

2022

## Transition of Women Veterans from Active Duty to Adult Learner on Campus

Sheila Outlaw  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Sheila Outlaw

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Transition of Women Veterans from Active Duty to Adult Learner on Campus

by

Sheila Outlaw

MA, Bowie State University, 2005

BA, Elizabeth City State University, 1983

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

March 2022

## Abstract

A large percentage of women veteran students at a local 4-year university are transitioning from active duty to the role of adult learner on a college campus, and some have overcome barriers, such as inadequate childcare, lack of transportation, and financial aid issues and completed their educational goals. Unfortunately, some women veterans are not successful. The purpose of this study was to identify methods that self-identified women veteran students at the local study site use to successfully meet their educational goals. Adult transition and transformative learning theory are the conceptual frameworks for this study. A qualitative study collecting semistructured interview data was conducted, targeting 10 participants from a local site. Data were collected through the interview process and transcribed; major themes and categories were developed by exploring majority common responses to the interview questions. The study findings revealed several recurring themes: (a) facing challenges during transition from active duty, (b) believing in self-success, (c) having pride in serving one's country, (d) self-identifying as a veteran, (e) meeting the needs of women veterans, (f) adjusting as an adult learner, and (g) gaining access to services through Student Veterans of America. The project was a position paper that addressed why women veterans successfully transitioned to adult learner based on the research. The findings may sway social change by showing women veterans the support that is necessary for a successful transition and enable them to reap some of the the benefits of getting their degree, such as increased employment opportunities.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study first to God, who is the source of my strength and the strength of my life. I also dedicate this to my husband, Charles and our two sons, Kyle and Corwyn. Thank you guys for your encouragement and your support during this journey. Thank you for giving me time to study, to attend residences, to miss family time, and for ensuring I had snacks during those late nights and all-nighters. I love you guys more than you know. You inspire me to be the best version of myself and to always set a good example. To my parents, Mr. Bobby and Ms. Peggy Connor: thank you guys for your unconditional love, for the opportunity to go to college, and for allowing “granny” to be “granny.” I also dedicate this doctoral study to my sibilings, Sherry, Rhonda, and Cathy. Thank you guys for loving me and allowing me to be a teacher when we “played” school. Who knew I was preparing for this moment?

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **The Local Problem**

In 1973, the number of women serving on active duty was 2.5% compared with 9% in 2013. By 2043, that number is expected to rise to nearly 17% (Office of the Actuary, 2014). A key finding in Patten and Parker's (2011) report suggested that according to a Pew study, 82% of post-9/11 women veterans joined the military to receive educational benefits; a quarter of a million of these women veterans probably will attend or are planning to attend college by the end of the decade. "In 2015, 149,375 women veterans used education benefits. This represents 7.4 percent of the total population of women veterans" (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017, p. 33.) Although a number of women veterans are enrolling in the 4-year university where this study took place, according to the university's military resource director, the specific number or percentage is not available because the site does not capture that information. Moreover, the participating site does not capture data on why women veterans attend college, whether they are full- or part-time students, or whether they point out veteran-related issues to their academic advisors or the veterans affairs office. The admittance process is the same for veterans as it is for other students, according to the military resource director.

Burkhart and Hogan (2015) and Baechtold and DeSawal (2009) pinpointed that when women veterans leave active duty, they are forced to redefine who they are, and for many of them, this occurs during their transition as adult learners on college campuses, where they struggle to redefine gender and career goals. Heineman (2017) used the

grounded theory methodology in her qualitative study to explore women veterans transitioning to the role of adult learner, and suggested the gendered-military experience was among the most influential forces for these women veterans transitioning to adult learner because the experience incited their feelings of marginalization and alienation, which appeared to have negatively influenced their desire to socialize on campus. This experience also influenced who they relied on for support. Some women veterans knew that they could rely on familial support during their transition to adult learner because of the support they received during their active duty service. As women veterans redefine themselves as adult learners, they are going to experience difficulties, such as self-identity and feelings of alienation. Greer (2020) highlighted the cultural difference between military organizational culture and civilian organizational cultures and suggested that some female veterans who transition from active-duty service may experience feelings of alienation. In many classroom situations, according to DiRamio and Jarvis (2011a) and DiRamio et al. (2015), these women veterans often feel unheard even when they have something to say. By nature of their gendered-military experience, they have learned to be passive. Some will selectively seek and accept help from faculty members and the campus's veterans resource center and will successfully transition, whereas others for various reasons will not successfully transition.

The problem is that there are some self-identified women veteran students who are not meeting their educational goals at the participating study site, according to the military resource director. As women veterans transitioned from active duty to adult learners on college campuses, many dealt with issues that hindered their ability to

transition successfully (Anchan et al., 2013). When interacting with women student veterans, the military resource director sees the reason that some of these students are not successful as a combination of many contributing external factors, such as family and economic issues, which may have a greater impact on the students than their interaction with faculty or program requirements. From an economic perspective, Tsai et al. (2012), in their multi-site study, compared 59 female and 1,181 male participants and surmised that women veterans made up about 8% of the veterans who are homeless. According to the resource director, isolating the impact of faculty interaction and holding constant all of the other variables, such as economics and family, that impact the woman veteran student's academic performance may help women student veterans successfully transition as adult learners. The director also remarked that when women veterans do not self-identify, faculty members are not aware that these students may need additional academic support and resources, which makes it difficult for the faculty to assess them and their issues as a woman veteran student, such as family and economics. Women veterans do not always self-identify themselves as veterans, according to Heineman (2017). Although women veterans are not required to self-identify, not doing so will prevent them from receiving GI benefits and resources set aside for veterans, such as tutoring, financial aid, counseling, and mental health services.

The purpose of this study was to identify methods that self-identified women veteran students at the local study site use to successfully meet their educational goals. This information will serve a twofold purpose. It will be helpful to not only women

veteran students but also faculty and staff to identify ways to accommodate women veteran students to support their success at the college.

### **Rationale**

The cultures of the military and a college campus differ significantly (Iverson et al., 2016; Vacchi, 2012). Iverson et al. (2016) noted that the military culture teaches a person to be self-sufficient; you are given a job and you are responsible for completing the job. Asking for help is a sign of weakness for the servicemember. Conversely, in a college environment, a person is expected to ask for help, if needed. Amid the college culture, students are free to make their own choices and are learning to become more independent and how to navigate various social scenes on college campuses. The military culture includes a unique collection of beliefs, practices, traditions, experiences, and power hierarchies that distinguish it from civilian culture (Kuehner, 2013). Military adaptation is a process that begins when an individual arrives at bootcamp and ends when they complete bootcamp. During the process, which is designed to be stressful, the recruit learns self-discipline and teamwork and gains physical and emotional strength; once bootcamp concludes, the recruit has transitioned into the role of a servicemember (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015). The instruction and indoctrination that the servicemembers receive during basic training include customs and practices of military life, physical fitness, military drill, discipline, a willingness to immediately obey all lawful orders given by superiors, and oftentimes, basic armed and unarmed combat training.

According to Heineman (2017), who used the grounded theory methodology in her qualitative study to explore women veterans transitioning, roughly 2 million

servicemembers are transitioning from active duty to civilian life, and about 16% are women. Some of those women veterans at the participating study site have successfully transitioned to adult learner and expanded their skill set. The percentage of women veterans making their transition at the participating study site is unavailable. The university's military resource director stated that in Fall 2019 approximately 50% of veterans were female; 83% of female veterans were enrolled full-time compared to 81% for male veterans who were enrolled full time.

The problem is that some self-identified women veteran students are not meeting their educational goals at the local study site. The military resource director suggested that the problem has many contributing external factors and that family and economic issues may have a greater impact on the students than their interaction with faculty or program requirements. The director also stated that not all women veterans self-identify themselves as veterans and make it known in a way to assess the faculty's perception of them and their issues. Lim et al. (2018) signaled that a faculty and/or staff member's daily interaction with a student veteran is critical for that student's socialization as a civilian. Lim et al. (2018) also said the faculty and/or staff member's expectation or perception of student behavior can make the student veteran's transition smooth or rough, and if the latter, hinder their academic success. Heineman (2017) used the grounded theory methodology in her qualitative study and suggested that women veterans' gendered-military experience was among the most influential force for their transitioning to adult learner because the experience incited their feelings of marginalization and



alienation, which appeared to have negatively influenced their desire to socialize on campus.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Veteran*: An individual—in this case a woman—who served in the active military, naval, or air service and was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable and is enrolled either full time or part time in an accredited college or university and eligible to receive GI benefits (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2013).

*Active duty*: Full-time duty in the active military service of the United States, including active duty or full-time training duty in the Reserve Component (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2013).

*Armed forces*: A term used to denote collectively all components of the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard (when mobilized under Title 10, United States Code, to augment the Navy; Department of Defense, 2020).

*Women's Armed Services Integration Act*: Enacted in 1948, it is a United States law that enables women to serve as permanent, regular members of the armed forces in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and the Air Force (*Women's Armed Services Integration Act*, 1948).

*Servicemember*: An active-duty member of the “uniformed services,” consisting of the armed forces (i.e., Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard), the Commissioned Corps of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Services (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2013).

### **Significance of the Study**

Many colleges are accommodating women veteran students' needs, which in turn, enables them to successfully transition to adult learners on campus. According to director at the participating site, although some needs are the same between male and female veterans, the female veterans do have some challenges that males do not. For example, for those women coming directly from active duty, the separation from a regimented or ordered environment with top-down control to one where all decisions are their own takes time for adjustment. Street et al. (2009) suggested that women veterans have to overcome unique challenges that their male counterparts do not. Franklin (2009) specified that women veterans are more likely to meet the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and are more likely to be victims of sexual abuse compared with their male counterparts. These types of unique military experiences affect their successful transition when they leave the military. Rattray et al. (2019) showed that veteran students with probable PTSD reportedly have more problems reintegrating and a greater need for health services than their counterparts who do not have PTSD. In addition, many veteran students are unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with self-identifying as having PTSD and do not receive the on-campus services.

Church (2009) hinted that those women veterans who attend colleges that are not prepared to address their needs may face seemingly insurmountable barriers to achieving their educational goals and consequently not make a successful transition. Therefore, knowing how some women veteran students are able to successfully transition to adult learner may help faculty and staff at this participating site to identify ways to

accommodate women veteran students who are not able to successfully transition.

Academic advisors may be able to point out to subsequent women veteran students the pitfalls that women veteran students have experienced and tell them how to either avoid them or navigate through them. The military resource director implied that the participating site does not capture information on whether the women veteran students go to their academic advisors or to the veterans affairs office to point out these issues; therefore, the site does not know the extent of the interaction between student and counselor unless the student provides permission for disclosure.

The military resource director stated that the administration process is the same for all students; however, to receive their GI education benefits, veteran students are required to complete additional paperwork once admitted into the participating site. Women veteran students who self-identify have access to a veteran support network at the participating site to ensure their transition is smooth and that they are set up for success. A woman veteran student who is unable to transition to adult learner successfully for whatever reason may see how despite challenges, their peers transitioned successfully to adult learner and experienced an enriched quality of life both professionally and personally. The study's relevance to social change is that the administrators and staff at the participating site may better understand the services and support needed for women veterans to succeed and reach their educational goals.

