PERCEPTIONS OF VETERANS COORDINATORS: POWERFUL PRACTICES TO BUILD ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF VETERANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to examine and understand the perceptions of veterans coordinators regarding effective higher education practices to build academic success of student veterans. Many colleges and universities do not understand the unique needs of veterans in higher education or know how to meet those needs to promote their academic success. Data for the study consisted of individual interviews, collection of artifacts, and a focus group. The perceptions and lived experiences of the veterans coordinators and directors were central to the data collection and analysis for this phenomenological research study. The research data revealed three significant themes that represented veterans’ perceived needs and the most effective practices to fulfill those needs and increase academic achievement. These themes correlated to transition assistance, connection and belonging, and integration and achievement. The study revealed powerful practices to build academic success for veterans in higher education and has implications for veterans coordinators and the institutions they serve. Findings from the research data provided a richer understanding of what student veterans need to attain degree completion in order to successfully transition out and pursue a career. Coordinators perceived a positive effect of the services on academic success, noting improved grade point averages and increased retention and graduation rates. A consensus among veterans coordinators was that support to student veterans does not end with enrollment and transitioning in to their institutions or processing their educational benefits. Successful Veterans Services programs are intentional in their efforts to support veterans in higher education to achieve their academic goals.

Keywords: student veteran, veterans coordinator, veterans services
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction and Background of the Study

Veterans are returning to America’s college campuses at a rate not seen since post-World War II, as veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq seek to pursue a college degree using the Post-9/11 GI Bill. With the growing number of veterans on campus, some institutions implemented programs and services geared toward meeting the needs of student veterans (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Cook & Kim, 2009; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). However, graduation rates are significantly lower for student veterans than the general student population (Adkins, 2015; Marcus, 2017). In their assessment of campus programs for veterans, the American Council on Education found, “Part of becoming more responsive to military and veteran students is understanding their needs, as well as recognizing what campuses do and do not do well in serving them” (2012, p. 24).

Student veterans are a diverse population with unique needs. Veterans often experience social and cultural differences on campus and may feel they do not belong (Adkins, 2015; Vacchi, 2012). Moreover, some institutions that assert to be “military-friendly” may not actually be veteran-supportive (Heineman, 2014). In the Rand report, Service Members in School: Military Veterans’ Experiences Using the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Pursuing Postsecondary Education, Steele reported that transition support services and resources varied greatly amongst campuses (2010). Although the literature has explored the topic of military veterans transitioning to college campuses, research has not examined strategies to build academic success of student veterans from the perspective of veterans coordinators. Effective veterans services and gaps in support services require further study to identify effective higher education strategies for veterans services to build academic success.
Statement of the Research Problem

Some colleges and universities have not implemented effective practices to meet the needs of veterans in higher education to promote their academic success. Many veterans are not utilizing all their education benefits to complete their programs of study or academic goals (Field, 2008; Marcus, 2017). After nearly a decade of substantial financial assistance from the United States Veterans Administration (VA), degree attainment among veterans in higher education is appreciably lower than the broader student population at many institutions.

Conceptual Framework for the Study

Veterans are non-traditional students with unique experiences and require different support services to meet their needs than traditional recent high school graduates. For institutions to make informed decisions regarding institutional resources and effective veterans programs, they must have a thorough understanding of veterans services and best practices relevant to the needs of student veterans and their academic goals. Through the theoretical lens of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, this study explored to what extent college programs are successful in meeting the perceived needs of veterans in higher education. Maslow’s theory of human motivation presupposes an ascending hierarchy in which one’s most basic needs must be met before ascending to the next level. These hierarchical levels included physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). Researchers found significant parallels between Maslow’s theory and meeting the unique needs of student veterans to achieve academic success in higher education (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

It was the conceptual framework of needs and needs assessment that shaped this study of veterans coordinators’ perceptions of veterans services and best practices to build the academic success of veterans in higher education. Waks (1982) described needs assessment as “any
inquiry into the existence of needs directed at assisting policy makers in developing policies and plans concerning goals and objectives, activities in achieving these goals and objectives, and the resources supporting them” (p. 8). Waks viewed needs assessment as “a process of inquiry and judgment” (1982, p.8).

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine and understand the perspective of veterans coordinators regarding effective higher education practices to build academic success of student veterans. Not all colleges have established veterans services that are effectively implemented and/or utilized. O’Herrin indicated that while many colleges and universities welcome veterans to their campuses, some do not understand their unique needs or know how to meet those needs (2011). This study contributes to the body of knowledge by gaining the unique perspective of veterans coordinators who are positioned to have firsthand knowledge of student veteran academic progress and the effect of veterans services on their academic success.

While previous research focused on the transition from military service to the college campus, this study fills a gap in knowledge by examining what student veterans need to attain degree completion in order to successfully transition out and pursue a career. Additionally, this study sought to identify institutional services and programs that are most effective in meeting those needs and what services are needed. This study will assist policy makers and college administrators in evaluating the effectiveness of institutional practices to identify and meet the unique needs of veterans in higher education.

**Research Questions**

The research questions put forth in this phenomenological qualitative study were as follows.
1. What are veterans coordinators’ perceptions regarding the effect of veterans services on student veteran academic success?
2. Which practices do veterans coordinators perceive as most effective for increasing student veteran academic success?
3. What dedicated student support services do veterans coordinators perceive as needed by veterans in higher education to successfully achieve their academic goals?
4. What gaps in services do veterans coordinators perceive in existing services within their institutions?
5. What are veterans coordinators’ perceptions regarding student veterans’ willingness or reluctance to ask for help and utilize available services?

Rationale for the Study

This phenomenological qualitative research allowed the veterans coordinators to describe their experiences based on their expertise with student veterans and veterans services. This study analyzed information and data to identify themes and patterns regarding the effectiveness of specific services. Moreover, the study examined the extent to which college programs are successful in meeting the perceived needs of veterans in higher education.

For many non-traditional students, financial difficulty is a primary reason for failure to persist to completion. The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides for tuition and fees paid directly to the institution, a housing allowance based on location of the institution, and a book allowance of up to $1,000 per year. Often, veterans are also eligible for additional forms of financial aid. Van Dusen reported that financial difficulty is most likely not the cause for high instances of student veterans non-persistence (2011). This study contributes to the body of knowledge about student
veterans and specifically fills a gap in knowledge by identifying powerful practices to build academic success of student veterans.

Researcher Positional Statement

As a veteran and former veterans coordinator, student veteran academic success in higher education is a keen interest. Experience in the position as a veterans coordinator provided understanding and insight into the perceptions of the participants. Additionally, experience as a retired Army veteran using the Post-9/11 GI Bill to continue educational endeavors lent an insider insight to the topic.

College is often a viable means of transition from military service to a new career. The desire to advise and assist veterans with the transition from military life to civilian life was the impetus for a pursuit of a master’s degree in student affairs after leaving the military and subsequently securing an advisor position working with veterans in higher education. This position afforded the opportunity to recognize the need for institutions of higher education to do more to support the student veteran population.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to give a better understanding of the research.

Completion. Successful graduation from a degree or certificate program.

GI Bill. Any version of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, as amended, in which veterans are given financial support to attend college (Adkins, 2015).

Institution of Higher Education (IHE). A facility, either the traditional brick-and-mortar or virtual, that provides educational coursework beyond a secondary education. This may include community colleges, colleges, universities, technical schools, or professional schools (Van Dusen, 2011).
**Non-traditional Student.** Typically refers to a college student over the age of 24. Other characteristics include: delayed enrollment, part time attendance or work, financial independence, married with dependents or single parent (NCES, 2002).

**Persistence.** The continued enrollment at an institution of higher education from fall to spring semester (Van Dusen, 2011).

**Retention.** The continued enrollment at an institution of higher education from one year to the next (Van Dusen, 2011).

**Veteran.** An individual that has served in any branch of the United States military in active duty, reserve, or the National Guard (Van Dusen, 2011).

**Veterans Coordinator.** The dedicated coordinator of veterans services at a college or university. Responsible for working with student veterans and veterans issues. (The title and responsibilities of this position vary amongst IHEs.)

**Veterans Services.** The dedicated services and support for student veterans at an IHE (e.g., veterans resource center, veterans student organization, dedicated point of contact/veterans coordinator, tutoring, financial assistance).

**Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

**Delimation.**

A delimitation of the study is the purposeful sampling method. This method may not result in a representative sample and may limit generalization outside a particular region (East and Middle Tennessee). However, selecting participants from both 2-year and 4-year institutions of higher education as well as public and private institutions was an important aspect of the research.
Limitations.

Sample size is a limitation of the study. The small sample size may not be representative of a broader, more comprehensive sampling. Additionally, the study may not represent opinions/perceptions of other veterans coordinators across the United States.

Assumptions

The following assumptions are relevant to the research.

1. All participants have designated responsibilities specifically related to student veterans at their institution.
2. Participants are knowledgeable of the veterans services and programs and other available resources at their institutions.
3. Participants have access to student progress records and to the VA required end of term reports that indicate student veteran academic progress.

Summary

The research study is organized as follows. Chapter One provides a broad introduction and overview of the topic of the research study. A background of the topic is followed by a statement of the problem, significance of the study, and research questions. Chapter Two is an extensive review of the relevant literature for the topic, including a historical perspective, the theoretical framework, and specific literature related to the study. Chapter Three describes the qualitative research methodology to include the research approach, description of the study participants, and procedures for data collection and analysis. Chapter Four presents the findings from the research study. Chapter Five presents the conclusions drawn from the study and implications of the study.
The first chapter introduced the topic of perceptions of veterans coordinators about powerful practices to build academic success of veterans in higher education. A brief history of the GI Bill indicated that student veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill experience similar challenges as post-WWII veterans that benefited from the original GI Bill of 1944. It is imperative that institutions of higher education understand the unique needs of this diverse student population and be intentional in their efforts to deliver programs and services to meet those needs and promote academic success. Developing and implementing powerful practices to support veterans in higher education is vital to building academic success of this diverse student population. Because there is no one-size-fits-all strategy, there is no consensus regarding the most effective practices to meet the challenge of supporting veterans in higher education.

This study contributes to educational research concerning veterans in higher education by exploring the perceptions of veterans coordinators at institutions of higher education in East and Middle Tennessee. Findings from this study will assist higher education decision-makers in gaining a holistic understanding of the proclivities of their student veteran population, discern trends and issues relative to their educational experience, and analyze existing strategic strategies to determine what works. Moreover, administrators will gain insight to assist in developing powerful practices to build academic success of veterans in higher education.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This review of the literature is organized into five sections: historical perspective, contemporary veterans in higher education, theoretical framework, veterans services offices, and current practice. A brief history of the GI Bill and academia writ large examines the changing relationship of the military and higher education. The following section considers characteristics and challenges of today’s veterans. Next, the unique needs of student veterans are explored through the theoretical lens of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Then, a discussion of student veteran academic success in higher education is provided as pertinent discourse for the overall research endeavor. This chapter concludes with a discussion of campus veterans services offices as well as current programs and practices. The literature has fully examined the topic of military veterans transitioning to college. However, practices to build academic success of student veterans from the perspective of veterans coordinators has not been explored.

Historical Perspective

Historically, the student veteran experience and the GI Bill of Rights have influenced the cultural environment and practices of today’s colleges.

Colleges and universities are facing perhaps the greatest challenge in their history as a million veterans seek the ways of higher education in America. These deserving students of the sophisticating experience of war and military service will certainly challenge many of the sacred and accepted practices of college training. (McDonagh, 1947, p. 149) McDonagh in 1947 expressed sentiments similar to those of modern-day college campuses with the influx of veterans using the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Act of 2008 (Post-9/11 GI Bill). American higher education institutions faced similar challenges when the original GI Bill,
known as the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, brought a surge of veterans to college campuses after World War II (WWII).

The historical relationship between the United States (U.S.) military and higher education predates the GI Bill, going back to the establishment of the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1802 (Rudolph & Thelin, 1990). The Morrill Act of 1862 established the land grant colleges and universities, with congressionally mandated military training in the curricula (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). And the National Defense Act of 1916 established the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) on America’s college and university campuses (Stever, 1997). Further expanding the relationship between higher education and the military, Congress passed the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944. The purpose of the original GI Bill was to assist the reintegration of returning veterans after WWII to civilian life and society; additionally, it would prevent the overwhelming unemployment and unrest experienced by returning military veterans after World War I (Accamando, 2017; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Van Dusen, 2011). Nearly two million military veterans arrived on campuses across the country to use their GI Bill, which brought both diversity and change to academia (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Moreover, the GI Bill helped shape the leadership and policy of American democracy. According to Mettler (2005), almost 60% of the U.S. House of Representatives were veterans in 1960. O’Herrin credited the original GI Bill with educating millions of professionals, including teachers, businessmen, engineers, scientists, and doctors (2011). These individuals positively affected American society with their collective skill set.

The next iteration of veterans education benefits was the Veterans’ Readjustment Act of 1952, known as the Korean War GI Bill, which was followed by the Vietnam Era Veterans Readjustment Act, which provided additional GI Bill benefits that allowed Vietnam veterans to
enroll in college (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). Higher education institutions provided little support for returning veterans during this era (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Moreover, Vietnam veterans often felt unwelcome on many college campuses amidst anti-war protests. This era of anti-war sentiment also saw an increase in male students on campus due to the 2-S Student Deferment (also known as the draft deferment) (Stever, 1997). This policy produced a lasting effect on college campuses as many who achieved their degrees under the draft deferment went on to become college faculty and administrators (Stever, 1997). Rumann and Hamrick (2009) reported that faculty and administrators on today’s campuses are less likely to have personal military experience than those of previous generations.

Although some veterans education benefits have phased out, some specific benefits still remain in effect. The Veterans Education Assistance Act of 1984 (also known as the Montgomery GI Bill or MGIB) provides a monthly payment while the student is enrolled in college. To receive Montgomery GI Bill benefits, service members must agree to a $100 per month deduction from pay during their first year of active duty service (Steele et al., 2010). Another version, the MGIB-Selected Reserve, pays a lower monthly rate to individuals serving in the National Guard or Reserve. After the military became an all-volunteer service in 1976, enlistments declined. The Montgomery GI Bill was a recruiting incentive to increase enlistments.

Veterans with a service-connected disability may be eligible for the Vocational Rehabilitation program. In addition to these U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) funded programs, service members serving on active duty, Reserve, or National Guard may be eligible to use Military Tuition Assistance, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Defense (Steele et
Most recently, the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Act of 2008 was signed into law by President George W. Bush on June 30, 2008. The law was effective on August 1, 2009, and made college more affordable and accessible for those who served on active duty after September 10, 2001 (Cook & Kim, 2009). Since the enactment of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, campuses across the country have experienced the largest increase in enrollment of military veterans since WWII (Cook & Kim, 2009).

Service member eligibility for education benefits depends on the service members dates of service and other factors, including disability and reserve status. Available VA education benefits include the following:

- Chapter 30 is known as the Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty. Service members established eligibility for the Montgomery GI Bill by meeting specific criteria while serving on active duty.
- Chapter 31 is the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program for veterans with service-connected disability.
- Chapter 33 is commonly known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Service members and veterans who served after September 10, 2001, may be eligible for the Post-9/11 Gi Bill. The option to transfer all or part of this benefit to a spouse or dependent must be exercised prior to leaving active duty service.
- Chapter 35 is the Survivors and Dependents’ Educational Assistance program available to spouses and dependents of service members who died in the line of duty or who are permanently and totally disabled due to a service-related condition.
• Chapter 1606 is commonly referred to as the Montgomery GI Bill-Selected Reserve. Members of the Reserve or National Guard are eligible for Chapter 1606 with continuous active service in the Reserve or National Guard.

