**JOURNAL OF WISDOM WITHIN QUARTERLY**

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**Volume 3, Number 1**

**FOUNDED 2024/NATIONAL Association of Black Counselors**

**Soldiers to Students: An Examination of Veterans’ Transition to College**

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***Abstract***

A large number of veterans enroll in universities annually. Nevertheless, ongoing questions exist regarding how veterans adjust to on-campus environments, maintain work-life-school balance, multicultural interactions, and transitions to traditional classroom structures.  The authors present a quantitative study conducted with college veterans (*N* = 124) in the Midwest.  Researchers examined factors impacting veterans’ transitions to higher education and participants' evaluation of university services affecting their structural, social, and cultural integration on campus. Researchers found student veterans experienced transitional challenges affecting their campus integration. Student veterans reported universities initiated minimal contact and shared that they experienced transitional adjustments concerning academic-work-life-family balance. Students need additional supports and improved university services.

*Keywords:* college veterans, transitions, college resources

The veteran population has made significant contributions to the world. Veterans have served our country, as well as contributed as engineers, educators, healthcare professionals, politicians, and scientists (Glen and Stuart, 2009; Griffin and Gilbert, 2012; Mettler 2005). Student veterans have pursued diverse career majors, including business and STEM. (Reynolds & Shendruk, 2018). The veteran population consists of approximately 19.2 million veterans, while forty-four percent of veterans transition to college to pursue 4-year educational degrees (Reynolds & Shendruk, 2018; U.S Department of Labor, 2019).

Student veterans are a unique population. They have a high propensity to be first-generation college students (62%), as well as non-traditional college students (85% were between 24-40 years of age) with families (47% parents and 47% married) (Reynolds & Shendruk, 2018; Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Liu, 2013). There approximately 4 million veterans who have a disability, while the average GPA for college veterans is 3.35 (U.S Department of Labor, 2019; Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Liu, 2013). College veterans are at-promise students that have the potential and tenacity to overcome statistical odds related to their status as a veteran and college student. Becoming a college student is a critical shift, whereas individuals who experience transitions without the proper supports are susceptible to challenges (drop out, mental health, feelings of isolation) (Brown and Gross 2011; Jenner, 2019; Lopez, Ryan 2010; Springer, & Nelson, 2016). Veterans can experience a range of psychological challenges and are known to have a higher propensity than civilians to experience mental health challenges. However, veterans are less likely to receive mental health services. Fifty percent of veterans with significant psychological symptoms have not received services (Albright, Fletcher, Pelts, & Taliaferro, 2017; Kulesza, Pedersen, Corrigan, & Marshall, 2015). Hence, the readiness of counselors to work with the veteran population and to remove barriers to treatment is critical and requires adequate training and supervision (ACA, 2016; CACREP, 2014; Ratts et al, 2016; Forziat et al., 2017; Killam & Degges‐White, 2018). Counselors and educational institutions who provide the necessary supports, structures, and multicultural sensitivities needed to help reduce transitional stressors can help students’ build coping skills known to strengthen one’s health (mental, physical). An individual’s mental health is key because it can affect the economy, as well as a persons’ life functioning, academic performance, societal impact, career, and family.

Prior research studies have evaluated veteran transitions from military or combat to civilian life (work, college, family) (Derefinko, et al, 2019; Reynolds & Shendruk, 2018). However, researchers were less likely to ask student veterans to evaluate their transition from the military to college. There are a small number of research studies that focus on veteran students’ evaluation of university services (Bradshaw, Sudhinarase, Mmari, & Blum, 2010; Lopez, Springer, & Nelson, 2016; Sanders, 2019). It is important to acknowledge the voice, needs, strengths, and challenges of veteran students, especially as it pertains to the academic, career, and socioemotional supports needed to help veteran overcomers continue to make healthy strides. Focusing on the quality of institutional services (international services and outreach; culturally competent counselors) that help support veterans’ transition as college students may help increase retention, promote wellness, and reduce the high number of veterans known to dropout during their first year (Hinton, 2020). Integrating the feedback from veterans about their transitions can also be beneficial to strengthening university services, the college culture, intrapersonal interactions, and culturally competent counselors prepared to serve student veterans. This study can also contribute to the literature, training, and practices concerning culturally competent services for serving diverse students It is paramount that university policy makers, administrators, counselors, faculty, and staff provide an atmosphere that is welcoming, inclusive, and values student veterans. Counselors, educators, and higher educational institutions are ethically responsible for supporting all students, including college veterans (ACA, 2014; Hart & Thompson, 2013). This includes the creation of systems that incorporate culturally competent counselors and educators prepared for the interdisciplinary work necessary to provide effective services to support veteran students’ transitions.

