could also prove prudent. Examining those individuals who decided to enter the workforce as opposed to entering postsecondary education could provide insights into their transition experience and what obstacles there are for veterans in this situation.

### **Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

We all know that successful people are made from hearty seed. But do we know enough about the sunlight that warmed them, the soil in which they put down roots. (Gladwell, 2008, p. 15)

This study sought to understand female student veterans' transition experiences throughout their entire college careers. This study hoped to identify what "sunlight" is for these female student veterans, how the "soil" or campuses they transplanted to works, and how their "roots" helped motivate them to continue to grow despite obstacles. Research indicates that the number of female veterans choosing to enroll in postsecondary education is steadily increasing and will continue to increase as the

number of females joining the military is also increasing. Postsecondary educational institutions must be aware that this upswing will continue for years to come and address female student veterans' concerns if they want to continue to compete for GI Bill dollars. Further examination of this topic could assist these institutions in ensuring they are meeting the needs of this segment of the population.

Female veterans are an understudied population, and overall, this study is only a minor part of the many topics that can be explored when understanding female veterans. The information gained in this study paints a vivid picture that these women are extremely determined and resourceful, and any actions a school can continue to administer to mitigate any of the foreseeable obstacles experienced by this demographic should be taken.

What I found while conducting this research was that many of the issues I personally experienced as a female veteran were not unique to just me. While I remained objective during the interviews, the experiences that these women were expressing were very similar to what I had experienced. The most prevalent issue female veterans face is feeling invisible as a veteran. Coming together and talking with these women, I feel like I gained new insights while confirming others, and I felt like I made a breakthrough in my own transition as I prepare to move out of school and remain focused on the "big picture" for my life. The best part of this research was coming together with women who understood my journey and I theirs. There were times during the interviews that I could read their body language or a look in their eyes and understand exactly what they were trying to say. It was rewarding bringing this many women together and watching them

let down the shield that they carry around to deflect what the rest of the world throws at them.

If nothing else comes of this study, I hope that institutions strive to get female veterans together and allow them to meet, network, share information/ stories, and build additional support systems that will only continue to propel them to reaching their goals of being college graduates.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Dissertation Questionnaire

***Brandman University***

**Dissertation Questionnaire**

**Felicia Haecker**

**College Transition Issues for Female Military Student Veteran**

- 1.) Why did you join the military?
- 2.) Why did you separate from the military?
- 3.) Do you consider yourself a veteran?
- 4.) What military benefits do you use?
- 5.) Why did you decide to enroll in college?
- 6.) What challenges have you faced as a female veteran transitioning into college?
- 7.) What services did you access in your initial transition into college that were beneficial?
- 8.) What services did you access that were not beneficial to your transition into college?
- 9.) What information or services do you wish were available to you when you separated from the military?
- 10.) What specific needs of female student veterans do you feel need to be met by your college?
- 11.) How has attending college impacted your personal life?
- 12.) Have any of your personal roles changed while attending college? (For example have you gotten married? Have you had a child while attending college? )

- 13.) What were the major obstacles you encountered early in your college career? How did you overcome these obstacles? What motivated you to keep going?
- 14.) After you assimilated into the college culture did you encounter any additional obstacles? How did you handle those obstacles? What kept you from dropping out?
- 15.) In class how do you go about relating your military experience to your classmates?
- 16.) How do faculty and staff react to finding out you served in the military?
- 17.) Who would you identify as being a part of your support to help you through college?
- 18.) How do you plan to use your degree upon graduation?
- 19.) Have you utilized the career center resources for help with employment opportunities? What was that experience like?
- 20.) After graduation will you be staying locally?
- 21.) If an ideal job is offered to you, but it requires you to move, are you open to this idea?
- 22.) If you were mentoring a young female veteran about to get out of the military and enter into college what advice would you offer her?

## APPENDIX B

### **E-mail Communication**

Requestor: Felicia R. Haecker, doctoral candidate (Brandman University)

Population: Female Student Veterans having completed at least semester at Sacramento State Sierra College or American River College.

Purpose: To identify participants for dissertation research

Sender: fhaecker@yahoo.com

Subject Header: Female Veteran Students

Message: My name is Felicia Haecker and I am a doctoral candidate in the Organizational Leadership program at the Brandman University. As a female veteran, I am interested in how other female student veterans experience transition into college culture. Specifically, I am interested in understanding what programs and resources meet the needs of female student veterans and what keeps these students motivated to earning their degree. I am seeking participants who have separated from the military, who have completed at least one year of coursework and whose military experience was on active duty. Participants of the study will be asked to engage in a focus group session with other female student veterans.

At the conclusion of the focus group, each participant will receive a \$10 gift card.

For more information, or to participate in this project, please contact Felicia Haecker at (916) 477-7349, or

[fhaecker@yahoo.com](mailto:fhaecker@yahoo.com).

## APPENDIX C

### IRB Participant's Bill of Rights



#### BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

##### Research Participant's Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the Brandman University Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The Brandman University Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.