• The Fry Scholarship provides Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to the children and surviving spouses of Servicemembers who died in the line of duty while on active duty after September 10, 2001. (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018)

Contemporary Veterans in Higher Education

A student veteran is a student that has a current or former connection to military service, whether serving on active duty, reserve, or National Guard status. Student veteran status is not defined by deployments, combat experience, use of GI Bill education benefits, or other veteran status (Vacchi, 2012). Many veterans enroll in college as they transition to civilian life. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has paid in excess of $86.2 billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits to more than 1.9 million eligible recipients since 2009 (Paul Lawrence, Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Benefits, In M. Cole, personal communication, June 22, 2018). By the year 2020, over five million individuals who served post-9/11 will leave military service (US Government Accountability Office, 2013).

Demographics.

In its 2016 report describing the demographics of the military community, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) listed the active duty military services as Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps. Active duty U.S. Coast Guard is a component of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and is not counted in Department of Defense active duty strength numbers. The Reserve component of the military includes the Army Reserve, Air Force Reserve, Navy Reserve, Marine Corps Reserve, Army National Guard, Air National Guard, and the Coast Guard
Reserve (under the Department of Homeland Security) (US Department of Defense, 2016). The total 2016 active duty force was 1,288,596 strong, 6% less than in the year 2000. The Army was the largest service with 471,271 active duty members. Females comprised 16% of active duty service members, and 31.4% of active duty service members self-identified as a racial minority. In 2016, over half (53.5%) of active duty service members were married (US Department of Defense, 2016). Figure 2.1 depicts the 2016 total military force distribution by Active Duty and Reserve force by service. A specific demographic breakdown of the total military force depicts gender of the total force (Figure 2.2), Hispanic ethnicity of the total force (Figure 2.3), and race of the total force (Figure 2.4).

**Figure 2.1** Active Duty and Ready Reserve Personnel

*Figure 2.1 Source: (U.S. Department of Defense, 2016)*
Figure 2.2 Gender of the Total Military Force

Female (n=357,276) 18.8%

Male (n=1,763,228) 83.2%

Figure 2.2. Source: (U.S. Department of Defense, 2016)

Figure 2.3 Hispanic Ethnicity of the Total Military Force

Hispanic or Latino (n=250,619) 11.8%

Not Hispanic or Latino (n=1,869,886) 88.2%

Figure 2.3. Source: (U.S. Department of Defense, 2016)
For active duty service members, military service is their full-time job. The Reserve component serves part-time, except when called to active duty service for national emergencies or war time service. The National Guard members are under the authority of the state governors and are often utilized in their state and communities to assist during emergencies (Accamando, 2017). However, when the need arises, the U.S. president has the authority to federalize these forces and deploy them wherever needed.

Student veterans are a diverse population. They come from different demographics, service cultures, experiences, and service statuses. Some may have separated completely from military service; others may be between deployments and still serving in the Reserve or National Guard (Accamando, 2017). These are important considerations as institutions determine how to
best support this student demographic in transition. Today’s veterans come from a highly trained, professional military where many held positions of trust and responsibility. They often experience significant cultural and social differences in academia (Vacchi, 2012).

**Challenges.**

The transition issues of modern veterans are not new. World War II veterans faced adjustment challenges on college campuses, including age difference with other students, financial and housing issues, and difficulty concentrating (Van Dusen, 2011). Van Dusen cautioned that institutional awareness of these and other challenges affecting modern veterans should not stigmatize veterans. Today’s veterans experience similar barriers in their transition to college as those after WWII. Veterans in higher education are non-traditional students and are often first-generation college students who experience barriers when entering college. Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell expressed that veterans experience unique challenges when transitioning from combat to college life (2009).

Molina and Morse noted that work and other life responsibilities present barriers that often prevent student veterans from completing a college education (2015). A united report from the American Council on Education and NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, formerly known as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, found that over 60% of active duty students identified with four or more risk factors to persistence and completion. Researchers identified seven risk factors to education attainment (Molina & Morse, 2015). Students that did not earn a high school diploma, delayed entry into college, enrolled part-time, worked full-time, were fiscally independent, supported dependents, or were single parents were more at risk of not completing their college education (Molina & Morse, 2015). Veterans and members of the Reserve faced 44% and 37% of these risk factors
respectively. These findings reinforce those of Steele et al. (2010), that noted that the challenges and stress of balancing family, work, and academic responsibilities are often reasons that veterans do not persist in college.

Durdella and Kim noted that veterans may tend to experience college through the values and experiences from their military service (2012). Accamando (2017) described the sense of family and belonging that service members experience. There is also a trust and connection to the military as an institution. In contrast, researchers have reported a feeling of isolation experienced by many veterans on college campuses (Accamando, 2017; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Women veterans expressed the absence of the relationship support in the college environment that they experienced in the military (Adkins, 2015). A sense of belonging and feeling connected are critical to student veteran persistence (DiRamio & Jarvis 2011). Cheng found that students value acceptance as an individual and as a part of the campus community (2004). Absent this sense of community or belonging, students may leave the institution and even abandon their education (Cheng, 2004). Cooper (2009) described the connection between student persistence and sense of belonging on today’s diverse college campuses. Cooper further discussed the role of student engagement to developing a sense of belonging and a connectedness to the institution as an influencing factor on student development and success (2009).

Bonar and Domenici described cultural challenges for student veterans (2011). Of note is the stereotype of the “wounded warrior,” even though the majority of veterans in higher education do not have physical or psychological disabilities. Bonar & Domenici described student veterans as resilient and generally healthy (2011). Some may experience cultural and social differences, as well as financial or academic challenges (Bonar & Domenici, 2011). However, physical and psychological challenges are a concern for some veterans. These
challenges may manifest as difficulty walking across campus or between classes, hyper-alertness, anxiety due to post-traumatic stress, trouble concentrating resulting from a traumatic brain injury, and difficulty relating to others (Steele et al., 2010). Researchers found that acculturation, fitting in, and connecting with peers arose consistently as significant issues faced by student veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009; Bonar & Domenici, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

The Student Affairs Council (2009) described challenges for student veterans as administrative, transitional, and personal. Administrative challenges included obstacles to the admissions process due to a lack of knowledge of admissions policies (e.g., required placement tests and orientations); admissions procedures and deadlines; the need for assistance with financial aid and complex VA benefits; and comprehending the standards for prior learning credit for military service and training.

Transitional challenges included developing a sense of connectedness and community with the campus and adjusting to the change in cultures from military service to campus life. Personal challenges included managing expectations and recognizing limits, pursuing support for physical or psychological needs, and learning to seek help when needed (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009).

**Theoretical Framework**

Considering Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954) as the theoretical framework for this study presents a different perspective than some previous research. Earlier research focused on Schlossberg’s transition theory; Astin’s inputs, environment, and outcomes model; and Tinto’s model of student departures (DiRamio and Jarvis, 2011). Maslow described human needs as an ascending hierarchy (1943). His theory proposed that one’s most basic needs must be met prior
to ascending to the next level of needs. At the highest level, self-actualization represents achieving one’s full potential. For 20 years, the U.S. Army built on this concept with its slogan “Be All You Can Be” (Evans, 2015). Carl Rogers believed that the propensity to self-actualize is the sole human basic need. He maintained that human motivation and behavior is dependent on the perception of one’s situation (McLeod, 2014). France (2016) suggested how one pursues his or her needs is as important as which needs are pursued.

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.**

According to Maslow (1954), humans are motivated to behave based on the need to satisfy a set of goals or needs. His five hierarchical levels included physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. When one level of need is met, another emerges. Physiological needs are the basic survival needs (e.g., food, water, shelter). The next level, safety needs, consists of the need for protection, security, and stability (McLeod, 2018). The social need for love and belonging involves a need for interpersonal relationships and feeling of connectedness. Maslow classified esteem needs as esteem for self and esteem or respect from others. Self-actualization is considered a growth need as opposed to a deficiency need. Self-actualization represents the desire to be all one can be by achieving one’s full potential (McLeod, 2018).

Carl Rogers’s humanistic perspective of human behavior suggested that each person is responsible for their well-being and happiness and that we are born with the capacity to achieve self-actualization (McLeod, 2013). Rogers believed that humans are motivated to reach their full potential if the environmental conditions are conducive (McLeod, 2014). Rose (2015) suggested that the military and its regimented structure, group cohesion, and high level of mentality and responsibility can facilitate self-actualization. He expressed that engagement with the world
rather than introspection leads one to achieve self-actualization (Rose, 2015). “The military not only motivated individuals to do better and to be better, it also provided a mission and a sense of purpose often lacking in civilian life” (Rose, 2015, para. 8).

France discussed how veterans meet their needs in the context of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (2016). The military provides much of the lower level needs in the way of food and shelter at the physiological level; security, order, and stability at the safety level of needs; camaraderie and mutually supporting relationships at the social/belonging level; and esteem from achievement (France, 2016). Military service offers endless challenges that build confidence and respect. According to France, “there is a level of personal satisfaction that many service members have about their military career, they often engage in personal growth, and have peak experiences that could often approach self-actualization” (2016, para. 6). When a service member leaves the military, he or she must rethink how their needs are met.

**Student Veteran Hierarchy of Needs.**

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) recognized parallels for veterans in higher education and adapted Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954) to the student veteran (Figure 2.5). For the student veteran, basic needs may include finances and health concerns. Once these basic needs are met, the need for a sense of connectedness to the college environment emerges, including a need for peer affiliation (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Parallel to Maslow’s level of social/belonging, student veterans balance socialization and a tendency to blend in. The next level to emerge on the student veteran hierarchy of needs is that of social and academic integration, leading to persistence and achievement. Lastly, the student veteran achieves the fulfilled potential of his or her civilian self (DiRamio and Jarvis, 2011). Wert (2016) agreed that a sense of social support and belonging is the most critical level for veterans in higher education (as cited in Accamando,
There is a strong sense of loss of belonging and sense of purpose upon separating from the military. This is also true for Reserve and National Guard personnel whose units are dispersed after returning from deployment. A connectedness to the college is necessary for veterans to alleviate the feeling of being disconnected and isolated on campus. Drew, Molnar, and Spearman (2015) emphasized the significance of student engagement and connectedness to student retention (2015). Social and academic integration may contribute to student persistence and degree attainment (Cooper, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Tinto, 1993). Figure 2.5 depicts the parallels between Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and the student veteran hierarchy of needs. These unique needs of veterans in higher education are a significant facet that affects the desire to persist to graduation for this student population.

**Figure 2.5** Adaptation of the Hierarchy of Needs for Student Veterans

![Figure 2.5](image)

Figure 2.5. Source: (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011)

Many colleges and universities do not understand the unique needs of veterans in higher education or know how to meet those needs to promote their academic success (O’Herrin, 2011). Rumann and Hamrick reported that many administrators and faculty lack personal experience
with military service and culture (2010). Some early research indicated that veterans needed special services and programs to help them transition from military service to campus life (Cook & Kim, 2009). According to Vacchi (2012), some researchers exaggerate the difficulties of veterans in higher education and base conclusions on stereotypes. Vacchi reported that research has overstated visible and invisible injuries by twice known estimates (2012). He cautioned that such exaggeration may result in the avoidance of veterans on campus. Vacchi expressed disagreement with literature that assumed student veterans would have trouble with the transition to college (2012). He did, however, recognize the significant differences in culture and socialization.

In his ethnographic study of veterans in higher education, Dalcher (2014) sought to learn the educational, emotional, and psychological needs of combat veterans in higher education. Dalcher discussed the combat veterans as a special needs demographic. As a marginalized group, like other minorities, veterans experience stereotypes about their experiences. Dalcher described the differences between veterans and what he labeled mainstream population (2014). He discussed the differences as either social-contextual or medically related. In the social context, Dalcher reemphasized feelings of alienation that many veterans experience on college campuses (2014). The maturity level and world experience help prepare veterans for the rigor of academics. However, these differences between veterans and non-veterans may also result in difficulty relating to others. Veterans may seek out other veterans because they feel veterans understand and share the same experiences. Veterans are reluctant to ask for help, whether for physical disability or classroom instruction. This may be due to a military culture of self-reliance where they do not want to be seen as weak. The grave experiences that many combat veterans encountered may leave “invisible wounds” that complicate their ability to focus on or
retain course work (Dalcher, 2014). These invisible wounds may include Post-Traumatic Stress, Traumatic-Brain Injury, or undiagnosed trauma.

Vacchi (2012) disagreed that veterans would have trouble transitioning to college, as the military service is a major transition in and of itself. Military service members experience transition inherently as a way of life. The initial transition into basic training instills a sense of confidence and purpose that prepares recruits for the demands of complex operations in the direst circumstances (Dalcher, 2014). The military has a built-in support structure that urges both teamwork and self-reliance. Without this support structure upon separating from the military, many veterans experience alienation, especially on college campuses where few people understand their experiences. This disconnect may affect a veteran’s ability to relate to non-veterans on campus. Moreover, without a support system, veterans may experience some difficulty in the transition process of navigating the bureaucracies of admissions requirements, financial aid procedures, and VA education benefit processing (Dalcher, 2014). Institutions of higher education can do more to support student veterans with their unique transition to college.

**Student Veteran Academic Success**

Although some institutions of higher education have implemented specific services and programs for veterans, graduation rates remain low at many of these institutions (Jenner, 2017; Marcus, 2017). Jenner discussed the concern for high rates of student veteran stop-out and dropout and low rates of graduation with a bachelor’s degree. Jenner noted how many student veterans are also first-generation, low-income, and under-represented minority students (2017). Financial issues, insufficient academic preparation, and delayed entry or a gap in education are some of the factors that affect attrition in these groups (Jenner, 2017). Marcus (2017) described the extensive institutional support at San Diego State that contributes to a graduation rate over
75% in four years for student veterans. Sans the support, many institutions recruit veterans (and GI Bill benefits), but students rarely complete degrees (Marcus, 2017). Marcus noted that GI Bill recipients at a nearby public community college graduated at a rate of only 1%. Upon examining 20 two-year colleges with an enrollment of at least 100 GI Bill recipients, one-third did not graduate any of these students. Another third graduated less than 4% (Marcus, 2017). Federal data indicated that of full-time students receiving GI Bill funding at community colleges in 2014, an average of 15% graduated in three years. Marcus cited National Clearinghouse data that indicated a national average of all full-time student graduation rates at community colleges as 23% in three years and part-time student graduation rates as 12% in three years (2017). This is a significant eight percent difference. Because GI Bill benefits are limited to 36 months, which is just enough to complete a four-year degree, three years to complete a 2-year degree at community college is also significant for students going on to 4-year colleges to continue their education.

Although some institutions like San Diego State have impressive success rates, student veteran graduation rates are lower than the traditional student population at some public community colleges (Marcus, 2017). In a collaborative effort with the National Student Clearinghouse and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ Veterans Benefits Administration, Student Veterans of America produced a report in February 2017 tracking veterans’ success. The report indicated that 53.6% of GI Bill recipients who started college in fall 2009 graduated within six years (Marcus, 2017). This is a national average of both 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education. Actual graduation, retention, and transfer rates are difficult to determine because many institutions do not track veteran-specific data and success rates. Others fail to report veterans’ data. Often, the data that are reported are difficult to compare because
institutions use different methods and timeframes of reporting academic success data. Findings from these and other research reports indicated that institutions of higher education can do more to provide support for student veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Molina and Morse, 2015).