Therefore, the purpose of this manuscript is to present the following: (a) sociocultural learning and adjustment of sojourners conceptual framework as an approach to encourage culturally responsive services that cultivate learning, (b) literature concerning veteran students’ transitions, supports, strengths, and challenges, and (c) a quantitative study conducted with college veterans (*N =* 124). Researchers conducted a study that examined student veterans’ experiences with services provided at a Midwestern university. This study also examined the transitional experiences of college veterans and their assessment of the structural, social, and classroom integration at a large research university in the Midwestern United States.

# Sociocultural Learning and Adjustment of Sojourners Conceptual Framework

Researchers discuss veterans’ transition to higher education through the lens of sociocultural learning theory and adjustment of sojourners theory as an approach to encourage culturally responsive services that cultivate learning. Furnham’s theory of adjustment of sojourners focuses on the need for individuals to learn coping mechanisms to adapt and/or navigate new environments (Furnham, 1988; Ward & Searle, 1991). Adjustment of sojourners theory suggests students who become knowledgeable about their environment and learn coping strategies feel better equipped to navigate new systems. Adjustment of Sojourners theory and sociocultural learning theory illustrates the interactive processes that influences learning, the learner, and environment.

Sociocultural learning theory emphasizes the impact that the environment and cultural climate has on an individual’s development and learning (Vygotsky, 1997). Sociocultural learning theory promotes structural process that cultivate environments that cultivate learning and progressions. The simultaneous effort of both the individual and institutions (structure, policies, practices) to strengthen their multicultural competence increases greater success for the student and the university. Students whose culture is considered and are better understood are likely to have better structural supports and better interpersonal interactions, which in turn would promote students’ positive attitudes about their experience at the university. Culturally responsive environments that value diversity and inclusion are prone to have greater success, student satisfaction, and retention rates (Hu & Kuh, 2003; Roksa, Kilgo, Trolian, Pascarella, Blaich, & Wise, 2017)

# Veterans’ College Transitions

Veteran’s successful reintegration into educational sectors, civilian life, and families requires a level of systematic support that often goes unnoticed. Veteran students are a diverse population whose input is needed when crafting supportive programs to meet their needs (O’Herrin 2011; Griffin and Gilbert 2012). The veteran population is an important part of college retention efforts, while failing to successfully manage this element of the student body will result in an objectionable experience for both the university and the veteran student (Brown and Gross 2011). It is critically important to support the transitions of first-year college veterans because veterans have been reported to have an 88% first year dropout rate and students in transition are likely to incur adjustment issues leading to challenges in the absence of proper supports (Callahan, & Jarrat, 2014; Hart & Thompson, 2013; Jenner, 2019; Lopez, Springer, & Nelson, 2016).

According to Cook (2009), “22% of colleges provide veteran specific assistance with the transition to higher education, nearly 50% of colleges do not have an individual trained to assist veterans with transitional issues, 57% do not provide veteran transitional assistance training opportunities to staff and faculty, and less than 37% of all colleges and universities have trained staff to assist veterans with disabilities” (p. 8). A subset within the veteran population is those affected by the physical, cognitive, and emotional ramifications of combat. Many veteran students experience feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) (Elliott, Gonzalez, and Larsen 2011; Van Dusen 2011; Strickley 2009). Additionally, Lackaye (2011) found that 93% of veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts “were shot at with small arms, 77% fired at the enemy, 95% saw dead bodies or remains, 89% were attacked or ambushed, 86% know a soldier that was killed or injured, and 65% saw a dead or injured American” (p. 48). Strickley (2009) argues that establishing counseling and psychological services as a safe place for the veteran student will be paramount in assisting them with mental health issues associated with combat. These statistics indicate real-world differences between veterans and traditional student’s transition into the college academic environment.