### **Research Question**

As women veterans redefine themselves as adult learners, they are going to experience difficulties, such as self-identity and feelings of alienation. By nature of their

gendered-military experience, they have learned to be passive. Some will selectively seek and accept help from faculty members and the campus's veterans resource center and will successfully transition, while others for various reasons will not successfully transition. Based on communication with women veteran students at the local study site, the military resources director stated that this study addresses an underresearched area of higher education. Belenky et al. (as cited in DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011) mentioned that the lack of research in this area is similar to silencing women who never really had a voice. The military resource director revealed that in fall 2019 approximately 50% of veterans were female; 83% of female veterans were enrolled full time compared to 81% for male veterans who were enrolled full time. Albright et al. (2019) assessed the support services postsecondary schools provided to veteran students and suggested that little is known about self-identified women veterans' transition to adult learner. Their research identified clear gaps in understanding what support is needed to help these self-identified women veterans successfully achieve their academic goals. The research question for this study was the following:

What are the perceptions of self-identified women veteran students regarding their success to transitioning from active duty to adult learner?

### **Review of the Literature**

To locate literature on the topic of women veterans' transition from active duty to adult learner on campus, I searched ERIC and Thoreau databases, the Walden library, and Google Scholar using the following key words: *postsecondary* and *higher education*; *university* and *college*; *women* and/or *female veterans*; *adult learners*; and *nontraditional*

*students*. In this literature review, I discuss the conceptual framework, veterans preparing for change, veterans having family support, and female veterans finding their voice. The literature review focused on theories and research that related to women veteran students being unable to transition successfully to adult learner.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study centers around Schlossberg's (1981) theory of adult transition and Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory. These two theories help to understand better the women veteran students' successful transition to adult learner. Schlossberg's adult transition theory addressed how adults cope with various transitions in their lives to include births, deaths, promotions, and completion of goals, such as postsecondary degrees. This theory is relevant to this study because Schlossberg's (1985) transitional model explores how a transition affects an individual's life and how the individual handles it. In this case, the theory helps to understand how women veteran students at the local study site successfully transitioned from active-duty military to adult learner on a college campus, despite having to face challenges, such as being more likely to meet the criteria for PTSD and more likely to be victims of sexual abuse compared with their male counterparts. Schlossberg's theoretical framework relates to ways in which these women veteran students may have overcome their challenges and successfully made the transition. The way in which adults handle transitions reveals how they explore, understand, and cope with ongoing life changes (Schlossberg, 1981). Griffin and Gilbert (2016) applied Schlossberg's transition theory to their qualitative

study when they explored how resources at colleges and universities can be critical to helping the veteran student meet their educational goals during their transition.

Mezirow (1997) described the transformative learning theory as “the process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (p. 5). Moreover, Mezirow illustrated that people understand their experiences through frames of reference, which are structured assumptions and that they select their perceptions based on their frame of reference. Nohl (2015) discussed the practical basis for the transformative learning process, based on Mezirow’s original theory, and proposed a model of the typical phases in transformative learning. Some of the phases included disorientating dilemma, self-examining one’s feelings of fear or shame, and planning a way forward. The transformative learning theory is relevant to this study because Mezirow’s original study focused on how a woman’s perspective changes after an extended break from academia (Calleja, 2014). The amount of time the women veteran students in this study have been away from academia varies. Whether 2 years or 20 years, the women veteran students’ perspective probably is different from what it would be if they were attending college directly after high school. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory shows how the women veteran students’ experiences as active-duty service members have changed whatever previous perspective they may have had regarding postsecondary education. Consequently, after they transition from active duty to adult learner on a college campus, they revise their earlier perspectives because of their military experiences.

### **Review of the Broader Problem**

As the U.S. military reduces its forces, many women veterans, armed with educational benefits from the post-9/11 GI Bill, are pursuing their degrees. Some of these women veterans are able to transition successfully from active duty to adult learner and parlay their degrees into lucrative postmilitary careers. Conversely, some women veterans are unable to transition successfully and meet their educational goals, according to the military resource director at the local site. This is significant because the reasons some women are unable to meet their educational goals may range from mental health conditions, according to Eakman et al. (2019), to a lack of day care for their children. In addition, women veterans who are unable to meet their educational goals tend to earn lower wages and according to Albright et al. (2020) tend to not participate in civic engagements.

Almost 2 million U.S. servicemembers have returned home from wartime service and are seeking new opportunities, such as expanding their knowledge and skill sets, becoming more marketable, and achieving career goals (Demers, 2013; McBain et al., 2012), to secure a future for themselves and their families. Almost 16% of these servicemembers are women, and Pelts and Albright (2015) insinuated that many will be seeking postsecondary degrees using their Post 9/11 GI Bill. Heineman (2017) used the grounded theory methodology in her qualitative study to explore women veterans' transition and observed female veterans, noting that many of these female veterans will have unique needs and that college faculty should be equipped to support these women to ensure they transition successfully as adult learners on their college campuses. Bonura

and Lovald (2015) observed the crucial areas, such as federal regulations and military structures, that college faculty should understand to better serve military populations.

According to Pellegrino et al. (2015), in their study on educational research among veterans, there are few studies that address veteran students' transition to adult learner, particularly the female veteran student and the specific challenges they face such as motherhood and marriage. MacDonald (2018) explored the best practices for what nontraditional students need based on the varied issues they face in reentering a classroom and suggested that veteran students are considered nontraditional students, and as the new majority, it is incumbent upon faculty and staff to learn how to work with these students. "A lack of knowledge about this population has led to low enrollment rates and high attrition rates," according to MacDonald (2018, p. 1). Olt (2018) used a layered-account autoethnographic approach to show his perspectives on the veteran student and concluded that despite the growing number of servicemembers enrolling in postsecondary education, the amount of information regarding the veteran student's transition to adult learner is modest.

Shudofsky and Ballan (2018), in their study which included veteran student peer mentors, remarked that as veterans transition from active duty to adult learner, their unique issues are not being fully explored. Dyar (2019), in a scoping review, surmised that although military veterans have many strengths because of their varied military training, they still may experience barriers during their transition as students. One area in particular is going from a regimented military environment to a relaxed college environment. Street et al. (2009) in their study findings remarked that "women are more



likely than men to meet criteria for PTSD” (p. 687) and suggested that women veterans are faced with overcoming unique challenges that their male counterparts do not experience.

According to Graf et al. (2015), in their study findings from an online survey that included 215 veteran students, some veteran students who self-identified as having PTSD implied that they sometimes experienced symptoms in the classroom. Franklin (2009) expressed that women veterans are more likely to meet the criteria for PTSD and more likely to be victims of sexual abuse compared with their male counterparts. These type of unique military experiences affect their successful transition when they leave the military. Support does exist to assist veteran students with a smooth transition to adult learner; however, the support needs to be modified (Evans et al., 2015). For example, colleges and universities could track the veteran students’ status by creating a web page that enables the students to access information, such as support contacts, available services, and downloadable forms. The information captured will enable colleges and universities to track the veteran student’s progress and/or identify where the needs are (Evans et al., 2015).

Morgan et al. (2020), in their longitudinal study which examined the military-to-civilian reintegration of new post-9/11 veterans, stated that although there are many programs to assist veterans with their transition, sometimes veteran students are met with barriers that hinder their smooth transition. Thomas et al. (2017) surmised from their study, which included mixed-methods analysis of open- and closed-ended questions, that in some instances where services are being offered to assist the women veteran student

with their transition, they opt to not participate. According to Osborne (2014), although the number of resources for transitioning veterans has increased, the number of institutions ensuring faculty and staff are trained to handle these veterans' issues is deficient.

Moreover, Heineman (2017) stated that when the faculty is prepared and equipped to address these female veterans' needs as they transition to adult learners, this increases the likelihood of the now-veteran student to transition successfully as adult learner. Young and Phillips (2019) focused on two areas of the veteran student's transition: challenges faced and most effective support. The authors assessed that if colleges and universities knew the answers to those two questions, they could more effectively support the veteran student with a smooth transition from active duty to adult learner. Ghosh et al. (2019) conducted an exploratory study of 134 veterans and assessed that veteran students enrolled in postsecondary programs had lower grade point averages than their civilian counterparts. In addition, between 2009 and 2015, among the roughly 850,000 veteran students using their GI Bill, it appears that 28% of those veteran students withdrew without receiving a degree or certificate (Ghosh et al., 2019).

Atuel and Castro (2018) defined military cultural competence as follows:

What is meant by military culture pertains to the defining characteristics of the military as an organization with a formal structure, as a cultural group governed by norms, and as a social group that provides people with identities. These three factors interact with each other to define the boundaries delineating military and civilian cultures. (p 76)

Atuel and Castro (2018) explained the military's chain of command and how it revolves around commanding officers with various superior and subordinate roles (e.g., commissioned officers, warrant officers, non-commissioned officers and enlisted). The chain of command identifies the servicemembers' rightful place, defines the servicemembers' relationship with each other, and dictates appropriate behavior based on servicemembers' role and status.

Active-duty servicemembers know their chain of command, obey their chain of command, and understand the consequences of disobeying the chain of command. Active-duty servicemembers are instructed by a set of military orders, which are created for them by their respective branch headquarters and distributed through their chain of command. The military orders drive the servicemember's move from place to place, what leadership schools to take and when, what training to take, etc. Servicemembers receive a full-time salary and are paid twice a month. When their military obligation ends, so does that salary, along with other benefits, such as medical, dental, etc. So, it is not unusual for the transitioning servicemember to experience a fear of leaving the military. In some cases, this is the servicemember's first time seeking employment because they entered the military directly after high school. The servicemember is making their own decisions regarding details as mundane as their attire (Atuel & Castro, 2018).

### ***Preparing for Change***

DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), in their study which blended the theoretical, practical, and empirical, assessed that some women were able to prepare for the change and to transition to adult learner successfully because their preparation was deliberate and

planned. These women faced challenges, such as delays with their Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits and child care, but overcame those challenges and were able to transition successfully. Gregg et al. (2016) conducted a phenomenological study “to describe the lived experiences of student veterans transitioning from active military service to postsecondary education” (p. 1). Gregg et al.’s study included interviews with 13 veteran students, and the study findings revealed that some veterans prepare for a successful transition to adult learner by remembering the positive and negative behaviors they learned while on active duty. The positive experiences included being accountable and being disciplined enough to work with minimal oversight, which were incorporated into their transition as adult learners. The negative experiences, such as being responsible for a team member and being unable to schedule your own life, also served as preparation for change for these female veterans. Being responsible for one’s self is far easier than being responsible for a team, which carries certain stressors. As a squad or platoon leader, servicemembers are responsible for not only their team members’ combat readiness but also for other stressors that may arise, such as ensuring the team member is fiscally sound, physically fit, and job savvy. Having the freedom to finally schedule one’s own life enabled these self-identified female veterans to enroll in school when they chose to and not when it was convenient for the military.

Academia also was part of some female veterans’ preparation for change. Jenner (2017), in a qualitative study, blended literature related to the veteran student’s transition process and their experiences during their transition and addressed some of the concerns about this population’s success in meeting their educational goals. I surmised from

Jenner's study that female veterans who enrolled in colleges and universities with an extensive understanding of the military transition process were better prepared with their transition to adult learner.