Cate (2014) described a paradox regarding student veteran success in higher education. On one hand, research reported evidence of high dropout rates. On the other hand, research also reported high completion rates. This paradox indicates the problem with many institutions failing to track student veterans as a population. According to Cate, institutional systems do not track or measure academic outcomes of student veterans effectively (2014). Cate found it difficult to find accurate data regarding student veteran academic success. The lack of efficient and accurate methods of collecting and assimilating data resulted in confusion and the paradox regarding academic outcomes for student veterans (2014).

Key findings in one quantitative study included the negative effect of remedial courses on persistence and graduation for veterans that did not use VA or military education benefits (Garrity, 2017). Garrity recommended further study. One reason for the negative effect may be the delayed enrollment in college level classes until remedial courses are completed, thus increasing both the time and money required to graduate (Garrity, 2017). Another reason for this finding may be that these student veterans were not prepared for college and not successful.

Garrity (2017) stressed the importance of recognizing the factors influencing retention and graduation. She emphasized that theories based on the general student population do not explain student veteran outcomes. Garrity cited a study by NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, formerly known as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, that found institutions of higher education do no track retention and
completion data specific to military service members and veterans as a unique student population (2017). She noted that assessing student support and programs to affect stop-out and dropout is hindered as a result.

Kapell, Boersma, DeVita, and Parker (2017) defined persistence as students continuing their education to graduation. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) reported that less than 10% of student veterans used all of their GI Bill benefit. The GI Bill makes college more accessible, but accessibility does not equate to graduation. A capable Veterans Services Office can lead or coordinate efforts to examine institutional policies and programs influencing student veteran persistence and academic success.

Veterans Services Offices

Van Dusen (2011) discussed the different structures or models of support at various institutions. The veterans coordinators are in a unique position to recognize the academic progress of student veterans and the specific needs that remain unmet. Some institutions do not provide a dedicated office for veterans services. In her research, Weber found that a dedicated office to support military service members and veterans demonstrated a commitment to this student population (2011). Furthermore, Weber found that at institutions without a dedicated veterans services office, the primary point of contact for veterans and veterans benefits advising at four-year intuitions was typically the registrar’s office (2011). Where no dedicated veterans services office existed at community colleges, the primary point of contact for veterans was typically found in the office of student services or student affairs, while veterans benefits were sometimes processed in the financial aid office (Weber, 2011).

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) noted that some state legislatures are becoming more involved and requiring a dedicated office to serve at state institutions (e.g., Minnesota and
Washington). A dedicated veterans office can serve as a place for veterans to interact, as well as a single point of contact on campus, which is key to making an initial connection as well as further engagement with the campus. A veterans office is a place where a veteran can begin a connection to the broader campus community, as they begin to navigate the higher education bureaucracy (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). It can also bring visibility to this underserved minority.

The Student Affairs Leadership Council (2009) advocated for establishing an infrastructure to support student veterans. The council identified four models implemented at colleges and universities: a one-person office, a one-person office and a campus working group, a cross-functional liaison network, and a comprehensive resource center.

**One-person office.**

The one-person office is staffed by a veterans coordinator, who is the primary point of contact for veterans issues, programs, and services. This person most often works in some capacity under Student Affairs. According to the Student Affairs Leadership Council, this is the easiest model to implement (2009). The veterans coordinator may also serve as the VA Certifying Official that certifies each veterans enrollment to the VA for payment if the student is using GI Bill education benefits. The advantages of this model include a central location for support. It is easy to implement and leverages personnel from other administrative offices. This model does not require a large investment of resources or institutional commitment to implement. However, coordination with other administrative departments may be limited. Additionally, veterans may come to rely on the coordinator for all their administrative issues when there are no veterans points of contact in other offices. With the one-person model, VA certification may only be an additional responsibility added to an otherwise full workload in another office (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009). Furthermore, other campus offices
are likely to send a student to the sole veterans coordinator as soon as they learn that the student is a veteran, even for issues that lie within their area of responsibility, such as admissions.

**One-person office and campus working group.**

This model includes a veterans coordinator, office, and a campus working group. The dedicated veterans coordinator and Veterans Services Office provide a central campus location where student veterans can find the information and support they need. Coordination with other administrative departments allows for easy referrals. An informed working group contributes to campus awareness of veterans issues and increases advocacy for this population. However, volunteer members of the working group are not personally responsible, and multiple members may blur the focus and priorities and add bureaucracy (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009).

**Cross-functional liaison network.**

The third model described by the Student Affairs Leadership Council (2009) consists of the dedicated veterans coordinator and Veterans Services Office. Instead of a volunteer working group, this model includes specific liaisons in other campus offices that are expected to know how to support veterans in their area of responsibility. These offices may include admissions, financial aid, counseling, disability services, and advising. This model has the advantage of a network of veterans contacts within specific offices that have responsibility for serving student veterans in their area. This concept institutionalizes services and takes some of the responsibility, thus relieving the sole veterans coordinator from all things veterans related. Conversely, this model relies on constant and challenging communication, and services may not be consistent across functional offices. Furthermore, liaisons’ other office responsibilities may distract from providing consistent veterans services (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009).
Comprehensive veterans resource center.

This model provides a one-stop shop for veterans services where services are centrally located and consistent. This model requires considerable resources and significant commitment and support from the administration. The Veterans Resource Center staff provides resources, connections, and support. In From Military Service to Student Life, (Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009), the author discussed the veterans coordinator as the primary contact for veterans services. This more comprehensive model with full support of administrative leadership has a Director of Veterans Services and includes a Veterans Resource Center that allows for services to expand and improve and includes benefit processing and transitional support to academic life on campus.

The Student Affairs Leadership Council indicated it is desirable for colleges and universities to establish an infrastructure for veterans services and programs (2009). A dedicated veterans coordinator and Veterans Services Office provide stability and validate institutional commitment to supporting its student veterans. Once the infrastructure for services is established, institutions can shift focus to creating a supportive campus environment. The Student Affairs Leadership Council suggested facilitating student veteran connections to build cohesiveness and educating staff, faculty, and the campus community about veterans (2009). The council also recommended recognizing veterans and veterans’ services as consequential members of a diverse campus community.

Veterans Programs and Services

Some institutions adopted the label of “military-friendly” but did not focus any effort on improving services to assist student veterans in achieving their academic goals. As a result, “student veteran retention rates have been poor, resulting in lost federal and state aid money, a
potentially wasted generation of student veterans, and a broken promise from the American people to our service members” (Dillard and Yu, 2016, p. 181).

Heinemann (2014) studied veterans and non-veterans at community colleges with and without a military-friendly designation. The Department of Education awards this designation to colleges that commit to certain criteria/programs including the following:

- create an environment that promotes connectedness with the campus community and promotes academic success for veterans;
- ensure campus leadership support
- centralize campus services for veterans and establish a designated space

(Heinemann, 2014)

While often used as a marketing tool, the military-friendly designation was created to help veterans make informed decisions when selecting a college. The expectation is that the military-friendly designation would have a positive difference on their experiences.

In Heinemann’s study (2014), schools registered as military-friendly scored lower than those without the designation in two areas: veterans’ sense of faculty validation and their sense of belonging. The implication is that even though military-friendly colleges are making an effort to be welcoming, there is more to be done by leaders at some community colleges to ensure that student veterans achieve academic success and experience a greater sense of belonging on campus.

In his article, “Make Your Veterans Resource Center Effective” (2010, January), Daniel Fusch argued that a designated space and a supportive campus community are critical to academic success. Veterans are not needy; they just need help getting on the right path (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). They do not want to be seen as dependent or a burden (Vacchi,
They do not expect preferential treatment or special services, simply recognition that their needs are different and that the higher education institutions have the ability to meet their needs (Vacchi, 2012).

**Best practices.**

Dillard and Yu (2016) summarized five best practices and recommendations for implementation to meet needs including establishing a student veterans organization on campus, faculty and staff professional development, professional interaction seminar, designated space, and a first-year seminar.

**Student veterans organization.**

Per Dillard and Yu (2016), campus administrative leaders can reap multiple benefits by assisting with creating a campus veterans organization. A student veterans organization may facilitate relationships that lead to a supportive network. This support among peers can help mitigate some of the transition challenges in adjusting to life on campus. An active student veterans organization can influence the broader campus environment and effect a positive climate and perception of military veterans.

Creating an effective student veterans organization can be accomplished by recruiting a faculty advisor, enlisting a few interested student veterans, and following institutional policies for establishing a new student organization. Typically, non-traditional students are not inclined to participate in student organizations. Therefore, a strong emphasis is necessary from campus leadership, faculty, and staff in promoting the organization to create supportive, positive climate (Dillard and Yu, 2016).
**Professional development.**

Professional development designed to educate faculty and staff about military life and culture may contribute to the institution’s understanding and commitment (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Educating faculty and staff is a key step in creating a “veteran-friendly” campus climate and can build a supportive network of informed advocates (Dillard & Yu, 2016). Dillard and Yu found that faculty led professional development had greater participation than when led by staff (2016). They recommended an annual or semi-annual seminar before the semester begins that informs participants about military culture, transition issues, misconceptions, and both campus and community resources.

**Interaction with student veterans.**

Beyond professional development, Dillard and Yu advocated a separate seminar or opportunity for staff and faculty to interact directly with student veterans (2009). The purpose of this seminar is to build staff professionalization that will improve customer service. The focus is on one-to-one interaction and may also serve to familiarize staff and faculty with disability issues including post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) stressed the importance of a staff that is knowledgeable. In this study, veterans voiced frustration when they felt shuffled from office to office, given erroneous information, and experienced staff members that did not recognize their unique needs.

**Designated space.**

The U.S. Department of Education lists creating a designated space for veterans as key to success (n.d.). Institutions of higher education that voluntarily commit to the “8 Keys to Veterans Success” agree to create a designated space for veterans. Dillard and Yu (2016) stated that a designated space demonstrates a commitment by the institution to veterans and their well-
being, even if the space is small (e.g., unused classroom or office). A designated space affords veterans an opportunity to meet other veterans on campus and to form a network of peer support that can contribute to their academic success (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). The intention of creating a designated space is not to isolate veterans from traditional students, but rather to assist with the transition from military service to campus life. According to Dillard and Yu, any institution of higher education has the capacity to allocate dedicated space (2016). It only requires the support of campus leadership. External funding through grants is available to improve the space.

**First-year seminar.**

Kuh discussed the first-year seminar as a high impact practice in education (2008). In addition to the academic benefits of small groups of faculty and students working together, mentoring relationships are also formed (Dillard & Yu, 2016). One reason for low retention rates among veterans is the culture shock of leaving a group/team centered environment for an independent routine in academia. Research has found that a veterans’ first-year seminar can benefit student academic performance through the support and interaction with supportive faculty (Dillard & Yu, 2016; Kuh, 2008). A first-year seminar that is oriented toward the unique needs of student veterans can also help build a support network. A student survey upon completion of one Veterans First-Year Seminar showed that 100% recommended the course and many believed the institution should make the course mandatory for all incoming student veterans (Dillard & Yu, 2016). Dillard and Yu expressed that implementing these best practices can positively influence the college experience immeasurably (2016).
**8 Keys to Veterans Success.**

The U.S. Department of Education, along with the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense, developed a voluntary initiative called “8 Keys to Veterans' Success.” Postsecondary institutions may volunteer to commit to these eight steps to assist military service members and veterans to transition to college, complete their degrees, and attain career skills (US Department of Education, n.d.). Schools that have committed to the keys are listed on the U.S. Department of Education website. As of summer 2018, 2,237 institutions had committed to these steps. The “8 Keys to Veterans Success” include:

- Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans.
- Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
- Implement an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
- Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space for them (even if limited in size).
- Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans.
- Utilize a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention, and degree completion.
- Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans.
- Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans. (US Department of Education, n.d., para. 5)
The synergy of the eight key steps is illustrated in Figure 2.6.

**Figure 2.6** Keys to Facilitate Veteran’s Success on Campus

![Figure 2.6](https://www.benefits.va.gov/vow/docs/08-30-13_email.pdf)

- **Merging veterans needs and veterans services.**

  As with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (adapted for student veterans), institutions must meet fundamental basic needs for student veterans to move to the next level. These may include providing referrals to VA medical facilities and assistance with financial aid applications and procedures (Accamando, 2017). Accamando stressed that social/belonging level is the most crucial. Institutions can establish programs and services such as a student veterans organization, veterans center/lounge, and events that will foster this critical socialization to help students move forward in their academic quest. Accamando emphasized that a central office should provide these support systems to make certain that students survive, and furthermore have the capacity to thrive in the campus environment (2017).

  Griffin and Gilbert (2015) noted that while some students expressed challenges with identifying socially on campus, the interest to connect socially was inconsistent. Some students
appreciated the student organization on campus for the information flow but were not inclined to participate in the social aspect for support or connections, possibly because veterans may likely have family and social responsibilities outside campus networks (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). Griffin and Gilbert found that student veterans comprise a diverse population, many with salient identities beyond military service and experiences (2015). While some veterans may have an interest in connecting with other veterans, others are likely to seek a path for maneuvering through the bureaucratic process and access their benefits. Student veterans organizations provide opportunities for both.

With all the monetary support available to veterans as well as the campus programs and services, student veterans should have a comparable rate of college enrollment and degree completions to non-veterans. According to Adkins, this expectation does not match reality (2015). One reason may be that veterans often do not feel they belong on college campuses. Adkins (2015) studied how they experience campus climates. Student veterans often seek out other veterans on campus for support. A student veterans organization on campus can provide opportunities for making those connections with students with similar experiences and maturity levels. Adkins discussed campus environments that range from supportive to ambivalent to challenging (2015). Campuses can be veteran-friendly to hostile (Adkins, 2015). Peer support is essential to mitigating these challenges,

Accamando (2017) discussed recommendations for college administrators and staff that will serve the needs of student veterans such as health and well-being, financial eudemonia, and opportunities to connect with peers. With adequate institutional support, student veterans are able to persist and achieve individual self-fulfillment (Accamando, 2017). A support system to meet core needs may allow the student to focus on academic and classroom issues. Because
veterans in higher education are such a diverse group, there is no one-size-fits-all program. Accamando urged institutions to determine specific needs of their unique population to determine what services and programs to support in budgeting decisions.

In his article, Zrioka (2011) interviewed Dana Weber regarding the survey conducted by Weber as part of a dissertation in the counseling psychology program at Arizona State University (Arizona State). Weber sought to assess veterans’ readjustment to civilian and academic life, and the ways the university could help. According to Weber, the lack of knowledge regarding military culture and experience, as well as the specific needs and expectations of this student population, presents a challenge to developing services and programs to ensure their academic success (Zrioka, 2011). The focus of the survey was to assess the psychosocial factors influencing academic persistence in school and which services and programs student veterans used that positively influenced their academic success. Weber (2011) found that social support and a sense of fitting in were two factors that strongly influenced their decision to remain in school. Weber also noted a correlation between the amount of combat experience and the degree of social support and sense of fitting in (2011). Student veterans with more combat experience were less likely to feel like they fit in or report more social support. Those with more combat experience and a lesser feeling of social support and fitting in were less likely to have a positive response regarding a desire to stay in school (Weber, 2011). According to Weber, creating an accepting environment is the best way to serve these students (2011).

Weber’s survey also asked about services and programs available on campus. Weber reported that two-thirds of those surveyed had used academic advising services and services provided for VA education benefits and certification of enrollment (2011). Other services most often used included financial aid, the library, and sports events. Student veterans that used more
services and programs available on campus responded the most positively about remaining in school (Weber, 2011). Weber suggested college leaders, administrators, and staff focus on the services most often used to insert programs that reinforce social support and sense of belonging on campus (2011).