## Soldier to Student

The transition from combat and military service to college can be anticipated or not anticipated by some members. Active-duty service members know the date that their contract of obligated service will end, and for some they will anticipate starting college shortly after being released. Other service members who have been medically discharged or dishonorably discharged may not be as prepared for this transition (Ryan 2010). The aforementioned challenge can prompt individuals to feel a sense of loss and to process grief.

A social and cultural role change also occurs during veterans’ transition to college. In the military, very lucid and concise are the expectations of superior officers and failure to comply enacts a uniform pedagogy of punishment. The college experience is in contrast, where the veteran student finds no clear chain of command or direct accountability (Strickley 2009). On active duty, service members have most of their daily schedule outlined for them. Basic training for the military is “the process of depersonalization and deindividuation in which the military must strip the individual of all previous self-definition” (Herbert, 1998, p. 9). Conversely, college students are encouraged to explore their own individuality and to think critically. Students are held responsible for time management and completing assignments.

Most veterans have always had a senior ranking person to ensure assigned tasks were completed, whereas in college the consequences are not as great in comparison (Strickley, 2009). For some, the less structured environment of the college campus is appealing and leads to having an optimistic outlook on this transition. Other service members may have difficulty in transition due to dependency upon the military’s restrictions and responsibilities. More than likely, these individuals will view their transition negatively. Schlossberg (1995, p. 56) claims transition “can be more or less difficult (and have greater or less impact) depending on whether the new role is a loss or a gain, positive or negative, or has explicit norms and expectations for the new incumbent” (Ryan 2005).

Veteran students are older, more mature, and most often considered non-traditional students because of the military credits they may have accumulated while on active duty (O’Herrin 2011). Veteran students, much like other non-traditional students, must again become acclimated to the classroom learning environment and must relearn study skills. Some veterans have not had to use these skills in a number of years (Ryan 2010). Student veterans are less likely to ask for help when they need it and are more inclined to seek the social support of fellow veterans over that of the traditional student (Livingston 2009). Green and Van Dusen (2012) uses the terminology *warrior mentality* to explain veterans who do not seek out the assistance of others.

In addition to academic responsibilities, veteran students are more likely to be married and have children (Strickley, 2009; O’Herrin, 2011). The veteran student may be more mature and academically focused due to their military experiences. Veterans may be overwhelmed by the immature behavior of their classmates, such as complaining about assignments, text messaging in class, and lack of attention to lectures (Glasser, Powers, Zywiak 2009; DiRamio, Ackerman, Mitchell 2008, p. 87).

# Supporting Student Veterans

Military veterans have reported their need and desire to acquire relevant services and resources that will help them transition to civilian life and meet their goals (i.e., education). There are a variation of resources in place to help veterans transition from military service to civilian life. Some of the resources may require improved resources and policies that culturally align with the current needs of non-traditional student veterans. Members of this population are exceptionally diverse and have life experiences beyond the traditional college student. In the DiRamio (et.al 2008) study, one Army veteran mentions, “I’ve just seen so much more than most of the college students here. I’ve traveled around the world. I’ve been given so much more responsibility and leadership” (p.87). O’Herrin (2011) suggests, “one of the most important steps that campus leadership can take is to gauge the specific needs of veterans at their institution before devoting resources to new initiatives” (p. 16). Furthermore, “both student veterans and campus administrators have spoken to the success of efforts that have been crafted with direct input from the enrolled student veteran population and have emphasized this is the best approach to designing supportive programs” (O’Herrin, 2011, p. 17).

There are basic services needed by veterans that make their transition into college easier (Jenner, 2019). Some of the services implemented by universities included: having a veteran representative within college offices (i.e. in financial aid to help navigate through the process of using their educational benefits, academic counseling to assist in the evaluation of transcripts from military service and training), a veteran specific university orientation, institutional collaboration with the community and local VA Hospital, educating faculty and staff about veterans specific issues and concerns, and establishing a veterans resource center.