The transition process occurs when the servicemember is leaving active duty and returning to being a civilian. Through an extensive network of relationships, services, and benefits, the military assists the servicemember with planning and preparing for endeavors in the civilian world after leaving active duty. According to the military resource director at the local study site, the network includes the individual military branches, the interagency Transition Assistance Program (TAP), and various community resources and provides information and/or assistance with navigating education, homeownership, insurance, and the servicemember's well-being. The information disseminated during the TAP briefings is broad and does not address specific questions the servicemember may have. For example, the servicemembers are told what benefits are available to them after they leave active-duty status, such as post education benefits, funeral costs, and so forth, but they may not be told the specific forms or the time required for submissions (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, n.d.). Moreover, no studies have been conducted to evaluate whether the TAP program is effective or how effective it is. A characteristic of adult learning is that adults seek out and retain information when they perceive they need it, not necessarily when it is presented. Although the training is given as part of the servicemember's transition from the military, the individual may be going through information overload and may not process the TAP training during the time it is presented, but would be more receptive once they are

actively seeking help and assistance, roughly 6 months to a year later (Disabled American Veterans, 2014).

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (n.d.), during the education benefits briefing of the program, servicemembers are told about their VA education and training benefits. These education and training benefits may be used at institutions of higher learning, including 4-year universities, community colleges, and entities offering advanced degrees. Servicemembers also are told how to apply for education benefits and how tuition payments are calculated against their GI Bill entitlement. However, they are not informed on things such as how to apply to colleges; that the majority of learning occurs outside the classroom and requires a significant individual effort; or whether the campus has a full-time veteran counselor, a Student Veterans of America (SVA) chapter, or a Principles of Excellence program.

Kirchner (2015) stated that to support the veteran student effectively, colleges and universities need to understand this population. In this qualitative study, Kirchner gave an overview of this nontraditional student population and its transition to adult learner. He also provided suggestions on how colleges and universities can help the veteran student assimilate into the classroom smoothly. He said that many veteran students are going from high operational tempo, highly structured environments to the environments where the responsibility to succeed or fail is solely based on their efforts Kirchner emphasized that in colleges and universities where orientation sessions were held, some of the veteran students' concerns were eased. Sessions that focused on financial and education benefits,

coping strategies, and how to connect students to community groups such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, appeared to be quite beneficial.

In a phenomenological study by Gregg et al. (2016), 13 veteran students were interviewed to learn that three areas that may help the self-identified student veteran successfully transition to adult learner were: “repurposing military experiences for life as a student veteran, reconstructing civilian identity, and navigating postsecondary context and interactions” (p. 1). According to Griffin and Gilbert (2015), in their qualitative study using Schlossberg’s transition theory, one way that former President Barack Obama intended for the United States to lead the world in terms of college completions by 2020 was by recognizing the increased veteran population and developing strategies that increase their graduation rates. The objective was twofold; it would have a positive impact on the former president’s goal and make the United States competitive while rewarding veterans for their service.

Veteran students who enrolled in a first-year transition course at applicable colleges and universities were better prepared to transition successfully as an adult learner, according to McMenamain (2016). McMenamain acknowledged that transition programs help veteran students to not only remain in school but also to complete their postsecondary education. McMenamain expressed that because of the integral differences between being active-duty servicemembers and adult learners on a college campus, veteran students benefitted from transitional courses, such as resume writing and how to convert their military experience to civilian experience. McMenamain also hinted that military variables such as expectations, structure, and learning outcomes also differ from

those on a college campus. If these expectations are not addressed and clarified to the veteran student, their transition as an adult learner on a college campus may be hindered.

### ***Having Family Support***

Studies showed that some female veterans were able to transition successfully because of strong family support and the Post 9/11 GI Bill (Sander 2012). Sander highlighted one female veteran in particular, who after several years of active-duty military service, initially had no interest in becoming an adult learner on a college campus. However, after being encouraged by her family and with the use of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, she was able to successfully make the transition. Martis (2015) collected data not only from the military veterans but also from their family members, and surmised that veteran students who received support from family, friends, and fellow servicemembers will likely have fewer negative experiences on college campus and are more likely to successfully transition to adult learners. Veteran students who received a higher level of family support tend to experience a successful transition to adult learner.

Dill and Henley (1998) examined how nontraditional students view stress in their lives. Forty-seven students participated in the study, and the ages ranged from 24 to 54 years old. Sixty-two percent of the participants were female. The participants completed a questionnaire, and their responses were interpreted using the Adolescent Perceived Events Scale for college students. According to Dill and Henley, the stressful academic experiences of veteran students were offset by successes in other areas of their life, such as completing military commitment and enjoying a stable home environment.



According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 47% undergraduate and 55% percent graduate student-veterans are married (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2020). Spousal support can be instrumental in the student veteran's successful transition to adult learner. Unfortunately, some veteran students attended college near their last duty station and, consequently, were not co-located with extended family members. Fortunately, one's support network is not limited to family members but also can include faculty members and friends. Faculty members can become an extended family and support network for the veteran student by showing concern not only from an academic perspective but also a personal perspective. Heineman (2017) stated that faculty members also can support female veterans with a successful transition to adult learner by addressing the special needs, transition issues, challenges, and opportunities that these individuals bring to the college environment.

Wild and Mahapatra (2018) studied a university to assess its level of preparedness to assure success for all veteran students transitioning to adult learner. The university was assessed in three areas: support, which focused on veteran student services; needs, which focused on what the faculty perceived as the veteran student's needs; and barriers, which focused on challenges the university faced with addressing the veteran students' needs. Wild and Mahapatra concluded that although the university supported the veteran students, training was still necessary for the university's faculty and staff to ensure the veteran students' successful transition to adult learner.

This study reinforced Pryce's (2016) assessment where in his book he addressed the veteran student and topics such as diversity and multiculturalism, student veterans'

transition to adult learner, mental health, and a needs assessment model. Wild and Mahapatra's study also reinforced a mixed-methods study by Parks et al. (2015). The study included 51 veteran students. All 51 veteran students participated in the quantitative portion of the study, and five of the 51 also participated in the qualitative portion. The goal of the study was to determine how college and university advisors can prepare themselves to help veteran students transition successfully to adult learner.

### ***Finding Her Voice***

Reis and Menezes (2020) conducted a qualitative study that defined guidelines for future research and intensified discussion regarding the challenges and opportunities of women integrating in the military. Their study was structured in three sections: the methodological process, the phenomenon of gender inequalities in a military context, implications and suggestions for future research. They acknowledged that the armed forces is a male-dominated entity and despite efforts, obstacles which date from the beginning of the incorporation of women into the military still exist to some extent. Reis and Menezes also stated that although numbers are increasing, women still represent a minority in the U.S. military and continue to face common challenges with male servicemembers. Being on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week brings a certain level of stressors, and when deployed to a combat environment or any other unstable environment. Particularly among women veterans, the stress is compounded and includes alienation and marginalization. While on active duty in this environment, female veterans often find themselves taking orders rather than giving them, which can lead to assimilating and losing her voice. It is not uncommon for female veterans transitioning to

adult learner to experience an identity crisis, particularly during the early part of their transition.

Meiners (2019) conducted a study that examined the transition of 85 veteran students and some of their challenges, which included lacking self-confidence with their academics and feeling out of place. When women transition from active duty to adult learner, they seem to disappear on campus. Heitzman and Somers (2015) framed their phenomenological study around the transition theory and surveyed 51 female veteran students to examine their experiences transitioning to adult learner. For example, although women veteran students may miss socializing with other veteran students, they may not join veteran-specific organizations to avoid having to be once again part of a male-dominated culture and thus veteran students seemingly disappear (Heitzman & Somers, 2015).

Love et al. (2015) surveyed 189 veteran students and assessed that some veteran students wanted to blend in with their civilian counterparts in class but were reluctant to express themselves because of negative experiences, such as being perceived as weak by their male counterparts, during active duty. The military culture is male dominated and an environment where weakness is disrespected. Service women often find themselves having to redefine their gender to survive. They have to check their femininity at the door because of a fear of being perceived as weak. In the classroom, these women veterans are now students and the military structure is removed. Unfortunately, they find themselves once again having to redefine their identity. Strong et al. (2018) conducted a case study and insinuated that as nontraditional students, veterans often find their transition to adult

learner difficult, particularly when trying to connect and establish relationships with traditional college students. After leaving the military and transitioning to adult learner on a college campus, the female veteran students may experience some challenges until they are able to seek help and they are often an invisible population.

Using a mixed-method approach, DiRamio et al. (2015) investigated women veteran students' attitudes regarding seeking help during their transition. The study findings revealed that the male-dominant military service did shape women's attitudes toward seeking help, even help with transitioning to being an adult learner. Sansone and Segura (2020), in an exploratory study, used time hazard models to address the need for research on veteran students. The study also confirmed the assessment made by DiRamio et al. that women veteran students' difficulty transitioning to adult learner sometimes depends on their assimilation into a male-dominated military. Heineman (2017) tracked three female veterans during their transition to adult learning. The female veterans found their voice and resumed their identity and pursued their dreams rather than the military's mission. Moreover:

The female veterans were focused, independent, and more mature than traditional community college students due to their unique, military experience. Because of their gendered military experience, however, they relied on a more individualized and self-focused approach to find their individual voices and personal identities as they transitioned to student–veteran status. (Heineman, 2017, p. 83)

In this qualitative study, Atuel and Castro (2018) explored the military's chain of command, military norms, and military identity and how they define and differentiate the

military environment from the civilian environment. The chain of command is a social network of symbiotic roles within an ordered power hierarchy. It determines authority, responsibility, decision-making, and communication flow. Military norms include the beliefs, values, traditions, behaviors, and events directly related to military service and life as well as the language servicemembers use to communicate with one another. Regarding its identity, the military is sometimes perceived as a warrior culture. It is a 24/7 occupation and servicemembers are always in a state of readiness.

The military's objectives are designed to complement the servicemembers' combat readiness. Consequently, the servicemember is required to participate in recurring field training exercises and classroom training, which can both be interrupted at any time because of mission requirements. Depending on the class, the military instructor's goals are to ensure the individual either can survive successfully in a combat environment or lead others successfully in a combat environment. Military learning environments are set up to ensure the individual is put in a *student* mindset, meaning walking in formation, doing pushups when disobeying an order, and having a curfew.

Southwell et al. (2018) surveyed 199 veteran students in their study and demonstrated that veteran students were indoctrinated into the military culture, which emphasized "strength, discipline, meeting or exceeding high expectations, assuming leadership positions, and teamwork" (p. 398). The university environment, which is less structured than a military environment, may make the veteran student's transition challenging. As an adult learner on a college campus, the veteran student's attire is her choice, and class attendance is her responsibility. The veteran student is treated as an

adult. The instructor's goal is to ensure the veteran student meets certain objectives to indicate that the material is understood and that either a certificate or degree will be awarded. Despite the differences in learning environments, Hammond (2017) used a historic lens to gain insight into the relationship between the U.S. military and higher education and revealed that active-duty veterans can successfully transition as adult learners on college campuses when educational and cultural adjustments are made. He suggested that although student veterans are "financially independent, disciplined, and goal-oriented" (Hammond, 2017, p. 18), the odds of graduating are not in their favor. Cate (2014), remarked that 51.7% of veteran students receive a bachelor's degree.