Veteran students’ responses identified several actions to specifically address the needs of this group, including college credit for military service and training; a space to meet and connect; and professional development for campus staff and faculty on veterans issues (Weber, 2011). Other recommendations included improved counseling on using military education benefits, an orientation for veterans, and a specific department for veterans programs. Some students requested a course similar to first-year seminar specifically for veterans to teach college success skills and to inform them of campus services and resources available (Weber, 2011).

Cook and Kim (2009) reinforced similar findings that deficiencies exist in services for meeting the needs for the returning veterans, including transition assistance, faculty and staff development regarding veterans issues, staff training for assisting students with medical issues, and creating an environment that encourages and facilitates the connections of veterans with other veterans.

Drew et al. (2015) examined veterans’ transition challenges as well as recruiting and retention practices of Tennessee 4-year private institutions that were members of the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association (TICUA). Drew et al. also sought to identify needs of the student veteran population and successful practices of serving those needs (2015). Recommendations from their findings included suggestions on how to attract military-connected students to the private 4-year institutions of TICUA. Findings consisted of three main themes or categories, “personnel and support services offered, institutional structures, and social and
cultural support” (Drew et al., 2015). According to Drew et al., each of these factors affected the students’ decision to persist in their enrollment at the institution. Sub-categories and recommendations included an effective web presence, assistance with financial information, student veteran orientation, training for faculty and staff, accessibility, streamlined processes and support.

Van Dusen (2011) reported student veteran issues at one college in the southwest. These issues included medical and financial challenges, responsibilities and demands on and off campus, and career concerns. These challenges increase the risk of veterans dropping out and raise the question of whether support systems, both on and off campus, are adequately used. Van Dusen noted that even when student veterans were aware of available sources, they were not using them. Van Dusen added that students acknowledged veteran-to-veteran peer support as significant (2011). Because of shared experiences as well as an inherent trust with other veterans, they find it easier to connect with other veterans than with other peers with less maturity and life experience (Rumann and Hamrick, 2010).

Kapell et al. (2017) examined student veterans’ participation in high-impact practices. In their exploration of engagement, Kapell et al. also discussed differences in this student population (2017). Some of these differences included service status (e.g., active duty, reserve, veteran). Service experiences are also different in that many have never experienced combat and their experience is much different than combat veterans exposed to grave situations and possibly suffered injuries, some of which may affect their college experience (Kapell et al., 2017). Student veterans are a diverse population with a wide range of experiences, needs, and expectations (Kapell et al., 2017). Kapell et al. discussed veterans as an underrepresented,
underserved student population. High-impact practices can positively influence outcomes and engagement. Some high-impact practices described by Kapell et al. include the following:

- first year seminars;
- writing-intensive courses;
- collaborative assignments;
- diversity/global learning experiences;
- internships; and
- capstone courses (Kapell et al., 2017, p. 31)

Student veterans programs exist to help veterans make the transition from the military to college. For instance, the Veterans Upward Bound program helps to prepare veterans prior to beginning college, developing academic skills in a program that provides instruction that prepares them for placement testing and college success. The program also includes remedial instruction that will help the student test high enough on placement tests so that remedial courses are not required in college (Kapell et al., 2017).

Another program, the Warrior-Scholar Project, is also designed to assist the student prior to starting college. The focus of this program is to develop a “social and emotional mindset” for college. This program uses an intense boot-camp held at various colleges. Students participate in workshops to develop skill for 14-16 hours a day. The boot camp approach is meant to provide a familiar atmosphere to learn skills that will make them academically successful (Kapell et al., 2017).

Successful veterans programs must have leadership support at the highest levels. Kapell et al. described a campus culture that recognizes and regards a veterans community with integrity (2017). Support services (academic and support) led by administrations have included:
• veteran specific courses;
• faculty and staff assisting student veterans with admission, financial and registration paperwork;
• student veterans organization;
• professional development for faculty, staff, and counselors; and
• veterans resource center (Kapell et al., 2017, p. 34)

A supportive campus culture may help veterans feel more connected to faculty, staff, and students. Kapell et al. emphasized the importance of a supportive campus environment to successfully implementing high impact practices to build academic success (2017). Kapell et al. found support services most used were academic related (2017). The military focus on mission and teamwork contributes to persistence to graduation. The new mission is to complete the degree, and some said they were not interested in unnecessary activities often seen as distractions (Kapell et al., 2017).

**Academic Advising**

Academic advising was identified as a campus resource used by student veterans (Zrioka, 2011). Cole (2013) discussed best practices for advising. Cole recognized student veterans as increasingly relevant as a diverse and unique student population. It is important for advisors to understand the transition experiences to better serve this student population. The GI Bill enables many veterans to enroll in college. However, the GI Bill can also be a source of stress. Often, student veterans do not know and understand the different types of benefits or how to use them to pay for school (Cole, 2013).

Transitioning from the military environment to college can present challenges, and academic advisors can help ease the transition and adjustment by understanding who these
students are and their transitional issues to know how to advise them (Cole, 2013). Establishing a rapport is critical and will help establish a connection that will help ease transitional challenges. Cole promoted an advising process that includes establishing relationships based on recognition of holistic needs (2013). Advisors also need to know and communicate available resources that will provide the support network to be successful.

With increasing numbers of veterans on campuses, academic advisors recognize veterans as a significant student population. Academic advisors are often one of the first contacts a student veteran has with the institution and can help establish their connection with the college. Establishing a meaningful relationship is imperative for their success and growth (Cole, 2013). To effectively advise, advisors need to know more about the background and experiences of veterans. An effective academic advisor can help veterans navigate their new environment and has positively affected student success and retention (Cole, 2013).

**Analysis**

Some early studies regarding veterans in higher education were criticized for exaggerating stereotypes and mental and physical challenges. Recent literature recognizes that veterans are a diverse population. They are non-traditional students with unique experiences and require different support services to support their complex transition issues and to meet a different set of needs than the traditional recent high school graduate. Adapted for student veterans, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs provides the lens to examine student veterans’ needs and the steps that institutions should take to meet those needs. The theoretical framework of Maslow’s hierarchy has significant parallels with student veterans’ needs that successful college programs should meet to help this population succeed to meet their academic goals.
Many veterans experience feelings of isolation on college campuses. A sense of belonging is essential to connect with peers and the institution to satisfy the basic need of social/belonging. Colleges can help by providing opportunities for these students to meet and form their own support. Veterans transition differently to college than high school students and institutions cannot support their transition in the same way. Researchers have noted an irritation with younger students as one of the challenges experienced by older veterans, especially in some community colleges where students view college as an extension of high school.

Unresolved issues remain. Why are so many veterans unsuccessful in college? Why are graduation and retention rates low while drop out and stop out rates are high? What do today’s veterans need to be academically successful and how do actual needs differ from perceived needs? There is a need to identify effective practices to build academic success in higher education. A study is needed to examine these and other questions from the perspective of the institutional representative that works most closely with this unique student population, the veterans coordinator.

Regardless of the long-established history with the military and the availability of veterans’ education benefits for veterans in higher education, Cook and Kim (2009) reported that minimal research was available on supporting military and veteran students. Molina and Morse (2015) expressed that empirical research and evidence regarding effective practices for supporting this student population was limited. Jenner (2017) noted that much of the research on veterans focused on transition and suggested that more research is needed on outcomes, graduation rates, transfer rates, and time to degree completion. Without sufficient research, veterans coordinators lack the empirical evidence needed to support proposals for veterans programs and services to improve student veteran academic success. Administrators at higher
education institutions lack clear research findings to justify the expenditure of funds to establish programs that could contribute to the persistence and degree completion of student veterans. This study seeks to add to the research and to fill a gap by exploring effective practices as perceived by the veterans coordinators at colleges and universities in the State of Tennessee.

Summary

This review of literature first explored the historical perspective of veterans and higher education and examined the changing relationship of the military and higher education, including a brief history of military veterans education benefits (GI Bill). A discussion of contemporary veterans in higher education followed and reviewed the demographics/characteristics and challenges of today’s student veterans. Next, the unique needs of student veterans were examined through the theoretical lens of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. This was followed by a discussion of student veteran academic success. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the veterans services offices and effective practices and a call for research.

The extant literature described the transition from military service to college campuses, as well as attempts by colleges and universities to provide services to improve the academic success of this underserved, underrepresented student population. Some institutions of higher education have implemented successful programs; this is reflected in higher persistence and graduation rates. However, many campus administrators do not know how to meet the needs of veterans, resulting in a gap in services. Insufficient research exists that examines the reasons for higher stop-out and dropout rates for veterans in higher education. Additional research is needed to further explore student veteran persistence, graduation, and time to degree completion. Furthermore, a gap in research exists that explores student veterans’ need for a sense of belonging on campus and a feeling of connectedness to the college that is essential to academic
success. This research examined veterans issues through the theoretical perspective of a hierarchy of needs. Moreover, this study sought to fill a gap in research by examining the connection between student veterans’ needs and effective practices for building academic success in higher education from the veterans coordinator’s perspective.

Studies indicated that a sense of belonging and feeling connected are critical to student veteran persistence (Ackerman et al., 2009; Bonar & Domenici, 2011; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This further supported social support and belonging as the most critical level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs adapted for student veterans (Accamando, 2017; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Research showed that institutions of higher education could do more to support student veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Heinemann, 2014; Morse, 2015). This study explored the academic success of student veterans from the unique perspective of the veterans coordinator. These are the experts that work directly with student veterans and are most knowledgeable about their academic performance as well as campus programs and services. Researchers described the lack of tracking and reporting of retention and completion data specific to veterans as an encumbrance to assessing support services and programs (Garrity, 2017). However, a veterans office with a dedicated point of contact (veterans coordinator) had a positive influence on academic success (Kapell et al., 2017; Student Affairs Council, 2009). The veterans coordinator is a valuable source of information, stability, and benefit processing as well as an initial connection to the campus at large. The veterans coordinator is the primary contact for veterans in higher education, and can also garner leadership support for and spearhead high impact practices that influence engagement and academic outcomes.


Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The enactment of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (effective August 1, 2009) made college more accessible and affordable for military service members and veterans that served after September 10, 2001. Some institutions of higher education implemented programs and services to ease the transition for the influx of student veterans on campus. Researchers described the parallels between Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and specific needs of veterans in higher education (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; France, 2016). Student veterans services and programs exist to help make the transition from the military to college by addressing their specific needs. The U.S. Department of Education described “8 Keys to Success” that included developing systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices (US Department of Education, n.d.). Kapell et al. examined high-impact practices that influence student outcomes and found that some practices effectively hindered the education experience (2017). Furthermore, Kapell et al. stressed that creating a climate supportive of veterans is essential to the effectiveness of high-impact programs implemented to address the needs of this underserved student population. Despite the financial assistance available as well as the campus programs and services, student veterans do not have a comparable rate of college enrollment and degree completions to non-veterans (Adkins, 2015; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Marcus, 2017). Research indicated that institutions of higher education can do more to provide support for student veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Molina and Morse, 2015).

Chapter Three described the purpose and methodology of this research study that explored the perceptions of veterans coordinators concerning powerful practices to build academic success of veterans in higher education. The purpose of the study was followed by a
brief methodological literature review and discussion of phenomenology. An explanation of the population and sampling was followed by a description of the instruments. Then, a precis of the research procedures was discussed in-depth, followed by an accounting for bias and trustworthiness and a brief discussion of ethical considerations of the research.

This phenomenological research sought to use qualitative methods to understand the perceptions of the veterans coordinators in building academic success of veterans in higher education. Veterans coordinators work closely with military service members and veterans at their institutions and have direct knowledge of student academic progress. The veterans coordinators also have extensive knowledge of the institution’s resources and available services as well as personal knowledge of individual accounts of veterans’ experiences on campus. The study examined perceptions of veterans coordinator participants based on the following research questions:

1. What are veterans coordinators’ perceptions regarding the effect of veterans services on student veteran academic success?
2. Which practices do veterans coordinators perceive as most effective for increasing student veteran academic success?
3. What dedicated student support services do veterans coordinators perceive as needed by veterans in higher education to successfully achieve their academic goals?
4. What gaps in services do veteran coordinators perceive in existing services within their institutions?
5. What are veterans coordinators’ perceptions regarding student veterans’ willingness or reluctance to ask for help and utilize available services?
Methodological Literature Review

Edmund Husserl launched the historical philosophical movement of phenomenology in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century (Groenewald, 2004). In the turmoil and uncertainty after World War I, Husserl philosophically viewed the external world as consisting of personal consciousness. In other words, certainty and reliability were rooted in one’s immediate experience and consciousness. Juxtaposed with the positivistic ideology of the time, Husserl based his philosophical method of phenomenology on reality as pure phenomena from which absolute data are derived (Groenewald, 2004). Martin Heidegger further developed the concept of “being there” or how a person perceives their world (Groenewald, 2004). According to Flynn and Korcuska (2018), phenomenological research seeks to discover the lived-experiences of participants. Flynn and Korcuska listed semi-structured interviews, collection of artifacts, and focus groups as appropriate methods of collecting data in phenomenological research (2018). This phenomenological qualitative approach is typical of the research methodology for examining student veteran issues in higher education (Accamando, 2017; Ackerman et al., 2009; Adkins, 2015; Kapell et al., 2017; Van Dusen, 2011).

Maxwell (1996) provided a synopsis of four components of qualitative methods as “the research relationship that you establish with those you study” (p.65), population sampling, data collection, and data analysis. How these components are conducted in the study affect the validity of conclusions drawn from the study (Maxwell, 1996). Researchers found that “purposeful sampling is essential for all phenomenological investigations, and all qualitative studies, for that matter” (Flynn and Korcuska, 2018, p. 44). For qualitative research, Creswell (2009) emphasized the purposeful selection of participants that will most contribute to the researchers understanding of the problem.
Methods

Population and sample.

The population for this study consisted of six participants selected using the purposeful sampling method. For effectiveness of the data collected, the criteria for selecting participants included participants from both public and private institutions of higher education, and both 2-year and 4-year institutions for maximum variation. As a criterion for selection, all participants were currently serving in a veterans coordinator capacity at their institution or in a commensurate position with comparable responsibilities serving the student veteran population.

Participants were further selected from professional relationships established at state conferences for veterans programs administrators. These experienced veterans coordinators are recognized as leaders at their institutions, as well as by peer members of the Tennessee Educational Association of Veterans’ Program Administrators. Participants represented institutions from a variety of geographical settings ranging from rural to metropolitan.

Description of instruments.

Creswell (2009) described the researcher as the key instrument of qualitative research. Another key instrument used for this research was a semi-structured interview guide. Data collection consisted primarily of open-ended, semi-structured interview questions, followed by probing questions to gain information rich data until reaching topic saturation. Interviews were conducted in person and audio recorded to assure accuracy in transcription. Field notes were used to capture impressions during each interview. Interviews informed the research questions by examining the participants’ perspectives of veterans services and student success. Furthermore, interviews provided detailed descriptions of participants’ perspective of the services needed by student veterans and whether their needs are met with services provided.
Artifacts focusing on student success data were collected during the course of the interviews at the six different sites. Data discussed at interviews included institutional statistics on student veteran persistence, retention, graduation, transfer, and time to completion. Sources of data included institutional and state reports. Additional artifacts encompassed information describing the institutional resources, programs, and services available to student veterans, as well as information regarding usage and effectiveness of those programs in relation to student veteran learning outcomes and academic success. Sources of information included institutional marketing materials and brochures, military/veterans brochures, and veterans web page on the institutional web site. Documents such as state reports on veterans academic progress were discussed during interviews and analyzed to determine alignments and contradictions among artifacts, participant’s perceptions, and institutional and state reports. Additional documents describing services were reviewed to gain insight and an indication, in part, of participant’s perspective on what services are needed. Similarly, college brochures promoting veterans programs and articles of student veterans success stories were reviewed. Interviews allowed the opportunity to clarify and expand on information from artifacts.