## Government Supports for Veterans’ Education and Reintegration to Civilian Life

According to Griffin and Gilbert (2012), the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, was established to assist military veterans in their transition from service to civilian life. Researchers suggests that this act was the most successful piece of social legislation enacted (Lackaye 2011). The bill provided loans for homes, farms, and businesses, vocational training, and up to a year of unemployment payments (Clark 1998). The Montgomery G.I. (Government Issued) Bill was created after noticing that veterans of World War I were returning home to the desolation caused by the Great Depression. In response to U.S. conflicts and need to reintegrate service members to society, the G.I. Bill has been amended over several decades,. This transmuting piece of legislation made college available to 2 million veterans in the decade following World War II ((Steele, Salcedo, and Coley 2010). More soldiers utilized the educational benefits than projected by attending college following the end of World War II. Researchers agree that during the 1940s and 1950s our nation “gained an additional 450,000 engineers, 360,000 teachers, 180,000 healthcare professionals, and 150,000 scientists” (Griffin and Gilbert, 2012, p 1.) as a direct result of the Montgomery G.I. Bill. Recipients of the G.I. Bill participated in civic and political organizations 50% more than those not using the benefit (Glen and Stuart, 2009; Griffin and Gilbert, 2012). By the end of the 1960s, the United States House of Representatives was comprised of 60% veterans (Mettler 2005, p.132).

G.I. Bill Amendments were made over four-decades starting in 1952, which provided less financial support toward tuition. Since 1984, service members have been required to invest $100 a month for a year in order to obtain educational benefits. Griffin and Gilbert (2012) project that the newest provisions made to the educational bill will have the most momentous impact on higher education, the work force, and national competitiveness since the original G.I. Bill of 1944. The Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, is one of the latest modifications to the original bill. Approximately 2 million active duty and veteran students who have served at least 90 days since September 11, 2001 will utilize this new bill (O’Herrin, 2011).

Researchers found a correlation between the new Post-9/11 G.I. Bill and an increase in higher education enrollment and recruitment (Glasser, Powers, and Zywiak 2009; Griffin and Gilbert 2012; O’Herrin 2011; Brown and Gross 2011; Green and Van Dusen 2012). This influx is similar to that which was seen post World War II. The Post-9/11 Bill expires 15 years after the member was released from active duty and can be used or a maximum of 36 months (3 years) of academic training. Veterans can use funds towards higher education, apprenticeships, certifications, and flight training (Strickley 2009). The improvements to the G.I. Bill have made it the most beneficial military educational benefits package since its initial inception (Steele, Salcedo, and Coley 2010).

Mettler (2005) noted that without the educational benefits of the Montgomery G.I. Bill many “would have returned to the same types of jobs their fathers had-in farming, mining, at steel mills, or with the railroad” (p. 93) without real options to secure their own career paths. Higher education became accessible regardless of socioeconomic status. Veterans who were honorably discharged were eligible to receive college tuition and fees, a monthly housing allowance, and annual book stipend (Griffin and Gilbert 2012). The educational benefits provided by the military has often been utilized to recruit individuals from marginalized backgrounds, which may often overrepresent individuals from low-income backgrounds who may not recognize alternatives for financially supporting their higher education goals and career pursuits (Christensen, 2016; Segal, Thanner, & Segal, 2007; Serpa, 2020; Wyant, 2012). While some individuals from marginalized groups may have been influenced to join the military solely due to their desire to earn educational financial benefits from the military, several veterans found the transition to educational institutions more challenging due to military related disabilities, non-traditional college status responsibilities, educational learning curves, and challenges with securing extended military financial support to complete their college degrees (Christensen, 2016; Jenner, 2019; Lopez, Springer, & Nelson, 2016; Vance & Miller, 2009; Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Liu, 2013). Military benefits are far ranging and complex. Some prospective veteran students may be confused by the many choices of institutions of higher education and how to use their benefits. How well a service member was debriefed regarding their transition from the military depends upon the branch (Ackerman, DiRamio, and Garza-Mitchell 2009; Strickley 2009).