The number of women veteran students with service-related disabilities is increasing. In 2019, Maynard et al. conducted a study that assessed at that time there were almost 400,000 women veterans with service-connected conditions. According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2017), the five most common service-connected disabilities for women veterans in 2015 were PTSD; major depressive disorder; migraine; lumbosacral or cervical strain; and uterus and ovaries, removal of, complete. These challenges, coupled with the regular challenges that stem from being a student, reduce the likelihood that the veteran student will meet their educational goals unless colleges and universities make the cultural and educational adjustments to meet these veteran students' needs.

As stated in the Rationale section, the culture and education adjustments between the military and a college campus differ significantly. Vacchi (2012) provided guidance on how colleges and universities could more effectively serve this population. They said

one of the things that puts veteran students at a disadvantage on a campus is a “lack of ability to navigate the systems and bureaucracy” (p. 5). College freshman are free to make their own choices to learn how to become more independent and how to navigate various social scenes on college campuses. Burkhart and Hogan (2015) interviewed 20 women veterans for their study based on the grounded theory. From the study, Burkhart and Hogan assessed that the upon entering the military, the women veterans’ initial reaction was “cultural shock that required that they adapt to the military culture and the role of becoming a servicewoman” (p. 7). Servicemembers, known as recruits initially, are in basic training in sometimes dismal locations such as Parris Island, SC, learning to navigate the mental and physical demands. Military adaptation is a process that begins when you arrive at bootcamp and ends when you complete bootcamp. During the process, which is designed to be stressful, the recruit learns self-discipline and teamwork and gains physical and emotional strength; once bootcamp concludes, the recruit has transitioned into a servicemember. The instruction and indoctrination that the servicemembers receive during basic training include customs and practices of military life, physical fitness, military drill, discipline, a willingness to immediately obey all lawful orders given by superiors, and oftentimes, basic armed and unarmed combat training.

### **Implications**

As a result of the study’s findings, a position paper might be a solution to the problem for the staff to ensure that they are equipped to address the needs of these self-identified women veteran students and to help them successfully transition to adult learners at the local study site’s

college campus. The position paper may include gender-specific support services. I propose an individual support plan for each self-identified woman veteran student to identify her specific needs and the services available to address those needs. The results of this study showed that the local study site needs to add additional services. In a qualitative study by Heineman (2017), using a grounded theory methodology, 19 women veteran students were interviewed, The study revealed that the number of women veterans pursuing postsecondary education is increasing and that the faculty at these colleges and universities need to be aware of how certain outliers, such as lack of family support and inadequate financial aid may influence their successful transition.

### **Summary**

Many of the women veterans at the local study site transitioned to adult learner to expand their skill set. According to the military resources director at the local study site, if colleges are not well prepared to accommodate women veteran students, this lack of services could hinder their success. Once these women veterans transition from active-duty status to student status, they may have to overcome various challenges to succeed as women veteran students.

Section 1 of this study describes the study's basic elements. It begins with defining the local problem, which is that some women veterans are not successfully transitioning from active-duty military to adult learner on a college campus. Next, it describes the rationale. Many of those women are transitioning to adult learner to expand their skill set. The rationale is followed by a list of defined terms to help the reader understand the terminology used throughout the study. The study's significance follows. The study is significant because its findings may provide insight into how successful



women veteran students' transition from active-duty military to adult learner on a college campus. Moreover, knowing how some women veteran students who are former active-duty military are able to successfully transition to adult learners benefits stakeholders such as academic advisors, the administration, and other women veteran students. The research question and the literature review complete the section 1.

Section 2 provides an overview of the methodology of the study. It begins with the research design and approach, followed by the criteria for selecting specific individuals to participate in the study, justifying the number of participants, and finally describing the procedures for gaining access to the participants. Data collection follows research design and approach and includes describing the data for collection; identifying the instrument; identifying the source for the instrument; establishing sufficient instruments to answer research questions; providing processes for how and when the data are to be generated, gathered, and recorded; describing systems to track the data; explaining the procedures for gaining access to participants; presenting the role of the researcher; presenting how data will be analyzed; and describing the evidence to assure accuracy.

Section 3 describes the project, which was a position paper. In this section, I provide a rationale of why the specific project was chosen for the study. I also provide a review of literature for this section, which is related to the position paper. The position paper is the most appropriate genre for this type of study based on the findings. The position paper gives the reader an overview of the findings without reading the entire

study. This section also shows the connection between the theory and the conceptual framework.

Section 4 explores my reflections and concludes the study. In this section, I reflect on the project's strengths and limitations as well as how it pertains to being a deliverable for the stake holders. My recommendations include ways I could have addressed the problem differently and alternative approaches based on the study findings. In this section, I also reflect on my role as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. Lastly, Section 4 provides a reflection on why this study is important and its implications toward future research.

## Section 2: The Methodology

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described methodology as “the general logic and theoretical perspective for a research project” (p. 35). This study addresses the guiding research question: What are the perceptions of self-identified women veteran students regarding their success to transitioning from active duty to adult learner? In this section, I describe the research design and approach and the participants, how I established a researcher-participant working relationship, measures I took to protect the participants’ rights, and data collection and data analysis conducted for this research study. This subsection describes how and when the data were analyzed and the evidence of quality and procedures to assure accuracy and credibility of the findings and explains the procedures for dealing with discrepancies.

I chose the basic qualitative design because, according to Merriam (2009), this design explores uncovering phenomenon instead of simply understanding the cause and effect of a situation. The selection of this design is based on the research question for this study. The theory of adult transition (Schlossberg, 1981) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) framed this study. Data collection for this study consisted of interviews, which also are characteristic of the basic qualitative design approach.

### **Research Design and Approach**

The research design derives logically from the problem and research question in the following way. The problem is that, according to the military resource director, there are some self-identified women veteran students who are not meeting their educational goals at the local study site. The research question—What are the perceptions of self-

identified women veteran students regarding their success to transitioning from active duty to adult learner—stems from the problem. Since the data collected from the study were in the form of interviews, I used the qualitative research design. The qualitative design “focuses on giving voice to the feelings and perceptions of the participants in a study” (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 142).

The basic qualitative research design is the appropriate choice for this study because the research question is focused on the perceptions of the participants. I justified using this type of design because the type of data being collected (i.e., interview data) is based on the participants’ beliefs, attitudes, perspectives which are qualitative data. Neither the case study nor the phenomenology approach is suitable for this study because in a case study, the researcher focuses on the participants’ exploration and description rather than trying to generalize their feelings, and in the phenomenological study, the researcher describes the participants’ lived experiences (Lodico et al., 2010). In addition, a case study although similar, according to Bogdan and Biklan, (2007) is described as a “detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event” (p. 59). The case study would require other sources of information than simply interviews.

Schlossberg’s (1981) theory of adult transition and Mezirow’s (1997) theory of transformative learning provide a foundation to view the insights of women veteran students at the participating site. I examined how women who self-identified as veteran students at the participating site confront barriers and their perception of how they were able to successfully transition to adult learning.

Neither the quantitative nor the mixed-method design were appropriate for this study. The quantitative design looks at statistical data and is not suited for collecting data based on a participant's perspective. Creswell (2009) expressed that the quantitative design tests objective theories by examining relationships among variables and the mixed-method design combines both quantitative and qualitative designs. Researchers using this design not only collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data, but they do so simultaneously to strengthen the study. Therefore, the mixed-method design would not be suitable for this study, which involved collecting data based on each participant's perception.

### **Participants**

I interviewed 10 participants for the study. Merriam (2009) stated that there is no specific number for research participants, but that the number depends on several factors, such as the questions being asked and the willingness and availability of the participants. Saturation is the standard by which nonprobability sample sizes should be determined in social and behavioral research, at least according to the methodological literature. (Guest et al., 2013, pp. 41-74). Data saturation was reached upon interviewing 10 self-identified women veterans. The self-identified women veterans in this study were enrolled at the local site. I selected this site for several reasons. The study site has self-identified women veterans enrolled, and a contact was identified who showed support for my research study. After leaving active duty, I successfully transitioned to adult learner and earned my master's degree while working full time and raising two school-aged sons.

**Criteria**

The criteria for selecting the participants were that they had to be self-identified women veterans of any branch of the U.S. military and currently enrolled in the local study site. According to Merriam (2009), researchers sample until they saturate the population. The number of women veterans in the sample depended on the “questions being asked, the data being gathered, the analysis in progress, and the resources I have to support the study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 80). I needed an adequate number of women veterans to explore how women veterans who were no longer on active duty and attending the local study site were able to successfully transition from active duty to adult learner. I considered the number of women veterans needed, the length of time that would be needed, and attrition, and I interviewed 10 women veterans to provide sufficient data to explore their perceptions on why they were able to successfully transition from active duty to adult learner at the local site.

**Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants**

I received institutional review board (IRB) approval from Walden. Afterwards, I completed the participating site’s IRB application and provided a copy of my approved proposal. After the site approved my study, I was granted access to the students. To contact the participants, I submitted the flyer to the site’s military resource director who posted it on approved social media sites that serve women veteran students. The flyer included my Walden email address for women veterans who were interested to email me and indicate their interest in participating. The flyer also noted that study participants would received a \$5 Starbucks gift card. When the self-identified woman veteran student

responded, I sent her a copy of the consent form via email, asking her to read it thoroughly. If the participant agreed to be in the study, an interview was scheduled at a private meeting location, and a copy of the consent form was sent for her to sign. On the day of the interview, I asked the participant whether she had any questions regarding the consent form, then I took the signed copy. I reminded the participant that I wanted to ensure that I had her exact wording and confirm whether she agreed with the interview being recorded. To establish the researcher-participant working relationship, I was accommodating; showed interest in the participants by acknowledging that I, too, am a woman veteran who successfully transitioned from active duty to adult learner; avoided barriers between me and the participants; dressed appropriately; and avoided biases.

### **Procedures for Protecting the Participants' Rights**

I assessed the importance of establishing safeguards to protect the women veterans' rights during the study as insinuated by Lodico et al. (2010). To protect the participants' rights and confidentiality and to anticipate and mitigate any ethical issues, I provided the participants a consent form to review and sign before the interview began. The form was based on the consent form example created by Walden University and included the researcher's name, the sponsoring institution, how the participants were selected, the purpose of the research, the benefits for participating, the level and type of participant involvement, acknowledgment that the interviews were recorded, and the risks to the participant. I assured the participants that their participation was confidential and that they could withdraw at any time, and that I would provide the names of contact persons, if questions arose.