A focus group conducted via a Zoom recorded meeting provided deeper insight into participants perceptions and provided triangulation and member checks to strengthen trustworthiness. The theoretical framework allowed an in-depth look at the way the needs of student veterans are met at participants’ respective institutions and participants’ perceptions concerning gaps in services.

**Research Procedures and Time Period of the Study**

The research study was conducted during the 2018-2019 Academic Year. Upon approval of the dissertation proposal, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process commenced. The
proposal was submitted for IRB approval according to institutional policies and procedures. The IRB committee reviewed the proposed research methods to assess potential risk, and to assure that ethical research methods and steps were in place to protect the rights and welfare of human subjects. Accepted ethical principles require the protection of participants from harm, respect for participant’s right to privacy, and the right to be informed of the nature and purpose of the study (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014). Participants must also be informed of the right to give or withhold consent. An informed consent form (Appendix A) was developed to obtain written consent from participants in this research study. The informed consent form consisted of the following elements suggested by Creswell (2009).

- The researcher was identified. Veteran status and previous employment as a veterans coordinator were disclosed.
- The sponsoring institution, Carson-Newman University, was identified.
- The process of selecting participants was identified.
- The informed consent form identified the purpose of the research.
- Benefits for participating in the research were identified.
- The type and level of participant involvement were identified.
- The form included a notification of potential risks to the participant.
- Steps to protect the confidentiality of the participant to the extent possible were specified.
- Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and assured that he or she could withdraw at any time.
- Names of persons to contact with questions or additional information were provided (Creswell, 209).
After notification of IRB approval, a pilot study was employed by conducting a trial run of the interview guide (Appendix B). An independent veterans coordinator, not participating in the research study, assessed the interview guide for appropriateness, clarity, practicality, and bias. Necessary adjustments were completed prior to commencing personal interviews of participants.

To begin the interview phase of the research, an email soliciting potential participants went to specific individual veterans coordinators according to previously established criteria. Each participant was asked to participate in an interview approximately one hour in duration as well as a focus group at a later date to be determined. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form prior to the interview. Further consent to audio recording of the interview was verbally obtained. Participants were assured that no specific names of individuals or institutions would be used in the research and that privacy would be protected to the extent possible. The process of reflexivity was used to acknowledge and set aside interviewer bias. Six participants were interviewed using semi-structured and open-ended questions. The probe and pause strategy was used to gain more in-depth detail and insight. Interviewees were asked to describe their experiences and perceptions based on their expertise with student veterans and veterans services. The veterans coordinators interviewed are the experts most familiar with veterans services at their institutions and with the academic success of veterans enrolled. Their expertise added value to the study. Extensive field notes were taken during each interview to capture reflections and observations. Member checks were conducted with interviewees after interviews were transcribed and coded to verify the accuracy of the analysis.

Artifacts regarding student veteran academic progress were discussed while on site to gain a greater understanding of the institution’s practices for building academic success of
veterans (phenomenon). Discussions included reports indicating the number of veterans on campus and graduation and retention rates, as well as surveys indicating institutional support services and resources provided to student veterans. Artifacts consisted of military student brochures that contained information regarding programs and services for military students and veterans, material related to college credit for prior learning and military service, and veterans education benefit information. The institution’s website provided additional information concerning support for student veterans. Theoretical assumptions concerning the needs of student veterans informed decisions about the selection of appropriate artifacts pertinent to understanding the participant’s perceptions regarding veterans services and academic success. Probing questions during the interview served to clarify and verify information in the documents and to obtain further details.

To achieve triangulation, a focus group was conducted by Zoom after interviews were reviewed and analyzed. At the start, a report of preliminary findings was provided to all the focus group members in order to provide awareness of the data results and offer an opportunity for the research participants to clarify and explain data outcomes if needed. Additionally, this forum allowed the focus group to facilitate a member check to ensure trustworthiness. Verbal consent for video-recording was obtained from each focus group participant. Participants were asked to observe a non-attribution policy and maintain the confidentiality and privacy of all participants. The focus group included interview participants and provided in-depth information and insight into veterans coordinators’ experiences and perceptions of practices for building student veteran academic success, as well as gaps in services. The focus group allowed the opportunity to gain clarification and expansion of interview details and a different perspective.
through group interaction. Encompassing field notes recorded interactions within the focus group. The meeting was recorded in Zoom and transcribed.

**Data Analysis**

Creswell stated, “Phenomenological research uses analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of what Moustakas (1994) calls an essence description” (2009, p. 184). Prior to commencing data analysis, the data were organized and prepared for analysis. This included transcribing audio and video recordings of participant interviews and focus group. Transcripts and artifacts were read and reread for familiarization, making notes of thoughts and ideas. All data were sorted and organized by type and source, and a list of data was compiled (Ary et al., 2014). Researchers described three stages of qualitative analysis as: “1) familiarizing and organizing, 2) coding and reducing, and 3) interpreting and representing” (Ary et al., 2014, p. 513). A discussion of the analysis of each source of data follows.

**Interviews.**

Interviews of veterans coordinators at six colleges were conducted to learn their perceptions regarding veterans services and academic success. Veterans coordinators from both two and four-year colleges as well as public and private institutions were interviewed to obtain a broader sample. The way the needs of student veterans are met at their institution of higher education were viewed through the theoretical framework of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Interviews were conducted in-person and audio recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed by rereading transcripts, making notes, and labeling relevant words, phrases, and concepts using open coding. Through inductive data analysis, information and data were analyzed to identify themes and patterns regarding the effectiveness of specific services. The use of axial coding
helped identify relationships and organize multiple codes together into categories. Selective coding was used to determine which categories were most important and further define the connections between categories.

Participant interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were read and reread for familiarization. Through content analysis, codes were identified from the data. Ary et al. described the coding and reducing process as the “core of qualitative analysis” (2014, p. 515). Descriptive coding began by looking for patterns and labeling words, phrases, and ideas that appeared frequently in the transcripts; expressed similarities, differences, or relationships; or were of particular interest as related to the research questions or theoretical perspective. Labels taken from participant’s language were placed in quotation marks (Saldana, 2009). Using participant language is called in vivo coding. Unusual and unexpected words or ideas were also coded. Using constant comparison, new codes were added as additional transcripts and artifacts were reviewed. After reviewing the assigned codes, combining, and reducing similar codes by topic allowed the most important codes to emerge. From these, codes were then arranged by category or theme. Themes were then labeled (e.g., student veteran needs, veterans services, gaps in services, effective programs, new programs). These categories/themes were analyzed to determine those most relevant and how they are related or connected. According to Saldana, coding is not just about labeling; it is about connecting data and ideas (2009).

Second and third cycles of recoding with deep reflection served to refine themes and concepts (Saldana, 2009). Detailed and reflective analytic memoing throughout the coding process helped to solidify emergent themes and patterns, and to progress toward complex concepts and theory. These main themes and connections were described in detail and represent new knowledge from the perspective of veterans coordinators in this study.


Artifacts.

Collected artifacts included documentation describing an institution’s veterans services. Reports reflecting the number of veterans served, veterans’ graduation and retention rates, and other relevant data were discussed during interviews/site visits. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks informed the types of artifacts collected. Artifacts were organized by type and reviewed, making notes, and labeling relevant words, phrases, and concepts using open coding. Axial coding was used to identify relationships and organize multiple codes together into categories. The use of selective coding helped determine which categories were most important and further defined the connections between categories.

Descriptive coding was used to analyze artifacts. Several questions during the coding process were helpful in identifying and refining categories and themes. For instance:

- Why was an artifact or document selected?
- What does it mean?
- How does it relate to other data?

By using constant comparison while reviewing and codifying artifacts, patterns emerged that led to revealing connections and relationships among themes that lent insight to the interpretation of the data.

Focus group.

The Focus Group served to delve deeper than initial interviews and answer additional questions generated from the interview process. The focus group was conducted via recorded Zoom meeting. The recording was transcribed and coded using the same process as for interviews. All audio and video recordings and transcriptions were protected on personal laptop and audio recording devices and transferred to a secured flash drive.
Through the process of memoing, perceptions and ideas were noted throughout the coding exercise to identify evolving themes as well as new ideas relevant to the research questions. This included analysis and codifying extensive notes taken during the focus group meeting that reflected non-verbal behavior, tone, and responses and interactions not captured in the meeting transcript. Through content analysis and inductive coding, the focus group data was further analyzed to identify meaning and insight relevant to the research. Patterns and themes were compared to those derived from other sources of data (i.e., interviews and artifacts). Once the explication of the data was completed for each data source, common themes from all interviews, artifacts, and focus group as well as unique variances emerged. Connections or relationships between these themes/categories were identified and represent the essence of the study that contributed to the holistic insight and understanding of the research. Figure 3.1 depicts these connections identified through the analysis and coding process.

**Figure 3.1 Analysis and Coding Process**

*Figure 3.1. Source: (Saldana, 2009)*
Trustworthiness

As a veteran and former veterans coordinator, student veteran academic success in higher education is an ardent interest. Through the method of epoche, setting aside personal judgment and attitudes mitigated natural bias in the research. Ary et al. referred to this practice as “bracketing” (2014). Additionally, the strategy of reflexivity through self-reflective journaling was used to acknowledge and set aside interviewer bias, as well as the use of a peer debriefer/reviewer. An experienced researcher not involved with the study reviewed the research periodically and throughout the research process to check for bias in the data, interpretations, and findings. A pilot test of the interview guide also served to identify bias and assure clarity.

Throughout the research process; detailed descriptions of participant experiences, artifacts, and other data were captured sufficiently rich in context to ensure transferability. To further ensure trustworthiness of the research, the use of peer debriefing supported the credibility and confirmability of the research process. Interviews and collection of artifacts were ongoing throughout the process, whereas the focus group was conducted after interviews were completed and reviewed. This strategy of triangulation further supported the dependability and credibility of the research through the use of multiple forms of data collection. Additionally, member checks were conducted with the interview participants, giving members the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The research focus was on the individual perceptions and experiences of the participants, not on specific institutions of higher education. To ensure confidentiality, no mention of specific institutions or names of individual participants was included in the writing of the dissertation. Numbering was used throughout the research process to identify participants and for
organization of the data. The development and use of an informed consent form for signature provided full transparency and further protected participants rights.

Summary

In conclusion, a phenomenological qualitative research approach was used to assess the perceptions of veterans coordinators regarding effective practices to build academic success of veterans in higher education. Individual interviews, artifacts, and a focus group provided information rich data that was systematically analyzed. Deliberate measures ensured the validity and trustworthiness of the research.
Chapter 4: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to understand the perceptions of veterans coordinators for building academic success of veterans in higher education. In order to explore the most effective practices for serving veterans, it was necessary to first assess the needs of this student population and to explore effective programs and services that meet those needs. Data for the study were collected via interviews, collection of artifacts, and a focus group.

A pilot study provided the opportunity to conduct a trial run of the interview guide. An independent veterans coordinator, not participating in the research study, assessed the interview guide for clarity and bias prior to commencing personal interviews of participants. Suggestions incorporated into follow-up questions added clarity. A focus group provided triangulation and member checks to further strengthen trustworthiness. The focus group consisted of interview participants that confirmed the accuracy of the data analysis and provided in-depth answers to each of the five research questions (Appendix C). Considering the theoretical framework in addressing each question allowed a comprehensive look at the way the needs of student veterans are met at participants’ respective institutions and participants’ perceptions concerning gaps in services. An experienced researcher not involved with the study reviewed the research periodically and throughout the research process to check for bias in the data, interpretations, and findings. The reviewer affirmed findings from the coding and analysis process. Artifacts encompassed information describing the institutional resources, programs, and services available to student veterans. Artifacts reviewed consisted of institutional websites, brochures, flyers, and magazines that provided information for veterans and other military-connected students.
Participants for the study consisted of six veterans coordinators or directors selected using the purposeful sampling method. Participants were selected from both public and private institutions of higher education, and both 2-year and 4-year institutions. To achieve a broader cross section of data, participants also represented institutions from a variety of geographical settings ranging from rural to metropolitan.

**Background of Participants**

The background and experience of the veterans coordinators and directors were similar in that each of the six participants interviewed were seasoned professionals. Four of the six coordinators were veterans with more than six years of experience in the military. Three of the veterans were retired military. One veteran also had experience as a “VA work-study” while using the Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits prior to their current position in veterans services. The VA work-study is a student work-study position funded by the U.S. Veterans Administration. Although two of the participants had no military experience, they had vast experience in higher education with more than 15 years in various roles. One had 32 years in higher education, and one was from a military family with one member currently serving. Five of the six participants were in positions dedicated solely to veterans services as either a coordinator or director, while it was a secondary responsibility for one participant. Access to leadership was another commonality of the participants. Five of the six participants reported directly to a Provost or Vice-President or just one level below (e.g., Assistant Vice President or Registrar), while one participant reported to a senior veterans coordinator.

**Research Questions**

The study examined perceptions of veterans coordinator participants based on the following research questions:
1. What are veterans coordinators’ perceptions regarding the effect of veterans services on student veteran academic success?

2. Which practices do veterans coordinators perceive as most effective for increasing student veteran academic success?

3. What dedicated student support services do veterans coordinators perceive as needed by veterans in higher education to successfully achieve their academic goals?

4. What gaps in services do veteran coordinators perceive in existing services within their institutions?

5. What are veterans coordinators’ perceptions regarding student veterans’ willingness or reluctance to ask for help and utilize available services?

Interview questions were designed to elicit in-depth dialogue regarding perceptions of the unique needs of the student veteran population and the effective practices to meet those needs that positively influence academic success. The first five questions in the interview guide solicited discussion that described the coordinator’s role, background, and experience as well as organizational and leadership construct. This provided a more in-depth understanding of the discussion that followed. The remaining 13 questions facilitated dialogue to address the research questions and key issues from the literature. Participants answered the following 18 questions.

1. Tell me about your experience and background for your position working with veterans and military students. (Length of time in position, education level, military service, and experience in higher education)

2. Tell me about your role as veterans coordinator (or other title).

3. Is your position dedicated to veterans services or is that an additional duty?
4. Describe the organizational and leadership construct related to veterans responsibilities within the institution? Separate veterans services office or within another office?
5. Is there a collaborative effort with other campus staff to support veterans or is “everything veteran” referred to you?
6. Describe how your institution assess the needs of student veterans on your campus(es)?
7. Tell me more about what you perceive to be the specific needs of veterans on your campus?
8. What are your perceptions regarding the effect of veterans services on student veteran academic success? Tell me a story about an example.
9. What dedicated student support services and programs do you perceive as needed by veterans in higher education to meet their needs and successfully achieve their academic goals?
10. Tell me about programs and services available to the student veterans on your campus?
11. Which dedicated student support services and practices do you perceive as most effective for increasing student veteran academic success (defined as persistence and completion)?
12. What do you perceive as gaps in existing services within your institution?
13. The institution has invested resources in services for student veterans. How do you perceive student veterans’ willingness or reluctance to ask for help from those services?
14. How frequently and effectively do you perceive that veterans take advantage of the opportunities offered by these programs and services?
15. Why do you think student veterans may be underutilizing services and how would you propose to resolve this?
16. Can you give me an example of practices that you perceive as not as effective in supporting student veterans academic goals and success?

17. Can you give me an example of a veteran’s experience on campus that reflects the primary impediment to effectively serving student veterans needs on campus?