APPENDIX D

Consent to Participate Form



CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Organizational Leadership Ed.D. Program, Brandman University

Interview Consent form for the Female Student Veterans Post Secondary Educational

Dear Student Participant:

As a doctoral student at Brandman University, I am currently involved in the data collection portion of my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges for female student veterans as they transition into and move through post secondary education. The study also seeks to understand what programs, resources and support systems were instrumental in the success of female student veterans. This study will use a qualitative case study approach to investigate this population. All responses will be kept confidential, and the participants will not be identified by name. Participants will be referenced according to their academic semester/year and branch of service. Only the members of my dissertation committee and I will have access to the records of information obtained directly from the focus group interviews. The benefit from participating in this study will be to gain a greater understanding of the needs of female student veterans in order to aid successful progress toward degree obtainment.

I understand that I may refuse to participate in or I may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time. I also understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed I will be so informed and my consent obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16335 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618 Telephone (949) 341-7641. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the Research participant's Bill of Rights.

The focus group will also be documented using audio and video recording devices. These recordings will only be reviewed by the researcher. Signing below signifies that you have read and understood the above and that you agree to participate in this study. Thank you for volunteering your time to participate in this study.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ consent to participate in the research study conducted by Felicia Haecker.

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

I hereby agree to abide by the participants' instructions.

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E

### **Interview Script**

I have chosen to focus on three phases of the transition process: moving in, moving through, and moving out of college. As this is the foundational theory that the study is based upon. By focusing on these three phases, I hope to paint a accurate picture of the transition experience through the female student veterans lens. There may be additional follow up questions asked of the participants for clarity.

### **Interview Script**

**Interviewer:** Felicia Haecker

**Interview time planned:** Approximately 1.5 hours

**Interview place:** At the campus Veteran Center

**Recording:** Digital voice and video recorder

**Opening Comments:** Based on the email or flyer you received you understand that this study is to explore the female student veterans experience when transitioning into college. I would like to thank you for your participation in this study. Information from this focus group will be included in my dissertation. For privacy concerns, your identity will not be revealed and will remain confidential. Although you have signed the consent form to participate in this study, you may choose to withdraw your consent at any time. Do you have any concerns or questions before we begin?

**Phase 1: Moving In Questions. The first phase of questions if focused on the transition into college.**

Why did you join the military?

Why did you separate from the military?

Do you consider yourself a veteran?

What military benefits do you use?

Why did you decide to enroll in college?

What challenges have you faced as a female veteran transitioning into college?

What services did you access in your initial transition into college that were beneficial?

What services did you access that were not beneficial to your transition into college?

What information or services do you wish were available to you when you separated from the military?

What specific needs of female student veterans do you feel need to be met by your college?

**Phase II- Moving Through Questions. These questions center on the motivational and persistence factors that keep female student veterans from dropping out.**

How has attending college impacted your personal life?

Have any of your personal roles changed while attending college? (For example have you gotten married? Have you had a child while attending college? )

What were the major obstacles you encountered early in your college career? How did you overcome these obstacles? What motivated you to keep going?

After you assimilated into the college culture did you encounter any additional obstacles? How did you handle those obstacles? What kept you from dropping out?

In class how do you go about relating your military experience to your classmates?

How do faculty and staff react to finding out you served in the military?

Who would you identify as being a part of your support to help you through college?

**Phasing III-Moving Out Questions. The last set of questions focus on future plans after degree attainment.**

How do you plan to use your degree upon graduation?

Have you utilized the career center resources for help with employment opportunities?

What was that experience like?

After graduation will you be staying locally?

If an ideal job is offered to you, but it requires you to move, are you open to this idea?

**Phase IV- Ending the session. At this point the session will conclude and any additional thoughts of the participants will be solicited.**

If you were mentoring a young female veteran about to get out of the military and enter into college what advice would you offer her?

**Closing Comments:** Again I would like to thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. Before we conclude are there any additional comments or thoughts you would like to add to this discussion?

APPENDIX F

BUIRB Action Form



BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

IRB Application Action – Approval

Date: April 21, 2014

Name of Investigator/Researcher: Felicia R. Haecker

Faculty or Student ID Number: B00417155

Title of Research Project:

A Case Study Examining the Motivators and Obstacles for Female Military Veterans in the Pursuit of Higher Education

Project Type: [X] New [ ] Continuation [ ] Resubmission

Category that applies to your research:

- [X] Doctoral Dissertation EdD
[ ] DNP Clinical Project
[ ] Masters' Thesis
[ ] Course Project
[ ] Faculty Professional/Academic Research
[ ] Other:

Funded: [X] No [ ] Yes (Funding Agency; Type of Funding; Grant Number)

Project Duration (cannot exceed 1 year):

Principal Investigator's Address: 5021 Brandon Oaks Ln, Carmichael, CA 95608

Email Address: fhaecker@yahoo.com Telephone Number: 916-477-7349

Faculty Advisor/Sponsor/Chair Name: Dr. Phil Pendley

Email Address: pendley@brandman.edu Telephone Number: 951-712-2065

Category of Review:

- [ ] Exempt Review [X] Expedited Review [ ] Standard Review

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I have completed the NIH Certification and included a copy with this proposal
<input type="checkbox"/> NIH Certificate currently on file in the office of the IRB Chair or Department Office