## **Data Collection**

To determine the participants for the study, I disseminated flyers either virtually via distribution lists approved by the local study site's military resource director or in person to approved locations at the local study site that serves women veteran students, which is a form of purposeful sampling (Lodico et al., 2010). The flyers included my Walden email address for self-identified women veterans who were interested to email me and indicate their interest in participating.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Data were collected through interviews that consisted of open-ended questions. Merriam (2009) expressed that interviews are the most effective collection instrument for the qualitative research method because this instrument enables the researcher to explain and understand the participants' experiences and perspectives. Interviews enabled me to control the line of questioning and provide the flexibility to be conducted face-to-face or via telephone or a videoconferencing platform (e.g., Skype, Zoom) and have a recorded transcript. The interviews lasted roughly 1 hour per participant. I asked each participant the same questions.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

To generate, gather, and record the data, I asked open-ended questions and made hand-written notes as well as audio record the interviews. According to Creswell (2009), asking open-ended questions is the most effective way to allow a participant to communicate their experiences. Asking this type of question also allowed me to understand the participants' perceptions regarding their success to transitioning from



active duty to adult learner. The interviews were conducted via the Zoom videoconferencing platform (<https://zoom.us>). Merriam (2009) surmised that interviews enable the researcher to effectively collect data. The interview protocol form was used to make notations regarding participants' responses. The form included a heading (i.e., date, place, interviewer, interviewee); the 10 interview questions; probes for the questions; and a final thank-you. The interviews were entered into a spreadsheet to keep track of data collected. I used the triangulation process to ensure my findings and interpretations were accurate.

### **Participant Access**

To gain access to participants, once I received IRB approval from Walden (Approval no. 02-19-21-0109430), I completed the site's IRB application to include providing a copy of my approved proposal. Once the site approved my study and granted me permission to access potential participants, I submitted a flyer to the site's military resource director, who posted it to approved social media sites that serve women veteran students. Interested participants reached out via my Walden email address on the flyer, and I provided initial information regarding the study and asked whether they were still interested. With those who were still interested, I set up an amenable time for a virtual one-on-one interview via Zoom and sent them the consent form. Before each interview began, I confirmed receipt of the signed consent form and asked for additional questions. Each meeting was recorded from start to finish.

During our initial meeting, before the interview begins, I explained to the participants the purpose of the study, that the study was strictly voluntary, and that their

participation could end at any time they choose (Lodico et al., 2010). I explained the informed consent form to the participant and ensured they understood it and that their participation was confidential. Once those administrative items were addressed, the semistructured interview began. I asked each participant 10 open-ended questions. According to Hagaman and Wutich (2017), the number of interview questions varies depending on several factors; however, they concluded that 16 or fewer interviews questions were enough to identify common themes among a similar group. The interview began with an ice-breaker, and I followed Creswell's (2009) suggestion that the last statement be a final thank-you to the participant for their time. I conducted a couple of follow-up interviews to clarify a response.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My relationship with the local site was to collect and analyze data. I had no relationships with any students attending the local site. My experiences related to the topic included being a women student veteran who has successfully transitioned from active duty to adult learner, which could be a bias but should also enhance the interview process.

Admittedly, given my experiences, I had some biases. One bias is that I believe women veterans must constantly prove themselves to their male counterparts. As a woman veteran who transitioned successfully from active duty to an adult learner, admittedly, there were some similarities between the participants and me, which could lead to bias.

To control the bias, I did not interview anyone whom I had supervised, who had supervised me, or who had attended class with me. My committee and the Walden IRB vetted and approved the interview questions beforehand. During the interviews, to avoid skewing the participants' responses, I did not interject my personal opinions. When I transcribed the responses, I did not add text; I only wrote what the participants said. When I was unclear about something they said, I replayed the video to clarify. I gave each participant the opportunity to review a transcript of her interview to ensure that it was accurate.

However, I was always cognizant that I am the researcher and not the participant. This study was not about me, it was about the participants. My primary goal was to add to knowledge rather than to pass judgement.

### **Data Analysis**

Merriam (2009) urged researchers to look at data analysis in steps starting from the specific to the general. I used the inductive method, which Merriam stipulated involved "examining many small pieces of information and abstracting a connection between them" (p. 16), to analyze the data. I prepared and organized the transcripts from the interviews by transferring the information from the audio recorded interviews into a written form using Microsoft Word. The transcribed interviews were saved on a USB drive as well as on my computer's hard drive. The computer, which is password-protected, is located in my home, and I am the only user. The USB drive was password-protected and has a built-in feature called BitLocker.

The interview transcripts were reviewed several times to ensure the data collected were thoroughly explored. My initial read gave me an overall sense of what was in the transcript and enabled me to code the data using Lodico et al.'s (2010) "perspective of participants" (p. 183) coding technique. Coding is "identifying different segments of the data that describe related phenomena and labeling those parts using broad category names" (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 183). I coded the data into categories and then based on the participants' interview responses, identified relationships within the transcripts using code names such as perceptions, experiences, and events.

I used a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to record themes and categories. Clark and Vealé (2018) showed data analysis by explaining how to recognize the difference between objective observation and subjective perception. I developed emerging themes, which includes observing and recording patterns in the data, from the interview transcripts. After the patterns were combined, I created the codes, which were similar to the themes. Both the codes and themes were revised as needed. Kranke et al. (2016) used song lyrics in this study to teach qualitative data analysis and added that coding is an essential component of developing a sound qualitative analysis.

Matheson (2007) indicated that interviews conducted for a qualitative study are a good source for data analysis. From the analysis, I created a coding matrix that showed main ideas and data conclusions. Themes were developed from this matrix by comparing patterns. I built themes, such as what the participants said during the interview that addressed the research question. I reported and interpreted the data using the traditional

scientific format (Lodico et al., 2010). This process ensured the study was accurate because the information drew on multiple participants.

### **Evidence of Quality and Procedure**

I justified my evidence of quality by identifying a peer debriefer who signed a confidentiality agreement. Lodico et al. suggested that a peer debriefer examines the notes—but no raw data—and regularly meets with the researcher to provide an alternative perspective of looking at the data. I used the peer debriefer to re-examine my assumptions and to provide alternative ways of looking at the data. I also used member checks, which is when the researcher sends the transcribed, summarized interviews to the participants for review. Lodico et al. specified that researchers use member checks to ensure their biases do not influence how the participants' perspectives are portrayed.

### **Procedures for Dealing With Discrepant Cases**

Creswell (2009) stipulated that discrepant information is another strategy to check the accuracy of the findings. Discrepant cases occur when “information runs counter to the themes” (Creswell, p. 192). Real-life perspectives do not always align. When the contradictory evidence is presented, the overall findings become more realistic and their validity is stronger. When a discrepant case occurred, I acknowledged the discrepancy and explained it when I wrote up the study findings.

### **Data Analysis Results**

Maxwell (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) determined that data analysis begins early in the data collection process and is ongoing during the entire process. To conduct data collection and data analysis simultaneously, I determined which interview

questions worked best at addressing the research question and asked those questions during the first part of the interview. As I transcribed the data from the interviews, I was conscious of and often referred to the research question to determine whether the participants' responses addressed the question. The open-ended questions asked during the semistructured interview enabled me to probe the participants for more extensive responses.

### **How the Data Were Generated, Gathered, and Recorded**

To generate data for this qualitative study, I emailed a flyer to the local study site's military resource director who posted it to approved social media sites that serve women veteran students; this is a form of purposeful sampling (Lodico et al., 2010). The flyer included my Walden email address for self-identified women veterans to contact me and indicate their interest in participating. The participants reached out via email expressing their interest in participating in the study. Approximately 15 individuals reached out initially, but only 10 actually committed to and participated in the study. I scheduled Zoom meeting dates and times that were amenable for those 10 participants.

Data collection consisted of conducting virtual semistructured interviews that comprised of open-ended questions. Merriam (2009) suggested that interviews were the most effective collection instrument for the qualitative research method because this instrument enables the researcher to explain and understand the participants' experiences and perspectives. The interview protocol assisted me with controlling the line of questioning and with being consistent with each participant. I began each interview by introducing myself, asking the participant whether they minded being recorded and if

they had any questions regarding the consent form, then explaining the purpose of the study. I interviewed 10 women veteran students from the local site one-on-one via Zoom. The interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom because of the COVID-19 pandemic and lasted from roughly 30 minutes to 2.5 hours.

### **Building the Findings From the Data**

To build the findings from the problem and the research question for this qualitative study, I transcribed each interview and remained cognizant of the purpose of my study as articulated by the research question—What are the perceptions of self-identified women veteran students regarding their success to transitioning from active duty to adult learner? During my first read through of the transcribed data, I did just that—only read the data. During my second read, I created a color-coded Excel spreadsheet and coded the data, which, according to Creswell (2009), involved segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions. During another read, I condensed the data into smaller chunks, also known as themes, which enabled me to see patterns, relationships, and variations.

Merriam and Tisdell remarked that condensing the data into themes enables the researcher to remain focused while going from the raw data to data analysis. Through yet additional reads, I became more familiar with the data, and consequently, identified the following themes: facing challenges during transition from active duty, (b) believing in self-success, (c) having pride in serving one's country, (d) self-identifying as a veteran, (e) meeting the needs of women veterans, (f) adjusting as an adult learner, and (g) gaining access to services through SVA. These themes align with the research question:

What are the perceptions of self-identified women veteran students regarding their success to transitioning from active duty to adult learner?

### **Data Analysis Findings**

The participants appeared relaxed and eager to share their stories. I identified several salient themes during the interviews that aligned with the research question: What are the perceptions of self-identified women veteran students regarding their success to transitioning from active duty to adult learner?

#### ***Theme 1: Faced Challenges During Transitioning From Active Duty***

The participants experienced various challenges during their transition to adult learner. All participants, however, did not face the same challenges. Some of the recurring challenges mentioned were fear of failure, fear of leaving the military, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants, having experienced successful military careers, communicated that they feared failing academically. Participant 2 stated that “she had struggled academically and was put on academic probation at one point.” For these reasons, she feared failing out of school. Fortunately, she was able to take a break, reset, and get on track. Participant 2 said that during a conversation with one of her professors, she was not asked directly whether she was going to complete her postsecondary studies but “more so about life, about what we want, about what we know we deserve, about what we know we can tackle, and it was like a light-bulb moment.” Participant 6 revealed her fear of failing academically because of previous academic failures. She said, “I wasted my GI Bill because I could not do it.” However, she was encouraged by family members to try again and has been successful. Participant 8 feared failing academically



because as a recent divorcee, she was not sure whether she could juggle school and motherhood. She said, “you know, because my family came first, but then I had to find you know, where do I fit in to make sure that I’m able to succeed in school.” Participant 9 stated that initially she was not sure whether she would be successful academically because she had to travel out of state to drill duty at least once a month. Drill duty is monthly obligation members of the National Guard and Reserve Components have to fulfill. Fortunately, she has been able to do both and to meet her educational goals.

Participant 1, whose military transition was unexpected, explained it as “being weird.” Participant 1 also expressed that she was “terrified, because of being so used to everyone being like you.” Participant 10 explained her fear of leaving the military was driven by “having to mentally understand civilian terminology compared with military terminology.” According to Participant 3, one of the biggest fears of leaving the military is the financial piece. “Will I be able to find a job to support my family?” This is where meeting the educational goals becomes so important. Receiving the degree enables the servicemember to apply for higher paying jobs and to be more marketable. Participant 4 said, “financially, that has been the biggest challenge to overcome.”