18. What do you perceive as the primary key to an institution’s successful support to its student veteran population?

**Analysis and Coding**

Thematic analysis allowed a systematic identification of significant patterns and themes through the use of open, axial, and selective coding of the data. An inductive approach to data analysis and identifying themes linked to the data ensured that the findings and results were data-driven. A theoretical framework of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs informed the analysis of themes associated with the research questions. This framework allowed an in-depth look at how the needs of veterans are met at participants’ institutions and participants’ perceptions regarding gaps in services. The perceptions and lived experiences of the veterans coordinators and directors were central to the data analysis for this phenomenological research study. For ethical considerations and privacy, all participants are referred to as participant, coordinator, or he.

**Findings**

The initial open coding process produced 57 individual codes. Further inductive analysis using axial coding revealed six significant categories. These categories included transitioning and acclimation, faculty and staff training, connection and belonging, academic support, leadership support, and dedicated veterans coordinator. Finally, a selective coding process revealed the most relevant categories and their connections. This resulted in three main themes
described by the participants as related to the theoretical framework. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 depict the connections and themes identified through the analysis and coding process.
### Table 4.1
**Example of Analysis and Coding Process for Question Three:** What dedicated student support services do veterans coordinators perceive as needed by veterans in higher education to successfully achieve their academic goals?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selections from Participants (Raw Data)</th>
<th>Open Coding</th>
<th>Axial Coding</th>
<th>Selective Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- An orientation for our military students</td>
<td><strong>Perceived Needs</strong></td>
<td>Transitioning</td>
<td>Transition Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Acclimated back into civilian life</td>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- “I don’t want to be around all those 18-year-old’s”</td>
<td>Getting acclimated.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fear factor is there and so the gentle encouragement is one of the number one thing</td>
<td>Adj. to 18Yr old’s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Certify the benefits for veterans and dependents</td>
<td>Adjusting to generational &amp; maturity differences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A dedicated mental health counselor</td>
<td>Transition/encouragement.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Identifying and understanding the credits that they’ve already got</td>
<td>Fear of unknown.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial aid/VA benefits.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mental health resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying transfer &amp; PLA credit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Student Veterans Club is a student-run, student-led organization</td>
<td>Student Veteran Organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- It was just such a big disconnect that they feel very out of place</td>
<td>Place/Space for veterans to connect.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Trying to bridge that gap. So not to just isolate them, but make them more together because they can learn from each other</td>
<td>Didn’t feel welcome or fit in. Connect/build relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Fac/Staff Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Flexibility and understanding from the faculty</td>
<td>Flexibility and understanding from faculty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- It’s vital that any veteran services does faculty/staff training</td>
<td>Accessible tutoring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- They need tutoring, and they get out of class go to their job and can’t come back because tutoring is down to 5 pm</td>
<td>Assist with resume writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- very well received, especially the resume workshops</td>
<td>#1Leadership support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Dedicated service, I mean school certifying official [is] a no-brainer</td>
<td>Career Services/resume’</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#1 No brainer – dedicated veterans services SCO</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Integration &amp; Achievement</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Academic</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Dedicated Coord/Staff</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Table 4.2
Example of Analysis and Coding Process for Question Two: Which practices do veterans coordinators perceive as most effective for increasing student veteran academic success?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selections from Participants (Raw Data)</th>
<th>Open Coding</th>
<th>Axial Coding</th>
<th>Selective Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-My primary role is to certify veterans and dependents using GI Bill benefits</td>
<td>Most Effective Services: Benefit Certification</td>
<td>Transition Benefits</td>
<td>Transition Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-This center is a success -They didn't feel like they fit in kind of thing. So, fortunately we were able to satisfy that need with this center.</td>
<td>Veterans Resource Center</td>
<td>Connection/ Belonging Space</td>
<td>Connection/ Belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-The collaboration piece between my office and faculty the professors -Faculty staff trainings that we do twice a year. Educate them on our population of students, the challenges, and things they need to know -Great because we're doing that 100% advising -The tutoring piece is a big thing -Then just someone that's right here that's going to walk that with them. -We also require every new student to take the college success course and within that course they learn about their degree works, they learn about the transfer credits if they have any all of that kind of stuff. So, it is really good -You’ve got to hire the right kind of people with the right heart and want to serve</td>
<td>Collaboration w/ faculty: Being intentional to establish relationships with faculty Faculty &amp; staff training Academic Advising Required Tutoring Students having someone to go to/advocacy &amp; accountability Require College Success Course</td>
<td>Faculty/Staff Education Academic</td>
<td>Integration &amp; Achievement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants described three main themes related to the theoretical framework. The themes included transition assistance, connection and belonging, and integration and
achievement. The perceived needs of student veterans and the effective practices to fulfill those needs are discussed in the context of these themes.

**Transition Assistance**

Maslow’s hierarchical levels included physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). His theory proposed that one’s basic needs must be met prior to moving on to the next level of needs. Researchers found significant parallels between Maslow’s theory and meeting the unique needs of student veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Figure 2.5 in Chapter 2 depicted these parallels. As with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (adapted for student veterans), institutions must meet fundamental basic needs for student veterans to move to the next level. Coordinator 2 described the primary basic need for student veterans as “getting acclimated back into civilian life and getting in to that hang of it.” He perceived that some of the basic needs are related to family, daycare, housing, and outside pressure. Acclimating to classroom demands with 18-year-old students also presented a challenge. Coordinator 3 further reinforced this feeling:

> So, not only do they have the age gap, but their life experiences and things that they’ve seen, the things that they’ve done, they’ve been in the workforce, they’ve experienced military life, some combat... the level of life experience is on a whole different level.

Coordinator 5 added, “We get a lot of people that six months ago were in Afghanistan or Iraq and now they are sitting next to an 18 year [old] that’s whining about a paper being due, or a cracked cell phone... so those challenges of transitioning back. So, addressing transition on the frontend really helps a lot of our folks that kind of overcome it.”

Another commonly stated challenge in the transition process was transfer credits or Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). Many veterans have earned college credits from a myriad of
institutions during their military service. They also bring military education, training, and experience that often transfers in as college credit if evaluated properly.

Coordinator 3 stated his/her primary role is to “certify the benefits for veterans and dependents and spouses, ensuring their enrollment and fees get submitted to the VA and that they’re paid on time.” He further stated:

They’re living on this. . . . I was living on this between the grants and scholarships and my BAH [Basic Allowance for Housing] I got from the GI Bill, that was my income. So, it’s very important that we get that as soon as possible because they’re depending on this.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill not only provides funding for tuition and fees but also provides a housing allowance that is an immediate source of income. Processing veterans VA education benefits in an accurate and timely manner is a primary basic need for veterans to have a sense of financial security during this transition. Coordinator 1 named the primary key to an institution’s successful support to its student veteran population as having “someone solely responsible . . . a dedicated position, a dedicated individual to coordinate all those activities under that umbrella.”

Coordinator 3 described their veterans services office as a “one stop for veterans.” Veterans can go there for anything they need, whether education related or not, and they will help “get them where they need to go” for resources or assistance. This was echoed by Coordinator 4 who stated:

I am pretty much a one stop shop. . . . everybody knows me. I work closely with Admissions, especially with residency, DD 214s, residency immunizations, all that kind of stuff and you know just getting student issues like students from overseas email me that they need some extra few things, and they need some help. And so, I am the liaison, if you will, between the students and the different departments.
Coordinator 4 agreed that encouragement during the transition process is one of the primary needs. He asserted that a fear of the unknown because they do not know what to expect, and facing so many choices (e.g., multiple colleges and programs to choose from) can be daunting. Accessibility services were also an important aspect of acclimating to college life. Students with TBIs [Traumatic Brain Injuries] are allowed to bring their support dogs on campus. Scribes are provided to take notes and has proved very successful.

Coordinator 5 stated that he is “personally responsible for the professional, academic, and spiritual development” of veterans, dependents, and spouses. Furthermore, “it’s not just about getting the best benefits [and] those types of things, it’s about getting the right kind of people in here and help them succeed in their academic journey.”

Coordinator 6 asserted that the financial piece and getting their VA benefits was one of the primary needs during the transition to campus. Coordinators noted that newcomer briefings, orientations, and transition courses for veterans are services implemented to meet the need for transition assistance. Coordinator 5 stated, “We see the people that attend that transition course in the frontend [and] 99.9% have graduated. That’s pretty impressive. And not only they graduate, they graduate with almost a 3.8 GPA.”

Members of the focus group added that expectation management was crucial. Students should clearly understand the expectation that they will be academically successful. Student veterans must have a clear understanding of what is expected of them; they need to know about the financial and VA benefit piece so there are no surprises. They need to know what costs are covered by the VA, the timing of their VA payments, and the policies for deferred payments. Effective VA benefit counseling should be part of the initial transition assistance.
In summary, coordinators agreed that the initial transition assistance to new student veterans is essential for a smooth transition from military to college life. Institutions must meet fundamental basic needs for student veterans to move to the next level. These needs include resources for health concerns, encouragement through the acclimation process, assistance with the bureaucracies of admissions requirements, understanding military education benefits, and assessing military education and experience for college credit. Support at this level is necessary for managing expectations and allows the student to focus on academic requirements, and a dedicated position is essential to coordinate all those activities, with emphasis on hiring the right people.

Connection and Belonging

Coordinator 3 described the number one need for veterans as a place for veterans to go, “they feel very out of place... very disconnected.” He further stated:

Sometimes they might not feel like they might be able to express their opinions in class because they feel very isolated. But they can come here and then let that out. So, I think it plays a huge role in their success here, their experience here and their want to continue. Because I feel like a lot of times the veterans will come and they'll start class and they'll feel so isolated. . . I remember my first semester here, I was like, “Why did I start back in college? I don't want to do this.” And then when I became a work study, I got more involved with the veterans around the Vet Center and the student veteran group, it was a lot more welcoming. And you could look at my transcript and see the difference between the two. So, it has a lot to do with it.

Coordinator 4 added that many of the student veterans start making connections and building relationships when they meet in the veterans services office. Coordinator 6 also noted
that “a place for them to connect with other military veterans which we have in our veterans center” was one of the most needed practices for serving veterans. He further stated:

I’m not sure if I can quantify that exactly but based on the research . . . there’s a correlation between a student feeling connected to the campus . . . that feeling connected and belonging that actually helps them believe that they can be successful. That’s a key huge input to be successful as the students believe that they are going to be successful.

Moreover, Coordinator 6 emphasized that “having the center to go to, knowing they have a Veterans Services here [and] knowing that they are supported, I think it helps them to be more successful.” In describing the effects of veterans services on veterans’ academic success, Coordinator 6 explained, “it’s been a common scene, there’s been several students . . . [that] were struggling but then through their connection with our Veterans Center, they received help.” He asserted that helping them get the tutoring they needed or even just encouraging them through personal communication provided needed support. Coordinator 6 went on to say:

I’ve seen them like struggle but then be successful. So, I can’t say I’m sure but I kind of wonder would they be successful without that and so . . . I think maybe not, you know, [I] think it made a difference.

Five of the six coordinators stated there is a dedicated space for veterans on campus. One coordinator noted lack of space as a gap in their institution’s services for veterans. Coordinator 6 described the Veterans Success Center, commonly known as a lounge, as an area for veterans and military family members to study, socialize and relax, as well as learn about the resources and services available to them. He also discussed the student veterans club that is a “student-run, student-led organization” with a faculty advisor who is also a veteran.
In summary, coordinators affirmed previous research findings that indicated veterans may experience a feeling of isolation on college campuses (Accamando, 2017; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). A veterans center on campus can facilitate making connections with other veterans and building relationships that may fulfill the need for a sense of belonging and feeling connected that is critical to student veteran persistence. Findings supported social support and belonging as a crucial level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs adapted for student veterans (Accamando, 2017; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). The goal is not to isolate veterans, but to facilitate connections through the veterans center to the campus at large. A veterans center on campus provides a place for veterans to go not only to connect to other veterans, but also to find support and connection to other resources available. Findings reflecting the success experienced by participants supported existing literature that described the connection between student persistence and sense of belonging on college campuses (Cooper, 2009). Student engagement may facilitate developing a sense of belonging and a connectedness to the institution. Student veterans organizations on campus have had mixed results. Some campuses experience successful participation. Other campuses’ efforts to initiate similar organizations have failed. Student veterans often have family and work responsibilities that prohibit participation due to scheduling. Some veterans may appreciate having a place to go to meet other veterans and gain access to services but are not interested in participating in a social organization. The veterans center is accessible on their schedule and provides multiple resources and connections to the broader campus community.

**Integration and Achievement**

“Integration and Achievement” is indicative of the Integration level of the Student Veterans Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 2.5) which exemplifies persistence and achievement.
Coordinator 3 gave an example of one student who came in because he was struggling with classes. They were able to help him get tutoring, and more importantly, were just there to listen and talk it through with him when he was ready to quit. Another student had used all of their VA education benefits and they helped them find other scholarships so that the student could continue another semester to graduate.

Coordinator 4 asserted that they do see the effect of veterans services on student academic success. He emphasized that “having a person here” to meet with students up front to encourage them and to explain the process of using VA benefits and other college requirements is effective. Coordinator 4 stated, “They are more successful than the person that is faxing paperwork from somewhere else.” Coordinator 4 also indicated that a new requirement for veterans to meet with an advisor as soon as they apply has also been effective, stating, “We have turned around quite a bit.” Additionally, every new student is required to take a college success course where they benefit from learning how to manage their degree requirements, transfer credits, and to use the resources available to them. Accessible tutoring was another commonly perceived need. One coordinator arranged for outside contracted tutoring services that are available to the students when they need them. Coordinator 5 expressed, “They need tutoring, and they get out of class go to their job and can’t come back because tutoring is down at 5 pm.” Additionally, access to mental health resources was perceived as needed for some of the student veterans. Coordinator 5 stressed that “mental health counselling has got to be deliberate in how you approach it.”

Coordinator 5 also discussed the importance of mentoring programs and working with students to resolve any issues that may arise, whether academic or faculty related or some other issue. He also stressed the importance of providing assistance as students transition to the work
force. Coordinators discussed partnering with career services for resume workshops, job fairs, and industry partnerships. Resume workshops were especially successful. Members of the focus group conveyed that both campus and community partnerships contribute to students’ academic success.

“Faculty and staff” is another commonly recognized aspect that can have a positive effect on student veteran academic success. Coordinator 5 noted that “understanding their challenges and the needs they have, I think is a first step for any organization.” Asking, “how can you better serve them, what are some of the obstacles?” Younger academic faculty can be another challenge. Some have very little life experience, and their experience has been in the classroom on a college campus. Coordinator 5 noted that:

They went from undergrad, to grad, to PhD and now they’re teaching. . . . [Some] have challenges in terms of talking to a 30-year-old that’s lived something. . . . [and] understanding that our students are not necessarily at the same level as the 18, 19, 20-year students that they traditionally have in class.

Coordinators perceived the relationships developed by being heavily engaged with faculty as an asset. Coordinator 5 asserted that it takes time and effort to develop those relationships and gain credibility on campus by presenting the veterans coordinator as a resource for faculty. He expressed how collaboration and being able to educate faculty and develop that relationship is a big factor; “it’s vital that veterans services offices collaborates and does faculty/staff training.” Coordinator 2 added that faculty are sometimes not clear on what to do. Coordinator 6 agreed that another area (or need) to address is faculty flexibility and understanding regarding VA appointments and military obligations of the students still serving.
Coordinator 6 stated that he was hired by the Vice President of Student Affairs to focus on the student veterans and on increasing their retention and graduation. He stated:

Part of our mission is to graduate students, but along with that comes generally supporting students, being there for them, interacting with them, communicating to them, knowing that they have someone here that’s working on their behalf if they might have issues. Also, really acting as a conduit to put them in touch with the resources, the many resources we have for them at the college.