# Assessing the Campus Environment on Veterans

Griffin and Gilbert (2012) created an assessment tool, Environmental Evaluation for Veterans Index (EEVI), for administrators and policy makers to examine their campus environment for the veteran student. “The index allows institutions to clearly and consistently measure whether they have the services, policies, and sources of support necessary to assist returning veterans transition into higher education” (Griffin and Gilbert 2012, p. 2). Under three main subheadings, the EEVI examines institutional personnel and services, social and cultural support, and institutional structures. Personnel and services include assessing if the institution has a veterans’ office and a point of contact to deal with veteran issues. Collaboration with the Department of Veteran Affairs, state officials, healthcare providers, and other schools is evaluated. The EEVI suggest that training should be held for faculty and staff in the concerns and issues of veteran students. Social and Cultural support is the second element of the EEVI. It inquires if there are institutional mentoring programs, a veteran’s student organization, events that honor and celebrate the veteran population, is there a student veteran list-serv so that all veteran students can be contacted, and if the institution asks for feedback from the veteran students’ institutions serve. The final means of assessment by the EEVI looks at the institutional structures. The questions examine if a school has accreditation, if the institution automatically credits the accounts of student veterans using G.I. Bill benefits when the payment is late from the VA, if the institution tracks the veteran student as they matriculate through their degree program and being able to supply statistical data such as graduation and retention rates from institutional research. Each question is answered with a yes or no based upon if the institution provides the service in question. All yes answers are then divided by the total number of possible yes answers to create a percentage of *veteran-friendliness*.

The G.I. Jobs magazine, as well as other private third-party entities developed a tool to assess universities friendliness to veterans based upon the services universities report they provide. Often, questions were answered with a simple yes or no. Survey questions to access structural elements of the university included: “Does the university assign credit for military service and training?”, “Does the university have a veterans’ services office?”, and “Is there tutoring and academic support available to veteran students?”. Many of the researchers focused on defining how “veteran friendly” universities are by looking mainly at these structural accommodations for veterans. The problem with this process was college veteran’s attitudes about the universities *military friendliness* were not taken into account when defining the concept. Thus, veterans were rarely asked to evaluate university services that were specific to veterans’ transitional needs and integration on campus. Hence, researchers were missing an important step in the process of accurately determining a university’s veteran friendliness.

## Veteran Friendly Colleges

Some higher education institutions have been designated as “Military or Veteran Friendly” to attract potential veteran students and their educational benefits. G.I. Jobs Magazine’s Guide to Military Friendly Colleges has created a list of “military friendly” schools and this list is one of the leading lists used by universities to recruit veterans. The magazine has a set criterion for institutions to make the list but does not establish a minimum score for inclusion. In fact, it did not require a complete investigative search at an institution to identify the effectiveness of structural services, programs and support offered, and statistical data such as veteran student graduation rates and retention patterns, before inaugurating the title of “Military Friendly” (Pope 2012). The cultural, social, and structural assessments recommended by Griffin and Gilbert (2012) provide a framework for administrators as well as researchers to assess the true “veteran friendliness” of academic institutions.

# Methodology

Researchers conducted an IRB approved quantitative study with student veterans (*N* = 124) at a large Midwest University nationally recognized by G.I. Jobs Magazine as a *Military Friendly School.* The purpose of this quantitative study was to identify factors that impact veterans’ transitions to college and their perceptions of university services. This study examined veteran student’s assessment of the structural, social, and classroom integration at a large research university in the Midwestern United States. The overarching research question was the following: What factors impact veteran student transitions? Researchers tested five hypotheses. Researchers predicted the following: (a) the more years that a student veteran has spent in combat leads to decreased comfort in the classroom environment, (b), veteran students are more likely to experience social and cultural problems with traditional students, (c) the veteran student may have difficulty in balancing coursework with their other responsibilities, (d) veteran students have difficulty with finding institutional supports and someone on campus who is understanding and supportive of their perspective as a veteran, (e) veterans who have been injured, wounded, or disabled will have problems coping with service connected disabilities in a university environment.