Signature of Principal Investigator: Felicia R. Haecker Digitally signed by Felicia R. Haecker  
DN: cn=Felicia R. Haecker, o=Brandman, ou=IRB  
Country, email=fhae171@brandman.edu,  
c=US Date: 4-21-14

Signature of Faculty Advisor/ Dr. Phil Pendley Digitally signed by Dr. Phil Pendley  
DN: cn=Dr. Phil Pendley, o=Brandman University,  
ou=Brandman, c=US,  
email=pendley@brandman.edu, cn=US  
Date: 2014.04.21 08:28:43 -0700 Sponsor/Dissertation Chair: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: 4-21-14

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
IRB APPLICATION ACTION – APPROVAL  
COMPLETED BY BUIRB

IRB ACTION/APPROVAL

Name of Investigator/Researcher: Felicia R. Haecker

- Returned without review. Insufficient detail to adequately assess risks, protections and benefits.
- Approved/Certified as Exempt from IRB Review.
- Approved as submitted.
- Approved, contingent on minor revisions (see attached)
- Requires significant modifications of the protocol before approval. Research must resubmit with modifications (see attached)
- Researcher must contact IRB member and discuss revisions to research proposal and protocol.

Level of Risk:  No Risk  Minimal Risk  More than Minimal Risk

IRB Comments:

IRB Contact

Name: George Byron Peraza-Smith DNP

Telephone: 949-379-9712 Email: gsmith@brandman.edu

IRB Certification Number: 04281402 Date: 5/1/2014

**Revised IRB Application**

**Approved**

**Returned**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Telephone:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Email:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX G

Flyer

Attention Female Veterans:  
Your story could help shape  
future college programs.

Come participate in a study focused on  
female student veterans.

Contact Felicia Haecker @ 916.477.7349

or by email @ fhaecker@yahoo.com

\* All participants will receive a gift card





## APPENDIX H

### Charts

#### **Research Question #1: What factors motivate female military veterans to pursue higher education?**

Table H1

*Research Question 1, Subquestion 1 Data Matrix and Narrative*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Educational benefits	4/4	3/3	6/6	6/6	5/5	4/4	5/5	4/4
Not ready for college				4/6	4/5			4/4
Patriotism	4/4		6/6					
Independence	4/4			5/6	5/5	3/4		3/4
Family tradition	2/4	2/3	4/6		3/5	2/4		

Table H2

*Research Question 1, Subquestion 2 Data Matrix and Narrative*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Future employment	3/4	3/3	4/6	6/6	3/5	3/6	5/5	3/4
Living expenses	3/4	3/3	3/6	4/6	4/5	4/4	4/5	
Family	3/4	2/3	4/6	3/6	3/6			

#### **Research Question #2: What obstacles do female military veterans face when pursuing higher education?**

Table H3

*Research Question 2, Subquestion 1 Data Matrix and Narrative*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Lack of benefit awareness	3/4	3/3	4/6	5/6		4/4	3/5	4/4
Poor counseling	3/4	3/3				2/4	4/5	2/4

**Research Question #3: What factors motivate female military veterans to persist after enrolling in college?**

Table H4

*Research Question 3, Subquestion 1 Data Matrix and Narrative*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Family	3/4	3/3	5/6		4/5			4/4
Big picture				6/6	5/5	3/4	3/5	4/4
Failure not an option (pride)	4/4	3/3	4/5	6/6	4/5	4/4	4/5	3/4

Table H5

*Research Question 3, Subquestion 2 Data Matrix and Narrative*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Family/ significant other	3/4	3/3	5/6	4/6	4/5	4/4	5/5	
Self			3/6			4/4	3/5	
Veteran center	4/4		5/6	6/6	3/5	4/4		

**Research Question #4: What obstacles do female military veterans face after enrolling in college?**

Table H6

*Research Question 4, Subquestion 1 Data Matrix and Narrative*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Negative reaction	3/4		5/6			2/4	4/5	
Positive reaction	2/4		4/6	5/6	5/5	3/4	3/5	4/4
Do not share veteran status		3/3	5/6			3/4		

Table H7

*Research Question 4, Subquestion 2 Data Matrix and Narrative*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Juggling responsibilities	4/4	2/3	6/6	4/6	5/5	4/4	3/5	3/4
Strain on personal relationships		3/3	4/6		3/5	4/4		2/4

Table H8

*Research Question 4, Subquestion 3 Data Matrix and Narrative*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Set realistic goals			4/6	5/6	3/5	3/6	5/5	3/4
Utilize available resources	4/4	3/3	5/6	5/6	3/6	3/4	3/5	4/4

**Research Question # 5: What recommendations do female military veterans who have successfully transitioned into higher education have for female military veterans who are considering higher education?**

Table H9

*Research Question 5, Subquestion 1 Data Matrix and Narrative*

Theme	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Focus Group 5	Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7	Focus Group 8
Plan	4/4	2/3	6/6		3/5		5/5	4/4
Be your own advocate	3/4	3/3	5/6	6/6	5/5	4/4	3/5	4/4
Seek out other veterans		3/3	3/3	5/6		4/4	5/5	3/4