The participants who transitioned from the military during the past year faced an unprecedented challenge—the COVID-19 pandemic. They were forced to rethink the entire college admissions and attendance processes. Colleges had minimal staff to mitigate the spread of the disease, which meant longer wait times for acceptance letters and responses to questions regarding financial aid, entitlements, etc. Participant 5 implied that “it was really tough getting into school because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They

like, weren't receiving my transcripts for some odd reason." The participants were not given the choice to attend class in person or online; all classes were online. Participant 8 noted that "COVID-19 brought on a level of stress that was unprecedented." She noted that the initial days were the worst because there were more questions than answers and students had no idea how it was going to affect their grades. Participant 7's approach initially was to try and wait it out; however, because she was close to completing her educational goal, she said, "I welcomed the opportunity for the online classes, if it meant being able to finish."

### ***Theme 2: Believing in Self-Success***

All 10 participants stated that their belief that they could succeed was not automatic or instant. There was not a single factor that drove their belief but multiple factors such as a determination to succeed, a positive work-life-school balance, family and faculty support, and pride in serving their country. The participants admitted that despite their delayed belief that they would be successful and the challenges they faced, failing was not an option and they were determined to succeed. The participants communicated that the military did not train them to fail, despite experiencing challenges such as being in a male-dominated environment and spending extended periods of time away from family.

The participants hinted that while on active duty they were determined to advance in the ranks and be promoted to the next level and that they were just as determined to succeed as an adult learner. Regarding a determination to succeed, Participant 3 said, "I had no choice; it was a goal. And because it was a goal, I was hard on myself. There was

no ifs, ands, or buts, I was completing it.” Participant 5 said, “I never doubted that I couldn’t compete it, but there were some challenges in a particular class.” In addition to being indoctrinated to succeed as a member of the U.S. military, Participant 8 implied she was determined to succeed because of the differences she observed between how male veterans were treated compared with female veterans. Participant 8 said, “I felt like sometimes I didn’t get the respect that I deserved as a veteran because you saw female first.”

The participants in the study perceived that having a positive work-life-school balance was a key component to their success. The research revealed that the work-life-balance ratio was different depending on the participant’s situation. Seven of the participants were wives as well as mothers and were juggling jobs and school, which was challenging. Finding the balance was critical to being able to successfully transition from active duty to adult learner. Participant 1 said, “I have two children; the youngest has developmental delays.” She juggles her schoolwork, being a wife, and taking her son to therapy three times a week. Online classes have been beneficial for some participants. Participant 2 has embraced the online classes because, working a full-time job, she has not had to be away from home to attend classes. Participant 2 said, “my fiancé has been my rock; he is very supportive.” One of the participants hired a nanny to come to the home in order to help with juggling her work-life balance. Participant 6 said, “it’s literally school, work, whatever I have left.” Although the participants were no longer on active duty, three were still fulfilling reserve duty obligations; consequently, they were

required to attend drill meetings twice a month and to be reactivated for duty 2 weeks during the summer, which often meant traveling away from home.

The participants perceived that having a supportive network, both family and faculty, also was important to their successful transition to adult learner. Having a supportive family network included parsing time for study and attending class. The participants acknowledged that the upside to attending class online was being able to spend more time at home. Participant 10, a wife and mother, said “I had to create a family schedule. I understood that like at 9:00 am, I am sitting at my desk. I literally had to create a schedule for everything.” She stated that the schedule included everything from when to cook meals to what time to transport children to their activities. Having supportive faculty members sometimes meant bringing the children to class, as one participant experienced. Participant 7, a wife and mother, said, “there were times where, and my daughter was young at the time, I would actually take her into the classroom with me and the instructors were very understanding.” Participant 9 is a single parent. She revealed that “being a single parent while on active duty was stressful.” However, having transitioned from active duty and being stable, her strong family support system has allowed her to complete her education goals.

### ***Theme 3: Having Pride in Serving Their Country***

The participants represented several branches of the United States military. Although their experiences and skill sets varied, their one commonality was being leaders while on active duty. Their leadership roles ranged from platoon sergeant, a position normally held by an individual in the rank of staff sergeant or E-6, to unit commander, a

position normally held by a colonel or O-6. The “E” indicates a person in the enlisted ranks and the “O” indicates a person in the officer ranks. Participant 5, a retired colonel (O-6), was commander of a unit. She said, “the military trains you as a leader no matter what. Whatever your job is, you are being trained to lead in that job.”

Participant 8, a retired major (O-4), said her pride went beyond just wearing the uniform. She said as a trained leader in the U.S. military, you wore that pride whether you were physically wearing the uniform. She said that pride is evident in every thing you do “both during while on active duty and after you transition from active duty.”

Participant 7, a sergeant (E-5), was married to a servicemember. They served in different branches and she spoke fondly of the friendly competition in their home. She said they both agreed that “their pride in serving their country has positively impacted other areas of their life.”

Participant 3 was a first-generation college student and “military brat.” This is the term that children of military parents are affectionately called. She perceived that her parents’ pride in serving in the U.S. military and using the military to catapult them to transition to adult learner were among the events that motivated her to be successful. The participants perceived their roles as leaders and pride in representing their respective military branches as key to their successful transition to adult learner. Being able to adjust and pivot successfully during challenging times gave the military servicemembers pride in themselves and credibility and respect among their peers. Consequently, being able to successfully transition to adult learning gave them that same pride.

#### ***Theme 4: Self-Identifying as a Veteran***

The participants perceived that self-identifying as a veteran was instrumental in their successful transition. Participant 1 said, “I feel like self-identifying is something that I did not realize I did. It was like second nature.” She also stated that, “self-identifying is like claiming your veteranship ... even during icebreakers.” The participants perceived that self-certifying gave them access to resources they may not otherwise have had.

Participant 3 informed the local study site that she was a veteran using her post-9/11 benefits but that she was unsure of the balance of her educational benefits. The site worked with her, and she was able to complete her semester with no interruptions. The participants perceived that self-identifying was extremely beneficial regarding post-9/11 benefits. A self-identified veteran student is one who, during their admissions process, sought the local study site’s military resource director to submit the necessary documentation to the Veterans Affairs office and certify that they were veteran students to receive their post-9/11 educational benefits. These participants received their financial entitlements on time and their tuition was paid on time, which avoided having to be concerned about financial woes at home and at school. Participant 2 showed that self-identifying as a veteran was instrumental in her successful transition to adult learner. She said she had questions regarding classes and since she had self-identified as a veteran, she had access to resources to help with her questions. She said regarding the assistance she received, “it was amazing!”

### ***Theme 5: Meeting the Needs of Women Veterans***

The participants ranged from baby boomers to millennials, and consequently, the processes have evolved. However, the participants perceived that the local study site actively met the needs of women veterans, which aided their success to adult learner. To the site's credit, the participants also perceived that the site attempted to meet the needs of both male and female veterans. Among the most important needs the participants identified were childcare, faculty and staff equipped to teach veterans, and educational benefits arriving on time. Participant 7, a baby boomer, said, "I think the site met the needs of women veterans and the reason I say that is because after I had enrolled, I encountered and was actually in class with several veterans." Participant 7 went on to say, "I think they were addressing the needs because and especially in the arena that I was in, it was more technology-focused and most of the females I acquainted with were also women veterans in that particular field." In addition, the instructors were equipped to teach veterans, which made a huge difference. Participant 7, whose spouse was also a servicemember, said there were times when she needed to take her child to class and the instructors understood her situation and were okay with it. Participant 4, a baby boomer, believed the site did an "outstanding job" of meeting the needs of women veterans. She indicated that the site had a female veteran who oversaw the Military Science Program and who was "extremely" responsive in ensuring female veterans' received the resources they needed to be successful. Participant 4 said sometimes a veteran student needed someone to advocate for them to the Financial Aid Office when their educational benefits had not arrived, which this individual willingly did. Participant 10, whom I would

describe as a borderline baby boomer, said she noticed how the site became better at meeting women veterans' needs over time. Participant 3, a millennial, said she perceived the site met the needs of women veterans "simply by having an ROTC program and allowing a female to oversee the Military Science Program."

Participants also perceived that the local study site met the needs of women veterans by hiring a female to oversee the Military Science Program. Military Science Programs are usually led by males who are military retirees, which perpetuates the male-dominated environment these women veteran students left in the military. The participants perceived that having a female oversee the Military Science Program provided a learning environment from a female's perspective and one wherein someone was sensitive to the challenges of a woman veteran student. According to Participant 4, "coming off active duty and not having, you know, the resources anymore on a regular basis, the Military Science Program director finds the resources for them. She reaches out to alums for resources to help the veteran students."

#### ***Theme 6: Adjusting as an Adult Learner***

The participants perceived that their successful transition as an adult learner was tied directly to whether they could make some adjustments. They stated that although they had supportive networks, some of the adjustments they still had to make were juggling jobs, adjusting to the classroom culture, and being able to multitask. In addition to being adult learners, six participants were wives, five were mothers, and three were reservists. During their reserve duty, those participants have to return to active duty one



weekend each month and 2 weeks during the summer, which means they are away from home but still have to complete class assignments.

Participant 7 said, “everything had to be adjusted.” She stated that she was working fulltime and going to school and even with a supportive spouse, adjustments had to be made. Participant 5 said she her adjustment did not include childcare issues as some veteran students may have, but she said, “it was an adjustment getting off work on time to get to class.” Participant 2 also noted having to adjust to working and being an adult learner. She said, “I was working 12-hour days and every 2 months the schedule would change.” The participants who were reservists discussed how their transition included thinking as a student during school and thinking as a servicemember during reserve duty.

Participant 9, particularly, spoke about the importance of staying organized regarding her military duties and civilian classes. She said in order for her transition to be successful, “I have to stay organized and to keep my military leadership apprised of what is going on.” Participant 8 said her adjustment centered around “managing my distractions.” She said she had to make a concerted effort to focus on schoolwork rather than getting sidetracked by her distractions. She said it was not always easy and during her first semester her grades reflected it. However, she was able to reset with the help of family and mentors and get back on track. Another adjustment was the learning environment. The college classroom culture differed from the military classroom culture. The college classroom was usually in a traditional setting on campus and the classes were taught by civilian professors. Conversely, the military classroom, in addition to being in a

traditional brick and mortar building, also could be in a military hanger, a tent, or a wooded area and the classes were taught by military personnel.

Participant 6 said her challenge was adjusting to the civilian instructors versus the military instructors. She said, “the military instructors are blunt and very aggressive. Whereas the civilian instructors I experienced appeared more passive.” In several instances, the participants found themselves in college classrooms with individuals much younger than themselves. This obvious age difference resulted in some of the participants experiencing social anxiety. They had nothing in common with these individuals, and many of the participants had experienced being in a combat environment, something their college counterparts had not. Participant 1 said, “my biggest challenge was just like, adapting to being around, not just civilians, but a bunch of 18 year olds, which caused anxiety.” Fortunately, their support systems provided the encouragement they needed to overcome those anxieties and adjust successfully.

Another adjustment the participants faced was learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants’ classes were all held online, and classes were not readily available as faculty and students were learning to navigate the uncharted waters. Participant 10 said, “I’m a tactical learner; I have to do stuff. Going in the classroom was extremely important for me. However, I made the adjustment and am completely doing it.”