Coordinator 6 spoke of academic challenges and helping students get connected with tutoring resources. The veterans services office also assisted students dealing with personal or mental health issues with contacting school or VA counselors. As the veterans coordinator, he also established relationships with the military community to maintain awareness of other resources. Additionally, a veteran support committee chaired by the coordinator meets monthly and provides a collaborative forum for representatives from other departments regarding support to student veterans. Coordinator 6 named academic advising, by advisors informed on veterans matters, as one of the services most needed for academic success. He perceived the number one service needed as a person solely dedicated to veterans services and the certification of VA benefits.

Researchers agreed that students’ social and academic integration is also important for persistence and achievement (Cooper, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Tinto, 1993). Coordinators described opportunities for recognition and visibility including athletic and other events that spotlight veterans on campus. Coordinators also discussed special recognition of student veterans at graduation services. Some wear special stoles or chords, and some are presented with a special coin.
In summary, participants affirmed a positive effect of veterans services on student academic success. After students’ needs at the social/belonging level are met, the next level to emerge on the student veteran hierarchy of needs (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011) is social and academic integration. Researchers expressed the importance of social and academic integration for persistence and achievement (Cooper, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Tinto, 1993). Equipping student veterans upfront with the knowledge and resources they need to succeed is key to persistence and achievement. Faculty and staff can have a positive effect on veterans’ academic success. One coordinator stated, “it’s vital that veterans services offices collaborates [with faculty] and does faculty/staff training.” The role of the dedicated veterans coordinator goes beyond transition and benefits. One coordinator stated, “Along with that comes generally supporting students . . . interacting with them, communicating to them, knowing that they have someone here that’s working on their behalf.”

**Perceived Gaps in Services**

Although senior leadership support was often described as a key to successfully supporting veterans, both middle-level and senior leadership were sometimes listed as gaps or impediments to providing needed support. While some coordinators obtained alternative funding through grants and other sources, some coordinators were limited by funding gaps for veterans programs and services. One coordinator asserted that a gap existed in their advising and the whole enrollment process. He offered that more training with the advising team and enrollment folks to help them understand the unique perspective of student veterans may help reduce the gap in the onboarding process for veterans. Some coordinators described a gap in administrative investment in veterans programming.
Faculty and staff support and collaboration were consistently noted as keys to successful support for academic success. However, coordinators also regarded specific training to inform faculty and staff of the unique needs and requirements of veterans as crucial. Faculty may be required to be more flexible when veterans are faced with scheduling of VA medical appointments and/or military duty and deployments. One coordinator shared that even when training was offered, few faculty members participated; and those were usually the same ones that are already understanding and supportive of veterans. Developing relationships with faculty takes time; but collaboration on the front end can alleviate many emerging issues. Class scheduling and alternative methods of instruction could also be considered to accommodate adult students.

Some institutions have made great strides in the onboarding process for veterans through outreach and deliberate efforts to continuously review and improve policies and practices. Some coordinators described a gap in the enrollment and advising processes, as well as in evaluating transfer credits and prior learning assessment of military education and experience. Coordinators acknowledged a statewide effort to develop standards for prior learning assessment but asserted that the focus is on senior enlisted ranks in the army, which does not describe the majority of their student veteran population. Coordinator 3 was optimistic that once this effort is in the works, that it might branch out and help more students. He further stated, “But I'd say that would probably be the number one need that I see.” Coordinators also noted a gap in career services and support to assist veterans in preparing for and finding employment. Some coordinators discussed a gap in consistency of services offered for veterans, as well as in reaching veterans and communicating services available.
Coordinators generally reported that veterans were willing to ask for help and use services if they knew about them. Even though there may be some reluctance, one coordinator noted a misconception that veterans were not willing to ask for help. Life outside campus and scheduling conflicts were the reasons most often noted for not using resources. Coordinator 3 expressed, “from my experience and I was an adult, I had a family and children. Yeah, my wife worked. I had to go pick up my kids. So, if I didn't have class, I had to go home. I couldn't stay around campus. He further stated, “it would've been nice, but I just I wasn't able to do that. And I know a lot of students are adults and they have those families.” This is consistent with prior research findings that veterans often have family and other responsibilities outside campus that limit participation outside the classroom (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

In summary, participants agreed that institutions can do more to support the veteran population on campus. Some coordinators named more leadership support and collaboration with faculty as areas with room for improvement. Coordinators also experienced a gap in funding for veterans programs. Participants agreed that prior learning assessment of military education and experience for credit was a primary gap in services. Coordinators indicated administrative commitment and investment are key to effectively reducing and/or eliminating gaps in serving this often-underserved student population.

Participants expressed that students indicated varying degrees of willingness to ask for help or use existing resources. The general consensus was that veterans are willing to ask for help and use resources if they know they are available, and the services or resources are actually needed.

**Keys to Success**

Coordinator 5 stated, “I think every school is unique and challenging in its own regard.”
All coordinators interviewed agreed that someone dedicated solely to veterans services was essential to successfully supporting this unique and diverse student population. Coordinator 5 further emphasized, “You’ve got to hire the right kind of people. . . . I think they need to be veterans, I think they need to be advocates with the right heart that’s going to serve them.”

When planning veterans services and programs, Coordinator 3 stated that consistency was key to serving the majority of the population. He further added, “I think it has a lot to do with trying to find out what their needs actually are versus stuff they don’t really care much about or they don’t have much concern outside of class.”

Regarding the primary key to the institution’s successful support to its student veteran population, Coordinator 6 asserted:

I think the key would be buy-in from faculty and staff . . . it’s the collaborative effort. I think the [veterans] support committee is really one of the key factors. Another one I would say would be [the] academic side, getting them on board. Of course, having the President that supports what we do is good.

Coordinator 6 further emphasized that leadership is key, not only at the level of the President, but also, the Vice Presidents, and “having the deans on board is key.”

Coordinator 2 attributed their success in supporting their veterans population to institutional support. He further stated, “They really allowed us to kind of figure this out . . . and then when they got in, they were fully in.” He further expressed that they moved forward with “courage, boldness, and wisdom in action.” Coordinator 2 added that they focus on “anything that would prevent them from being successful,” offering services like legal clinics and math and writing labs in the center. This also includes career services. He expressed that veterans services extend to all military-connected students to include dependents and family members.
Coordinator 2 described one effect of veterans services on academic success as improved GPAs, stating graduates have gone “from 7 to 39 cumulative 4.0’s for full-time undergraduates.”

Members of the focus group asserted that clear, transparent communication up front is essential. Each student has individual unique needs to address. Coordinator 2 stressed the need for expectation management and noted that “students who know how to game plan are more engaged and more successful.” Two coordinators also noted the value of attending state and national forums to stay informed of collective knowledge relative to serving veterans.

In summary, participants consistently expressed that a position dedicated solely to veterans services was key to successfully supporting the student veteran population. One coordinator emphasized hiring the right people. Veterans services should be consistent to reach a majority of the veteran population. Expectation management and clear communication were also noted as essential. Support from the campus community, including faculty and all levels of leadership, is salient to providing effective services for increasing student veteran academic success.

Final Analysis

The first research question asked for participants’ perceptions regarding the effect of veterans services on student veteran academic success. Participants claimed a direct correlation and positive influence of services on student academic success. Coordinators credited a significant increase in GPAs to improved services provided for veterans. Similarly, participants also saw increased retention and graduation rates, especially for those students who participated in a transition course or college success course. Additionally, students that had personal contact with the veterans coordinators for advisement and encouragement were more successful. A Veterans Services office or a veterans center helps alleviate stress and feelings of isolation by
having someone to talk to about difficulties. Furthermore, effective and timely benefit counseling and processing ensure students receive timely payments and affords a sense of financial well-being and security that allows them to focus on academic issues. Findings supported previous research results that indicated implementing best practices can positively influence the college experience immeasurably (Dillard & Yu, 2016).

The second question asked participants which practices they perceived as most effective for increasing student veteran academic success. Findings revealed that many of the effective services for improving persistence and achievement were academic related. Participants were consistent in citing tutoring and academic advising as effective practices, especially when student veterans were required to meet with an advisor prior to registering each semester. A transition or college success course also led to improved student success. Coordinators unanimously asserted that educating faculty and staff about unique veterans issues was an important factor in veterans’ academic success. This finding supported previous literature assertions that educating faculty and staff on military culture, transition issues, misconceptions, and resources is key to creating a supportive network of informed advocates (Dillard & Yu, 2016; Drew et al., 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). Furthermore, collaboration with faculty and staff as well as being intentional in establishing relationships with faculty was another effective practice contributing to success. Coordinator 5 stated, “I think that collaboration piece, being able to educate the faculty and developing that relationship is probably the biggest factor because we can catch things early.” Additionally, findings revealed that having a dedicated space for veterans to go was a factor in their success. The veterans center was viewed not only as a place for veterans to meet and socialize with other veterans, but also effectively served as a place to find and connect with resources and support. Likewise, a dedicated coordinator position
consistently emerged as an effective practice and a primary key to success. This position serves as a source of encouragement, information, support, advocacy, and advisement. Hiring the right people who will serve veterans and help them succeed is crucial. It is significant to note that as institutions establish a dedicated veterans coordinator position, it is common to hire an experienced veteran that can relate to student veterans through shared or similar experiences and culture. Veterans are often familiar with working with the VA and/or using VA GI Bill benefits. In addition to hiring the right people, it is also vital that the position reside at the coordinator level or above, as were the study participants; this will assure that veterans issues can be raised to the appropriate level of administration and not get bogged down under bureaucracies and departments with no vested interest in the success of student veterans. Some participants experienced success with offering mental health resources, orientations and newcomers briefings, textbook programs, special tutoring sessions, and career services such as resume workshops. Findings revealed that developing campus and community partnerships also contributed to students’ success.

The third question asked participants what dedicated student support services they perceived as needed by veterans in higher education to successfully achieve their academic goals. Perceived student needs included assistance with acclimation to civilian and campus life and with adjusting to generational and maturity differences. One coordinator stated, “the level of life experience is on a whole different level.” This finding is consistent with the literature that described feelings of alienation that many veterans experience on college campuses (Dalcher, 2014). Although the maturity level and experience may help prepare veterans for academic rigor, some veterans may find it easier to connect with other veterans than with other peers with less maturity and life experience (Rumann and Hamrick, 2010). Vacchi (2012) disagreed that
veterans would have trouble transitioning to college, as the military service is a major transition in and of itself. However, he did recognize they often experience significant cultural and social differences. Participants expressed the need for an individual dedicated to coordinating veterans services and activities to meet student needs. Additionally, participants cited the need for a dedicated space and student veterans organization to afford opportunities for making connections with students with similar experiences and maturity levels. Other perceived support services needed included an orientation for new student veterans, accessible tutoring and mental health resources, and more effective evaluation of transfer credits and military experience for prior learning credit. Additionally, faculty and staff education, accurate and timely benefit processing, and career services such as job fairs and resume workshops are needed to help students succeed.

The fourth question asked participants what gaps in services they perceived in existing services within their institutions. Findings from this study supported existing research in the literature which indicated that institutions of higher education can do more to provide support for student veterans (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Heinemann, 2014; Morse, 2015). Effective veterans services programs are constantly rethinking and revising policy and processes to find what they can do better. Answers concerning gaps in services varied amongst participants from different institutions. Where some institutions experienced success, others expressed gaps or room for improvement. Administrative commitment and investment in veterans programs, leadership support at all levels, and funding for veterans programs are all key to effectively reducing and/or eliminating gaps in serving this often-underserved student population. Perceived gaps included frontend transition assistance with enrollment processes and advising, benefit counseling, and evaluation of transfer credits and credit for prior learning from military education and experience. Some participants indicated the absence of a space for
veterans or a dedicated veterans services position as gaps. Additional gaps in services included effective collaboration with faculty, faculty and staff training, and consistency in services offered. Knowing the unique needs of the institution’s veteran population is key to providing the resources and services needed. As one coordinator stated, “it has a lot to do with trying to find out what their needs actually are versus stuff they don’t really care much about or they don’t have much concern outside of class.”

The fifth question asked participants for their perceptions regarding student veterans’ willingness or reluctance to ask for help and utilize available services. Participants’ responses ranged from very willing to somewhat reluctant to ask for help and from very frequent to the middle/neutral range for using services. One coordinator noted a misconception that veterans are reluctant to ask for help. The consensus was that veterans were willing to ask for and use services if they knew about them. Life outside campus and scheduling conflicts were reasons indicated for not using resources. One coordinator described a trust factor built from initial contact with the student and through an ongoing relationship, and a trust that they will know how to help them. Similarly, another coordinator stated, “They know we are here but [it] still takes time to build their credibility and being involved and being around them.” This also varies from student to student. Some students frequently use resources while others are more reluctant.

Participants noted that some students use the veterans centers very frequently. Participants stated that the initial need for transition assistance included expectation management. This supports the Student Affairs Leadership Council findings (2009) that veterans may experience the personal challenge of expectation management. Student veterans need to know what is expected of them as well as recognize their own limits and ask for help when needed. The literature expressed that veterans are reluctant to ask for help, whether for physical disability or classroom instruction
(Dalcher, 2014). The military culture of self-reliance and not wanting to be seen as weak may cause some reluctance.

**Summary**

Unique needs of student veterans were explored through the theoretical lens of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. At the highest level, self-actualization represents achieving one’s full potential. This translates to a fulfilled potential of their civilian self for veterans in higher education. Furthermore, this qualitative research study examined the most effective veterans services and programs to meet those unique needs by interviewing the veterans coordinators and directors with direct knowledge of this diverse student population. A focus group discussed initial findings and further elaborated on effective practices and gaps in services. The study also examined printed and physical artifacts as well as veterans information on institutional websites.

The research data generated three significant themes that represented veterans’ perceived needs and the most effective practices for increasing student veterans’ academic success. These themes correlated to transition assistance, connection/belonging, and integration and achievement. Coordinators perceived a positive effect of the services on academic success. Coordinator 6 stated there is “a direct correlation to it. I think there’s a positive impact on it.” Coordinators expressed that retention and graduation rates are “going really well” and that both retention and graduation numbers are up. Additionally, student veteran GPAs are on par with the traditional student population. There was a consensus that veterans were willing to ask for and use services and other opportunities if they knew about them. Coordinator 5 surmised, “I think that we have to be deliberate in preparing our students not just with a degree at hand, but ready to walk in to the next phase of life.”
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Introduction

The veteran population on college campuses has continued to grow exponentially since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Some institutions anticipated a surge in veteran enrollments and were proactive in their efforts. One coordinator noted:

We started talking about financial aid or all of these different parts of it. We knew the GI Bill was [] coming . . . and we wanted to be ready. . . . We basically had a little faculty senate that would think of every problem that could potentially come down the way and then how are we going to resolve it.

Institutions implemented programs and services to meet the unique needs of the student veteran population. However, some colleges and universities have not employed effective practices to meet the needs of veterans in higher education and to promote their academic success. Many veterans do not use all their VA educational benefits to complete their academic goals, and degree attainment among veterans remains appreciably lower than the broader student population at some institutions.

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to examine and understand effective practices in higher education that build academic success of student veterans and to answer the following research questions.

1. What are veterans coordinators’ perceptions regarding the effect of veterans services on student veteran academic success?

2. Which practices do veterans coordinators perceive as most effective for increasing student veteran academic success?
3. What dedicated student support services do veterans coordinators perceive as needed by veterans in higher education to successfully achieve their academic goals?