**Participants**

The researchers utilized purposive sampling and distributed surveys to the student veteran population at a large Midwestern university. According to the Midwestern University Veterans’ Service Center, there were 802 students on campus that identified as military veterans. One hundred and four student veterans participated in the study, which included 95 respondents who fully completed the survey. Participants self-reported the following demographic information: age, gender, marital status, and race. Participants were undergraduate and graduate student veterans. Eighty-four percent were males and 16% were females. The participants average age was 33. Participants’ race included 76% white, 11% Hispanic, and 6% Hispanic/Latino. Thirty-six percent were married, 3% were separated, 17% were divorced, and 44% were single.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection process began on June 3, 2013 and concluded on July 3, 2013. The researchers used SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool to collect participant data that was sent out through the university listserv. Research participants had the opportunity to reflect on their transition as a veteran college student and their reflections concerning a mid-western universities services. Respondents were asked a series of questions that allowed them to evaluate their structural, social, and cultural integration to campus. Participants were asked questions, such as: if the university contacted them to ask about their veteran status, if they were notified about the veterans services center, how they may have learned about the veterans service center, their level of comfort in the college classroom, the degree to which they may have been challenged with balancing their responsibilities, and how well they may be coping with a service related disability. Survey respondents provided descriptive data that identified and measured the overall services provided by the university. Descriptive analysis allowed researchers to answer questions about factors influencing veteran students’ transition to college. In addition to descriptive analysis, researchers used statistical software SPSS and Excel to analyze the data, as well as to create visual representations of the results.

# Results

Student veterans (*N* = 124) at a large Midwest University participated in the study, which included student veterans (*n* = 95) who fully completed the study. Seventeen percent of student veterans indicated that they had significant challenges transitioning to college and 18% reported no challenge with transitioning (see Figure 2). The following structural question was asked of participants who completed the survey: *After you were accepted as a student at a Midwestern university, were you contacted by anyone from the university about your veteran status?* There were 71% of respondents who said they had not been contacted by anyone concerning their veteran status, 7% of student veterans reported they did not know if they had been contacted, and 22% reported they were contacted.

Secondly, respondents were asked, how they were notified about the University Veterans’ Services Center. Four percent of respondents reported that they were contacted by someone from the Veterans’ Service Center. Eight percent of veteran students stated that someone from the university contacted them and made them aware. Low percentages in these two fields is evidence of a structural barrier. While, sixty percent of respondents said they actively sought out the Veterans’ Service Center (see Figure 1).

Hypothesis #1 was the more years a veteran spent in combat led to decreased comfort in the classroom environment. When veteran students were asked about their level of comfort in the classroom, 62% said that they were *very comfortable.* Of the population, 31% said they had never served in an active combat zone, 17% spent less than one year in combat, 7% spent three to five years in combat, and 5% did not provide an answer. The larger percentage of student veterans (40%) spent 1-2 years in combat.

Hypothesis #2 stated that veteran students would be more likely to experience social and cultural problems with traditional students. Respondents to the survey were asked “Which statement best fits how you feel about your interactions with non-veteran students on campus?” The figure below illustrates that 72% of veterans feel they generally get along well with other non-veteran students, 17% encountered very few problems, 4% encountered significant problems when interacting with non-veteran students, and 7% said they did not associate with non-veteran students. Another question assessed veteran interactions with faculty and staff on campus. There were 76% of student veterans who reported they had no issues with faculty, 2% noted a significant number of problems, 18% reported a few problems, and 4% did not know/did not answer.

Thirdly, it was hypothesized that the veteran student may have difficulty in balancing coursework with other responsibilities. Sixty-nine percent of student veterans indicated they had difficulty with balancing their responsibilities and coursework , 26% reported balancing was not a challenge, and 5% indicated that they had no experience.

The fourth hypothesis was that veteran students often have difficulty finding someone on campus that is understanding and supportive of their perspective as a veteran. Forty percent indicated that they did not experience a challenge, 17% reported they had no experience, and the remaining 43% reported they sought the help of another individual and failed to locate it.

Hypothesis five was that veterans who were injured, wounded, or disabled would have problems coping with those service-connected disabilities at the university. The findings illustrate 55% of participants had service-related injuries. Thirty-seven percent of respondents indicated they had a challenge coping with those service-connected disabilities at the university and 47% of respondents indicated they had no experience.

# Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine factors impacting international students’ transitions to college and their experience with university services. More specifically, research examines veteran student’s assessment of the structural, social, and classroom integration at a large research university in the Midwestern United States. Study results indicate the university has not effectively developed a method to connect with the student veteran population and corroborated prior research concerning factors that impact veterans’ transitions to college. Several participants indicated they had issues with transitioning to the university. Veteran students reported that they had difficulty finding someone on campus that was understanding and supportive of their perspective as a veteran. Majority of the participants also indicated they were not contacted by the university concerning their veteran status. Forty-three percent of participants reported they sought the help of another individual and failed to locate it. Most of the participants reported that they had to actively seek out services from the Veterans’ Services Center, while trying to balance all other responsibilities as an attempt to successfully navigate through the higher education system. This is a concern because most respondents reported that they had difficulty balancing coursework with other responsibilities. Additionally, most participants spent time in combat and more than half of the veteran respondents reported a service-related injury/disability that could potentially impede their success without the proper structural supports and strategies (i.e., healthy coping skills) to mitigate challenges. Thirty-seven percent of respondents indicated they had a challenge coping with service-connected disabilities at the university and 47% of respondents indicated they had no experience. Most participants did report they were very comfortable in the classroom. However, 22% of the participants reported issues with campus faculty-staff and 28% indicated they experienced challenges with non-veteran peers or had no interactions with non-veteran peers.

The findings indicate that the lack of culturally responsive university services and supports to assist with veterans’ transitions to college influenced their integration on campus. The lack of university outreach to veteran students could lead student veterans to feel undervalued, unsupported, not understood as student veterans, unwelcome, and discouraged when they request help that goes unanswered (Koo, 2021). The aforementioned had the propensity to influence veterans: a) interactions or lack of interactions with faculty, staff, and students, b) difficulty balancing coursework and other responsibilities (college-work-life balance), c) challenge coping with service-connected disabilities. Thus, ultimately affect student veterans’ mental health, college performance, and retention.

## Implications

It is imperative that stakeholders are multiculturally competent individuals who acknowledge college veterans’ multifaceted characteristics, strengths, challenges, stressors, and transitional needs as college veterans. Culturally responsive services recognize the need for individuals to initiate outreach services to help students in transition navigate campus as well as help them feel a sense of belonging (Hinton, 2020). Universities may also consider providing a veteran student transition cohort model and hosting events encourage family-community participation.

The results show most students were rarely contacted by the universities veterans’ program, several felt they were not understood as veterans, and did not feel like they were being helped when requested. This can lead to additional stress, frustration, and transitional challenges. It is essential that counselors and stakeholders are prepared to proactively address the unique challenges faced by veterans and proactively address barriers that may deter veterans use of services and negatively affect their progress to cope with service-related disabilities. Quality university interventions and counseling services will likely decrease the number of veterans who experience challenges related to college attrition, mental health challenges (41% of veterans were diagnosed with a mental health challenge or behavioral adjustment disorder), homelessness (21.8 million veterans), and non-fulfillment of military contracts (in one year 207,000 veterans were dishonorably discharged, received conduct discharges, or other-than-honorable discharge) (Albright et al., 2017; Leal, 2007; Olenick, Flowers, & Diaz, 2015; Ryan, 2010; Salter, 2020).

To encourage positive interactions with student veterans, universities can establish student-faculty professional development and cultural exchanges that encourage positive interactions and cultural competence. Information can also be provided related to wellness programs and counseling resources (time-management, social skills trainings) that can strengthen positive climates (Sontag-Padilla, et al, 2018; Williams, 2019). Students seek role-models and look for individuals who they can identify with (Meiners, 2019). The establishment of faculty veteran mentor-student mentee programs can provide a role-model and point of contact where students can access information about navigating their transition to higher education and intentionally interact with faculty in a semi-structured form. Welcoming faculty and staff to share veteran status via staff biographical profiles may be beneficial. A university central online group resource station may host the profiles and allow veteran faculty and staff to voluntarily share resources pertaining to the college transition and balancing life responsibilities.