### ***Theme 7: Gaining Access to Services Through SVA***

The SVA organization has more than 1,500 chapters. Its goal is to advocate for the student veteran regarding programs and services to ensure their postsecondary

education success (SVA, 2016). The SVA also has a legislative arm that advocates for the preservation and evolution of the GI Bill. The research findings revealed that the participants perceived that being a part of the local study site's veteran organizations was instrumental in their access in several ways. Being involved with the SVA gave them access to advisors and or counselors equipped to address student veterans' needs, whether academic or personal. Participant 2 specified that SVA advisors were instrumental in helping her to balance her academic workload. Participant 2 also said, "I became very involved with SVA and it was appreciated because I learned a lot of things, such as about the GI Bill." Participant 4 implied that the local study site's SVA ensures the veterans have a place on campus to gather and interact. Participant 4 also said, "the SVA ensures the veterans' area is equipped with refreshments, computers, etc., whatever they may need to be comfortable." The SVA also served as a mediator between veterans students and the faculty, if needed. Participant 5 said during her interactions with the SVA member, they talked about what the expectations were. She was told that, "if you run into any problems, reach out to us, so we can run interference, like with an instructor or with finance."

Most importantly, the participants perceived that being part of the SVA attributed to their successful transition because they felt like they had an ally and they felt connected with like-minded individuals and did not feel alienated in the classroom. Participant 1 said, "my biggest challenge was just like, adapting to being around not just civilians but a bunch of 18 year olds." The SVA provided an opportunity to engage with

and encourage other student veterans experiencing these feelings to assist with a successful transition.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Creswell (2009) demonstrated that discrepant information is another strategy to check the accuracy of the findings. Discrepant cases occur when “information runs counter to the themes” (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). Real-life perspectives do not always align. When the contradictory evidence is presented, the overall findings become more realistic and their validity is stronger. I acknowledged the discrepancy and explained it below.

Participant 1 hinted that the local study site did not meet the needs of women or men veterans. When asked whether she perceived the site successfully met the needs of women veterans, she said,

I had to email the person over the GI Bill and stuff several times, just to like, make sure that my entitlements are in. At the beginning of the year I wasn't receiving my pay. I had to get back pay because he wasn't responding. It took me mailing the president and ccing a whole bunch of people for me to finally get my entitlements rolling. It's very frustrating.

The other participants did not communicate this perception. I identified this discrepancy to indicate that data exist that do not fit within the themes.

### **Data Analysis Application to Conceptual Frameworks**

Schlossberg's (1981) adult transition theory and Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory were excellent resources for understanding these women veterans in their

varied transitional states. The themes were critical in helping to understand these women veterans' perceptions of their success. The women I interviewed perceived that their success in meeting their educational goals was evident in the themes: (a) facing challenges during transition from active duty, (b) believing in self-success, (c) having pride in serving one's country, (d) self-identifying as a veteran, (e) meeting the needs of women veterans, (f) adjusting as an adult learner, and (g) gaining access to services through SVA.

Jenner's (2017) qualitative study provided insight into how the interviewed participants perceived that their self-identifying as a veteran was instrumental in their successful transition. By self-identifying, the participants had access to resources they may not otherwise have had. Schlossberg (1981) explored how a transition can impact an individual and how the individual understands, copes, and responds is instrumental in a successful transition. The participants I interviewed in this study were impacted by various challenges during their transition from active duty to adult learner; however, they understood, coped with, and responded to those challenges and were able to meet their educational goals. Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory provided a lens into how the interviewed participants' experiences as active-duty service members transformed their perspective on transitioning from active duty to an adult learner on a college campus. Gregg et al. (2016) in a phenomenological study showed that some veteran students can transition from active duty to adult learner by remembering their positive and negative experiences and transforming those events into a positive outcome. The participants I interviewed remembered their positive and negative experiences as

active-duty servicemembers and transformed those experiences in a determination to succeed.

Schlossberg's (1981) theory of adult transition addressed how adults cope with transitions in their lives, to include completing postsecondary degrees. The participants in this study were determined to successfully transition to adult learner, despite facing challenges. Although there were other factors that aided in their successful transition, the determination to succeed appeared to be a strong driving force. The participants communicated that the military did not train them to fail, despite challenges such as being in a male-dominated environment and being away from family for extended period. They perceived that they confronted transitioning to adult learner with the same vigor, noting that failure was not an option. Although the challenges that the participants faced sometimes made them question whether their transition to adult learner would be successful, they remained focused and were able to successfully transition from active duty to adult learner.

Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory was described as "learning that occurs when one experiences a disorienting dilemma" (p. 41). The transformative learning theory was relevant to this study because, according to the interviews, upon transitioning from active duty to adult learner, the participants perceived they were experiencing a dilemma on the best way to navigate the transition process. They had become accustomed to the military instructing their lives, and consequently, found the transition to adult learner disorienting and puzzling as they navigated the process.

Regardless, the participants were able to learn from their disorienting dilemma and to transition successfully from active duty to adult learner.

### **Data Analysis Application to Literature Review**

The goal of this section is to explain how the data analysis applies to the literature. A literature review is provided for each theme to support the analysis. The literature review also is the synthesis of the available literature regarding the study's themes. The seven themes are (a) facing challenges during transition from active duty, (b) believing in self-success, (c) having pride in serving one's country, (d) self-identifying as a veteran, (e) meeting the needs of women veterans, (f) adjusting as an adult learner, and (g) gaining access to services through SVA.

#### ***Facing Challenges During Transition From Active Duty***

Women veteran students, though strong in many areas because of their military training, still face challenges when transitioning from active duty to adult learner. One of the challenges they face is adjusting to a more relaxed civilian environment. Conversely, the military environment is structured and often stressful (Dyar, 2019). Another challenge that women veterans may face during their transition from active duty is PTSD.

According to Franklin (2009), women are more likely than men to meet the criteria for PTSD.

#### ***Believing in Self-Success***

Military training builds self-confidence despite barriers. As the training becomes more challenging, each time the servicemembers meet the challenges, they become more confident. As active-duty servicemembers, women are trained to believe they can

overcome any obstacle. Transitioning as an adult learner is no different. Gregg et al. (2016) conducted a study that concluded some veteran students prepare for a successful transition by remembering how they faced and overcame previous challenges while on active duty in the military.

### ***Having Pride in Serving One's Country***

The military not only builds self confidence in servicemembers, it also builds pride. The pride in serving one's country carries over to pride in other areas of one's life. In this case, it carries over to having pride in being able to meet your educational goal. According to Albright et al. (2019), the pride servicemembers have for serving their country transcends into participating in civic engagements once they transition from active duty.

### ***Self-Identifying as a Veteran***

According to the resource director at the site, women veterans who self-identify as veterans were able to gain access to various resources, such as tutoring and transitional classes. Self-certifying also enabled women veterans to take advantage of their post 9/11 educational benefits. The director said that if the site is unaware of the veteran students' status, the resources will not be made available. Women do not self-certify as veterans for various reasons. Unfortunately, fewer than 30% of the female veteran population self-identify as veterans. They are either unaware of or choose to not take advantage of veteran-associated benefits (DVA, 2014; Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017; Thomas & Hunter, 2019). Among the reasons they choose to not self-certify are to attempt to



blend into the classroom population and to escape the sense of invisibility they sometimes faced while on active duty in the military (Thomas & Hunter, 2019).

### ***Meeting the Needs of Women Veterans***

The needs for women veteran students vary. Their needs may range from child care to transitional classes. Baechtold and Sawal (2009) stated that women veterans transitioning from active duty also may have experienced sexual assault or gender bias. Issues such as sexual assault and gender bias may influence women veterans' transition to adult learner, so it is imperative that colleges and universities have qualified staff in place to assist as needed. Heineman (2017) acknowledged that women veterans are more likely to have a successful transition to adult learner and to meet their educational goals when colleges and universities are equipped to address their needs.

### ***Adjusting as an Adult Learner***

Some women veterans research the transition process extensively and are prepared to transition to adult learner. Jenner (2017) viewed preparation as key to a successful transition to adult learner. Jenner concluded in their study that female veterans who transition to adult learner with an extensive understanding of the process are more likely to meet their educational goals.

### ***Gaining Access to Services Through SVA***

The SVA provides a wealth of information for the veteran student. The SVA offers services and resources that the veteran student may not be aware of without gaining access to the organization. One of the goals of the SVA is to lobby for the veteran students and ensure they have the resources available for them to meet their goals (SVA,

2016). Through the SVA, women veteran students can access both a local and worldwide network of services and assistance.

### **Evidence of Quality**

I justified the evidence of quality by identifying a peer debriefer who signed a confidentiality agreement. The peer debriefer re-examined my assumptions and provided alternative ways of looking at the data. Lodico et al. (2010) explained that a peer debriefer examines the notes—but no raw data—and regularly meets with the researcher to provide an alternative perspective of looking at the data.

I used member checks to ensure my biases did not influence how the participants' perspectives were portrayed. Lodico et al. (2010) hinted that researchers use member checks to ensure their biases do not influence how the participants' perspectives are portrayed. To conduct the member checks, I provided a copy of the preliminary findings to each participant to read and requested their feedback. The raw data, spreadsheet, transcripts, and any other material relating to the study are stored and locked on my personal computer, which is password-protected. I am the sole user on this computer.

### **Data Analysis Summary**

I interviewed 10 participants from the local study site. The purpose of the study was to identify methods that self-identified women veteran students at this site used to successfully meet their educational goals. Merriam (2009) said that interviews are the most effective collection instrument for the qualitative research method because this instrument enables the researcher to explain and understand the participants' experiences and perspectives. I conducted member checks with the participants to ensure the data

were transcribed accurately; none of the participants requested revisions. I solicited a peer debriefer to re-examine my assumptions and provide alternative ways of looking at the data.

The conceptual framework for this study centered around Schlossberg's (1981) theory of adult transition and Mezirow's (2014) transformative learning theory, which serves as a foundation for the findings. The problem is that there are some self-identified women veteran students who are not meeting their educational goals at the local study site. The purpose of the study was to identify methods that self-identified women veteran students at the local study site use to successfully meet their educational goals. The self-identified women veteran students in the study perceived that they were able to successfully transition from active duty to adult learner because they overcame their challenges during their transition from active duty, believed in their self-success, had pride in serving their country, self-identified as a veteran, had their needs as women veterans met at the local site, adjusted to being an adult learner, and gained access to student veterans associations.

The project deliverable is a position paper that enables the researcher to convey their position regarding an issue. In the position paper, I convey the participants' experiences regarding why they were able to successfully transition to adult learner. Section 3 describes the project, which was a position paper. Section 3 also includes a project-related literature review, a project timetable, and project implementation and evaluation plans.

### Section 3: The Project

I chose the basic qualitative design for this study to explore self-identified women veterans' perceptions regarding their ability to transition successfully from active duty to adult learner. As a result of the study's findings, I chose the position paper (see Appendix) to convey the participants' position regarding their successful transition to adult learner. The goals of the project are to identify ways for faculty to assist women veteran students with adjusting to being an adult learner, identify ways to increase interaction between staff and women veteran students, and identify ways to help all women veteran students achieve their educational goals.

The position paper appropriately addresses the problem because the study findings explain how these women veteran students confronted their challenges during their transition to adult learner, experienced pride in serving their country, and believed in themselves. The women veteran students at the local study site were able to successfully transition to adult learner. I used the criteria of Schlossberg's (1981) adult transition theory and Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory to develop the project and frame the women veteran students' perceptions of why they were successful

In this section, I provide a rationale for the project to explain how the project appropriately addresses the problem. The subsequent literature review shows how the literature related to the project and suggested ways to assist women veteran students who are not completing their educational goals. A complete project description, project implications, and evaluation plan are also included in this section.