4. What gaps in services do veteran coordinators perceive in existing services within their institutions?

5. What are veterans coordinators’ perceptions regarding student veterans’ willingness or reluctance to ask for help and utilize available services?

These research questions were explored from the perspective of the veterans coordinators that work closely with this student population. Their experience based on their expertise with student veterans and veterans services was centric to adding new knowledge from the perspective of veterans coordinators in this study. This chapter summarizes findings and implications of the study and suggests recommendations for future areas of study.

For institutions of higher education to make informed decisions regarding resources and effective veterans programs, they must have a thorough understanding of the unique and diverse student veteran population. Furthermore, a knowledge of best practices relevant to the needs of student veterans and their academic goals is imperative. Through the theoretical lens of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, this study explored effective college services and programs to successfully meet the perceived needs of veterans in higher education. The results correlated to the following themes.

**Transition Assistance**

The theme of transition assistance correlates to the basic level of needs in the Adaptation of the Hierarchy of Needs for Student Veterans (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011) as depicted in Figure 2.5 in Chapter 2. This study reinforced previous research findings that deficiencies exist in services for meeting the needs for returning veterans, including transition assistance, faculty and
staff education regarding veterans issues, and creating an environment that encourages and facilitates the connections of veterans with other veterans and to the campus at large. Veterans coordinators interviewed for this study identified several basic needs of veterans returning to campus. The transition assistance needed included an orientation or newcomers brief addressing issues specific to veterans, VA benefit counseling and processing, evaluation of transfer credits, support and encouragement, assistance getting acclimated and adjusting to generational and maturity differences. Some veterans also required access to mental health and accessibility resources.

Veterans coordinators identified the most effective services to fulfill those transitional needs as “having a dedicated position, a dedicated individual to coordinate all those activities under that umbrella,” accurate and timely certification of VA education benefits, and collaboration with faculty and staff to identify issues early. Coordinators also described a veterans transition course or college success course, as well as specific orientations and newcomers briefings as effective in the transition process. Some coordinators indicated that gaps still exist on the frontend of transition assistance. Gaps identified were in the enrollment and advising process, and in evaluating transfer credits and prior learning assessment of military education and experience.

Connection/Belonging:

The theme of connection and belonging corresponds to the social/belonging level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954) or the Blending in and Socialization Strategy level in the model adapted for student veterans by DiRamio and Jarvis (2011). DiRamio and Jarvis asserted that a sense of belonging and feeling connected are critical to student veteran persistence (2011). Some veterans coordinators interviewed perceived a feeling of isolation among veterans.
Coordinators agreed that a space for veterans to meet allowed them to connect and build relationships. Four of five coordinators stated that students consistently use their veterans centers. One veterans center is in the construction and remodeling phase. The point is not to isolate veterans, but to provide the conduit of support that will help them to develop a sense of connectedness to the larger campus. This is key to achieving peer affiliations and connectedness that will facilitate moving to the next level of social/belonging. One example was of sponsored events or trips that were open to both veterans and traditional students to bridge that gap, bringing them together because they can learn from each other. Regarding the veterans center, Coordinator 3 said:

But you know, there's a lot of times there's gaps between classes and there's different things like that, and sometimes you just need somewhere, you can't go home to study because you have kids running around and then it's really hard to study. So, having a place that you can come here relate to other veterans that have seen the same things and not the exact ideas but have similar ideas that you do and be able to sit down and, you know, okay, I just need to work on a paper or I just need a cup of coffee and you talk to somebody that I can relate to on a level. I think has a lot to do with their success, that it alleviates a lot of that stress, alleviates a lot of that pressure of feeling isolated, feeling alone. And I think that that's a majority of academic success is if you can alleviate that kind of stress. I know when I was in college, the times that I've felt more involved and more welcome, I did better in class. If I was just kind of there because I just went there and go to school and not be really involved, I didn't do so great. So, I think that this kind of gives them an opportunity to be involved without having to really go out of their
schedule or having to come out of their way to leave to come back home to come somewhere or something like that. It's more, it fits with their flow and their schedule.

One coordinator indicated that the high turnover and commuting culture of community colleges presented unique challenges in getting students involved in student organizations or campus activities. Research indicated that graduation rates also tend to be lower at some community colleges. Marcus (2017) cited National Clearinghouse data that indicated a national average of all full-time student graduation rates at community colleges as 23% in three years and part-time student graduation rates as 12% in three years. An examination of 20 two-year colleges with an enrollment of at least 100 GI Bill recipients found that one-third did not graduate any of these students. Another third graduated less than 4% (Marcus, 2017).

Coordinators expressed that involving students in veterans clubs/organizations requires encouragement; and in some instances, has been unsuccessful. Veterans attending multiple campuses and having scheduling conflicts have also resulted in low participation. However, other campuses have robust organizations that are active in campus life. These student veteran organizations may provide a connection and sense of belonging for veterans as well as a network of support.

In the Hierarchy of Needs (adapted for student veterans), Accamando (2017) asserted that the social/belonging level is the most crucial. This study affirmed that institutions can establish programs and services that will encourage this critical socialization to help students move forward in their academic journey. However, gaps still exist due to lack of space, program funding, and administration investment in veterans programming.

**Integration and Achievement**

The theme of integration and achievement is indicative of the *Integration* level of the
Student Veterans Hierarchy of Needs depicted in Figure 2.5. This level includes *persistence* and *achievement*. Researchers agree that social and academic integration may contribute to student persistence and degree attainment (Cooper, 2009; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Tinto, 1993). The theme of integration and achievement encompasses those areas that directly contribute to student veteran persistence and academic achievement. Veterans coordinators indicated that educating faculty regarding unique challenges of returning veterans was a vital element of any veterans services program. Moreover, collaboration with faculty and staff as well as being intentional in establishing relationships with faculty was named as one of the most effective practices contributing to veterans’ academic success.

This theme also incorporates specific needs in the areas of leadership support, academic support, and a dedicated veterans services position. Veterans coordinators indicated varying degrees of leadership support. Coordinators agreed that senior and middle-level leadership support, with emphasis on the academic deans, was key to successfully serving the student veteran population in their academic quest. Some coordinators indicated a gap in administrations’ investment in veterans programming. Faculty understanding and collaboration were also among the gaps in services named by some coordinators. Coordinators indicated academic support as a primary need for building success and achievement in veterans. Connecting veterans to academic resources such as tutoring and academic advising were identified as effective practices. Some institutions went further to develop mentoring programs and coordinate group tutoring sessions prior to exams. Developing campus and community partnerships also contributed to students’ success. Coordinators indicated that partnerships with career services for job fairs and resume workshops also proved effective in helping students transition to their civilian life.
A dedicated individual to coordinate activities under the umbrella of serving veterans in higher education is a key to success, according to veterans coordinators interviewed. Struggling students find help in the veterans center to connect with resources. Veterans also find a connection to the campus at large through the veterans center. Student veterans receive encouragement and support to persist from other veterans as well as the coordinator or staff in veterans services. Coordinators agreed that there is a positive effect and a direct correlation between effective practices for serving veterans and increased retention and graduation rates, as well as improved GPAs of their student veteran population. Regarding what institutions can do to improve persistence and achievement, Coordinator 5 asserted, “finding the right people to put in the positions in the veterans services office that is going to serve the veterans in the right way and meet their needs is the biggest thing they could do.”

**Implications**

This study contributed to the body of knowledge on veterans in higher education by articulating the perceptions and lived experiences of the veterans coordinators and directors that were central to the data collection and analysis for this phenomenological research study. Moreover, this study fills a gap in knowledge by providing a richer understanding of what student veterans need to attain degree completion in order to successfully transition out and pursue a career. Furthermore, the study identified powerful practices to build academic success for veterans in higher education. This study has implications for veterans coordinators and the institutions they serve. Institutions that have not implemented effective practices to meet the needs of veterans in higher education and to promote their academic success may also benefit by gaining a better perspective and understanding of this diverse student population and how to effectively promote their academic success.
A recommendation for institutions that desire to establish or improve services for student veterans and increase retention and degree completions for this student population would be to first establish a committee to review current practices. Examining current research and common knowledge regarding unique needs and effective practices to fulfill those needs will help establish a basic core foundation. Further, institutions should seek out the veterans community among faculty and staff in leadership positions on campus that will help move the initiative forward and gain administrative support. It is also important to find out who your veterans are. A member of the focus group noted that campus technology support may be helpful in identifying analytics in this regard. Institutions should determine specific needs of their unique veterans population through surveys and direct communication with student veterans. Members of the focus group suggested, “start somewhere, learn from that, and go from there.”

Veterans coordinators have the opportunity to stay informed of collective knowledge relative to serving veterans by attending the Tennessee Statewide Veterans Education Academy, the Tennessee Educational Association of Veterans Program Administrators (TEAVPA), and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators/NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education annual conference on veterans and other military-connected students.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This qualitative research study examined the perceptions of veterans coordinators from six institutions purposefully selected because of their successful veterans services programs. Veterans coordinators shared their perceptions regarding the unique needs of their student veteran population and the services and programs that best fulfill those needs. These
coordinators also discussed perceived gaps in services. Findings supported what previous research has shown as both specific needs and effective programs to improve academic success.

Recommendations for future study would include an examination of the perceived gaps in services at institutions with less successful veterans programs. Additional study might include an exploration of how these institutions with low retention and graduation rates for student veterans could be motivated to implement practices and programs designed to meet the needs of this often underserved, underrepresented student population. To enable veterans to make more informed choices, further study could examine possible legislative requirements for transparency and disclosure of institutions’ veteran retention and graduation rates, similar to other special populations shown in National Center for Education Statistics.

**Limitations**

A limitation of this study is the sample size. The small sample size may not be representative of a broader, more comprehensive sampling. Additionally, the purposeful sampling method may not result in a representative sample and may limit generalization outside a particular region.

Selecting participants from both 2-year and 4-year institutions of higher education as well as public and private institutions was an important aspect of the research to achieve a broader cross section of data. However, the study may not represent opinions/perceptions of other veterans coordinators across the United States.

**Summary**

This qualitative research study contributed to the existing body of knowledge about veterans in higher education by exploring specific needs and the programs and services that effectively meet those needs and improve academic success. This study identified powerful
practices to build academic success of veterans in higher education from the perspective of veterans coordinators.

While there are some common challenges and practices, every school is unique. Student veterans are a diverse student population with a wide range of experiences, needs, and expectations (Kapell et al., 2017). Because veterans in higher education are such a diverse group, there is no one-size-fits-all program. A consensus among veterans coordinators is that support to student veterans does not end with enrollment and transitioning in to their institutions or processing their educational benefits. Successful Veterans Services programs are intentional in their efforts to support veterans in higher education to achieve their academic goals and transition to the next phase of civilian life. Developing and implementing powerful practices to support veterans in higher education is vital to building academic success of this diverse student population. With adequate institutional support, student veterans are able to persist and achieve individual self-fulfillment.
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Appendices
Appendix A: Informed Consent
Informed Consent Form

**Title of Study:** Perceptions of Veterans Coordinators: Powerful Practices to Build Academic Success of Veterans in Higher Education

**Principal Investigator:**
Carol Powell
Carson-Newman University
clpowell@cn.edu

The principal investigator is a veteran and formerly served in a position in higher education with responsibilities for serving student veterans.

**Introduction:** You are invited to participate in a research study entitled Perceptions of Veterans Coordinators: Powerful Practices to Build Academic Success of Veterans in Higher Education. The study seeks to identify effective practices in meeting specific needs of student veterans to attain degree completion and successfully transition to pursue a civilian career.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to examine and understand effective higher education practices to build academic success of student veterans from the perspective of veterans coordinators. This study seeks to identify institutional services and programs most effective in meeting the needs of veterans in higher education, and to identify gaps in services to meet the unique needs of this student population.

**Selection of Participants:** A purposeful selection method was used to include veterans coordinators from public and private institutions of higher education from both 2-year and 4-year institutions. Participants are asked to participate in an individual interview and in a focus group at a later date to be determined.

**Study Procedures:** Participants will be asked to answer questions and give their perspective regarding higher education practices, services, and programs to assist student veterans in achieving their academic goals. Interviews will be audio recorded. The focus group will be conducted by Zoom and audio and video recorded. Recordings will be transcribed for analysis. Recordings and transcripts will be stored securely and destroyed when no longer needed for the study. Many of the artifacts will be discovered at interview sites, including documents relevant to the research.

**Time Required:** Individual interviews will require approximately one hour. The focus group meeting will require approximately 40 minutes to one hour.

**Benefits of Participation:** There is no anticipation that you will benefit directly from participation in this study. However, findings from this study may contribute to the knowledge and understanding of effective higher education practices for building academic success of student veterans. This may hold potential value and benefit to students, practitioners, administrators, policy makers, and other stakeholders.
Potential Risks: Potential risk for participating in this study is minimal. Questions designed to elicit answers based on your personal views, expertise, and experience may bring a slight amount of discomfort. Privacy will be protected to the extent possible.

Confidentiality: To ensure confidentiality, no mention of specific institutions or names of individual participants will be included in the writing of the dissertation. A numbering system will be used throughout the research process to identify participants and for organization of the data.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. At any time, you may decline to answer a question or questions, or terminate your participation with no penalty.

Contact Information: If at any time you have questions or concerns about the research, contact the researcher at clpowell@cn.edu.

Consent: I have read and understand the information described above and have discussed any questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in the research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Participant: (print name) _________________________________

Participant’s signature: _________________________________ Date: _________
Appendix B: Interview Guide
Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your experience and background for your position working with veterans and military students. (Length of time in position, education level, military service, and experience in higher education)

2. Tell me about your role as veterans coordinator (or other title).

3. Is your position dedicated to veterans services or is that an additional duty?

4. Describe the organizational and leadership construct related to veterans responsibilities within the institution? Separate veterans services office or within another office?

5. Is there a collaborative effort with other campus staff to support veterans or is “everything veteran” referred to you?

6. Describe how your institution assess the needs of student veterans on your campus(es)?

7. Tell me more about what you perceive to be the specific needs of veterans on your campus?

8. What are your perceptions regarding the effect of veterans services on student veteran academic success? Tell me a story about an example.

9. What dedicated student support services and programs do you perceive as needed by veterans in higher education to meet their needs and successfully achieve their academic goals?

10. Tell me about programs and services available to the student veterans on your campus?

11. Which dedicated student support services and practices do you perceive as most effective for increasing student veteran academic success (defined as persistence and completion)?

12. What do you perceive as gaps in existing services within your institution?
13. The institution has invested resources in services for student veterans. How do you perceive student veterans’ willingness or reluctance to ask for help from those services? 

14. How frequently and effectively do you perceive that veterans take advantage of the opportunities offered by these programs and services? 

15. Why do you think student veterans may be underutilizing services and how would you propose to resolve this? 

16. Can you give me an example of practices that you perceive as not as effective in supporting student veterans academic goals and success? 

17. Can you give me an example of a veteran’s experience on campus that reflects the primary impediment to effectively serving student veterans needs on campus? 

18. What do you perceive as the primary key to an institution’s successful support to its student veteran population?
Appendix C: Focus Group Questions
Focus Group Questions

1. What are veterans coordinators’ perceptions regarding the effect of veterans services on student veteran academic success?

2. Which practices do veterans coordinators perceive as most effective for increasing student veteran academic success?

3. What dedicated student support services do veterans coordinators perceive as needed by veterans in higher education to successfully achieve their academic goals?

4. What gaps in services do veteran coordinators perceive in existing services within their institutions?

5. What are veterans coordinators’ perceptions regarding student veterans’ willingness or reluctance to ask for help and utilize available services?