Military personnel and veterans are used to structure and organization. Thus, military veteran students expect services that are streamlined and an active chain of command. Not having a meaningful way to contact the veteran student is a structural barrier. Researchers suggests that structured contact from the university increases the success of the student (Fisher, et al., 2019). It would be beneficial for universities to streamline services for veteran students through the Veterans’ Services Center and evaluate their effectiveness by gaining information from student veterans. Secondly, the Veterans’ Service Center could develop a way to contact each veteran student on campus by providing resources than can be utilized independently, rather than only communicating with the few that have requested services. It is also important for veteran services to conduct needs assessments and to regularly engage in program evaluation to assess the quality and delivery of services.

It is imperative that the university establishes contact and provide active support to all veteran students. It is also helpful for institutions to develop comprehensive programs and incentives understanding that this population of students is different from the traditional and conventional non-traditional student. In an effort of truly being military or “veteran friendly”, it would be beneficial for institutions to utilize best practices for working with students in transition and to collect statistical data related to the retention patterns and graduation rates of military veteran students, the coping methods and wellness of students, and students’ career awareness and supports (i.e., career counseling, 5 year financial scholarships or applicable funding for completing an undergraduate degree) as it pertains to selecting a college major that aligns with their goals (Brown & Gross, 2011). It would also be beneficial for counselor educators to work collaboratively to provide cultural competence training and to prepare multicultural competent counselors who are prepared to work with the military population. Collaborations can also help educators to recognize signs, needed supports, strengths, and resources that can be beneficial to supporting veterans as they navigate to obtain their degree in higher education.

## Future Research

It is imperative that stakeholders continue to hear the voice of student veterans, provide psychoeducational supports, and conduct research concerning the transitions of veterans. Future Research may focus on the intersection of student veterans who are also considered underrepresented minorities in higher education (female, first generation college, racial minority, low SES during high school) and their experiences with university faculty, students, and staff. A comparison study may also be conducted with veterans who participate in a cohort and receive psychoeducation counseling intervention supports and faculty mentors versus veteran students who do not receive the same intervention.

Future studies can include mixed methods studies that ask veterans and high school seniors (from low SES families) in transitions about the degree to which educational funding from the military influenced their decision to join the military, verses their interest to truly serve in the military. This study could be expanded to include longitudinal study that incorporates: (a) quality psychoeducational interventions (i.e., career counseling, coping interventions, time-management) and multicultural training for leaders, (b) a strategic plan based on students individual needs that allows students to see college is attainable and presenting diverse options for students to map out financial supports to pursuing postsecondary education, (c) an ROTC option of supporting college for two years prior to signing a contract to serve, individuals ability to quickly move though position ranks when the have an educational background), and (d) a comparison group where researchers evaluate the paths of students who plan to transition into the military that includes their motivation for joining the military, wellness, career goals, transitional placements, and career satisfaction after exiting the military.

## Strengths and Limitations

The strength of the study included participants self-report regarding their transitional experiences and encounter with university services. Utilizing purposive sampling allowed researchers to utilize a sample that was representative of student veterans at a midwestern university. However, future research can be strengthened by increasing the number of participants to include students beyond the Midwest. Descriptive statistics also allowed researchers to provide clear characteristics regarding participants, but also has limits concerning its generalizability.

# Conclusion

This researchers’ presented a quantitative study conducted with military veterans. The goal of the study was to examine the experiences of veterans who transitioned to college. The researchers’ examined student veterans’ perspective of how university services impacted veterans’ structural, social, and classroom integration into campus life and culture. Researchers found that most veterans who reported to have transitioned to the college setting believed they needed additional information and supports to help with their transitions. The aforementioned findings, support the importance of including the voices of military veteran students to help address their transitional needs through systematic supports and interventions that support healthy transitions, progressive retention, and timely graduation of military veterans. The findings from this study may inform university practices, contribute to the preparation of counselors in training, strengthen the cultural competence of university faculty, staff, and students, as well as the improvement and development of culturally responsive programs for student veterans.

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**Figure 1.**

*How student veterans were contacted by the university*

**Figure 2.**

*Respondents challenge with transitioning to college*