### **Rationale**

The study's findings may provide information to the local site on how to ensure the staff is equipped to address the needs of self-identified women veteran students. I chose the position paper as the project for this study. Bala et al. (2018) stated that a position paper is a written statement that discusses a specific problem and "suggests an established and agreed upon approach to the stated problem" (p. 45). My position is that a problem exists regarding women veteran students being unable to meet their educational goals at the local site; however, the problem may be rectified if the recommendations identified in the study are implemented. The rationale for choosing the position paper is that the study's findings support implementing the recommendations that would assist the site in addressing the local problem. I identified seven themes: (a) facing challenges during transition from active duty, (b) believing in self-success, (c) having pride in serving one's country, (d) self-identifying as a veteran, (e) meeting the needs of women veterans, (f) adjusting as an adult learner, and (g) gaining access to services through SVA. The themes are evidence that, with the necessary resources, the women veteran students who are not meeting their educational goals would be equipped to do so.

### **Review of the Literature**

I searched the ERIC database through the Walden University Library, Google Scholar, and journal websites to find literature for this review. The key words used in the search included *women veterans* and *postsecondary education*, *female veterans*, *higher education*, *theorists*, and *theories*. I also searched using the phrases *women student*

*veterans, female veterans transitioning to college, challenges of women veteran students, and nontraditional female students.*

Women make up roughly 21%–27% of the total veteran student population, and they also are overrepresented relative to their male counterparts among the overall veteran student population (Albright et al., 2019). Female veterans represent the fastest growing group among the veteran population (National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Despite these statistics, research among this population’s transition to adult learning is minimal. Further, Saunders et al. (2021), after interviewing 10 women veterans, found that the “current literature on student veterans, particularly women veterans, often implies a binary, gender-essentializing framework and terminologies” (p. 3), confirming the minimal amount of research on this population. Ghosh et al. (2019) conducted an exploratory study of 134 veteran students to investigate whether they were satisfied with their transition. Veteran students face many challenges adjusting to being an adult learner. Norman et al. (2015) interviewed 31 veteran students and explored their perceptions on the challenges they faced during their transition. In a special research volume, Hammond (2017) provided education and suggestions on how to study veteran students and noted that data are sparse. Hammond also noted that longitudinal data, which are used to aggregate student analyses, are insufficient. Consequently, although veterans are entitled to their post 9/11 educational benefits, navigating the process can be challenging, and some veteran students become discouraged and give up, thus not completing their educational goals. However, these data may not be accurately conveyed in the literature.

The position paper addresses the problem of women veteran students not meeting their educational goals and provides recommendations that the stakeholders at the local site can use to improve retention. The position paper can be used as a stand-alone document if needed, and its succinct format allows me to provide specific information to the reader to avoid their having to read the entire study, if they choose. Schlossberg's (1981) theory of adult transition and Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning theory were the conceptual framework for this study. Schlossberg addressed how adults cope with various transitions in their lives to include births, deaths, promotions, and completion of goals, such as postsecondary degrees. This theoretical concept applied to how women veteran students at the local study site successfully transitioned from active-duty military to adult learner on a college campus, despite having to face some challenges, such as being more likely to meet the criteria for PTSD and more likely to be victims of sexual abuse compared with their male counterparts. Mezirow (1997) described the transformative learning theory as "learning that occurs when one experiences a disorienting dilemma" (p. 41). This theoretical concept applied to this study in that the participants' extended break from academia caused some disorienting dilemmas during their transition, such as online learning and attending class with students much younger.

### **Position Paper**

The genre I chose for this project was the position paper because this genre discusses a specific problem and provides an approach to the problem (Bala et al., (2018). According to Malone and Wright (2018), position papers present useful ideas and

information to help stakeholders understand issues and to solve problems. In the study, I explored the problem that there are some self-identified women veterans who are not meeting their educational goals at the local study site. The study findings indicate that support services geared specifically for women veteran students would assist these students in meeting their educational goals and increase retention among them. This literature review explores the following topics: the transition to adult learner, postsecondary education retention, military-friendly environment, and veteran support services.

### **The Transition to Adult Learner**

As the economy changes, the need for workers who are educated increases. Bergman and Herd (2017) showed that as many veterans leave active duty, their goal is to transition to adult learner, which will help fill the need for these workers. When transitioning from active duty to adult learner, the veteran student will experience one of three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevent (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Student veterans reportedly experienced barriers during their transition from an active-duty military culture to a civilian culture, and subsequently to a civilian college or university, according to Kim and Cole (2013). Fortney et al. (2017) expressed that the U.S. military is a highly structured environment, and veteran students sometimes find it difficult to transition to the less structured environment on a college or university campus. Fortney et al. added that the transition can trigger mental illness symptoms. MacDonald (2018) explored the best practices for what nontraditional students need



based on the varied issues they face in reentering a classroom and acknowledged that the woman veteran student is among the fast-growing nontraditional student population and that their struggles to remain in school may differ significantly from their traditional student counterparts. MacDonald stated that, for this reason, college and university faculty and staff should be educated on how best to assist this group with a successful transition. Bedford et al. (2018) suggested that a viable option for veteran students transitioning to adult learner who are experiencing mental health challenges may be the electronic problem-solving treatment (ePST), “an autonomous computer-guided intervention that delivers six sessions of problem-solving therapy based on the manual used in the Improving Mood Promoting Access to Collaborative Care Treatment (IMPACT) Study” (p. 757). Chen et al. (2019), using an epidemiological survey to evaluate the mental health characteristics of 71 veteran students, identified unique characteristics of veteran students exposed to suicide that may inform prevention programming. According to Chen et al., “student veterans represent a potentially vulnerable population on college and university campuses, and efforts should be made to support their transition to adult learner as well as to their overall mental well-being” (p. 202). When veteran students transition to adult learner on college and university campuses with support services in place to socialize this population and use those services, according to Min (2021), these veteran students were not as likely to have abusive relationships.

## **Postsecondary Education Retention**

Researchers differ over what defines educational success and persistence/retention. However, Cate et al. (2017) defined postsecondary educational success as meeting academic objectives and obtaining a certificate or degree.

Recognizing the skills the women veteran students attained during active duty and giving them opportunities to integrate those skills into the classroom can serve not only as a morale booster but also a retention tool. Another possible retention tool for universities is to consider offering veteran students credits for their time on active duty, as it pertains to their academic study. Research that tracks retention rates for veteran students appears minimal at best and less for women veterans.

The SVA released a report in 2014 that compared veteran student retention rates with that of traditional students across the country (SVA, 2016). Cate (2014) remarked that the SVA report emphasized current tracking systems are not designed to accurately measure veteran students' retention rates. Nonetheless, the findings in Section 2 suggest that women veteran students are more inclined to complete their educational goals when they have the support to assist them with overcoming transitional challenges, such as personal, financial, academic; when they self-certify as a veteran; and when they are self-determined. Chan (2018) alluded that math performance, specifically beyond pre-algebra, could have a positive impact on the veteran student's retention and, ultimately, their success in completing their educational goals. Alschuler and Yarab (2016) stated that feelings of isolation can also determine a veteran student's retention. Although support may be available, the veteran student must first overcome the stigma of seeking help,

which unfortunately is part of the military culture. Fredman et al. (2019) suggested that if colleges and universities were to coordinate with the Veterans Administration through the Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership initiative, the postsecondary education retention rates may increase. Williston and Roemer (2017) suggested that having peer spaces on college and university campuses that support social interaction, such as mentoring and tutoring among veteran students, may encourage retention among this population.

### **Military-Friendly Environment**

Norman et al. (2015) interviewed 31 veteran students and explored the fact that veterans face many unique challenges after enrolling in postsecondary universities and that some are not adequately equipped to successfully navigate academic process. According to Castro (2015), some veteran students are not aware of the time commitment required to be successful. Ryan et al. (2011; as cited in Auguste et al., 2018) viewed veterans as nontraditional students and suggested that college and university advisors attempt to establish relationships with them to assist with their successful transition to adult learner.

Conversely, military assignments are not made based on whether the military installations are servicemember-friendly. Veterans are driven by a set of military orders, which are specific instructions that explain things such as what military installation they will be assigned to and what job they will be doing in that location (Department of the Army, 2019). Following those orders determines whether they are successful. University campuses are the opposite. The environment allows students the freedom to make their

own choices. Conversely, an adult learner on a college campus, if not connected to other veterans or if the campus is not military-friendly, may feel alienated, particularly during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when classes were all online. Trahan et al. (2019) interviewed 12 veteran students—within the framework of phenomenological theory—to identify how they live with social anxiety and avoidance. Their findings suggested that other factors such as age and maturity level also encourage perceptions of alienation among veteran students during their transition to adult learner. Universities are encouraged to assist veteran students in areas such as rolling admissions, preferential course registration, and self-certifying as a veteran to ensure their experience is in a military-friendly environment and one that is conducive to them meeting their educational goals (Hitt et al., 2015). It is important that veteran students perceive they are in a military-friendly environment. If not, they may be reluctant to seek assistance, whether for financial, mental health, or other issues, because they feel it denotes incompetence, irresponsibility, or weakness (Eichelberger et al., 2017).

### **Support Services**

Molina and Morse (2015) stated that research should be available that examines the connection between programs and services that universities offer to veteran students. Although schools have implemented some programs to support veteran students, few studies exist to determine which services and which universities have been able to effectively provide the veteran students a positive experience (Southwell et al., 2018). The support services and programs should include ones that encourage veteran students to self-certify during enrollment, match them with a mentor, identify any special needs

they may have, such as PTSD, and connect them with additional veteran support services to address those needs. Veteran students who may have a learning disability as a result of PTSD may experience cognitive deficits (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014) and will need specialized support. In addition, support services should also be available for those who may need academic support, such as tutoring.

Eakman et al. (2019) interviewed 162 veterans in a nonexperimental, cross-sectional correlational design study and implied that it is not uncommon for veteran students to have mental health conditions, thereby hindering their academic success and warranting the necessary support services to assist them. Gonzalez and Elliott (2016) stated that postsecondary institutions have begun offering their faculty members military science training on mental health topics. This demonstrates the universities' commitment to providing support services to the veteran students to assist with their successful transition. Artime et al. (2019) acknowledged that if colleges and universities were to increase accessibility to campus services for veteran students, that would be an important step toward improving this population's mental health and increasing their academic performance.

Unfortunately, gaps in support services exist, often when the veteran needs it most. In a qualitative study by Walsh (2017) drawing on grounded theory, 12 women servicemembers were interviewed and participated in focus groups to provide a better understanding of the support services provided to women servicemembers returning from deployments. The gaps showed the lack of support services before, during, and after deployments. Walsh (2017) stated that campus officials should consider implementing

specific services that assist women veteran students who have deployed. Women veteran students who deployed and may have experienced sexual assault or gender identity issues are particularly vulnerable. Their male counterparts do not commonly experience these two challenges.

Isbell et al.'s (2019) study was based on the experimental learning theory, which suggests that when the nontraditional student has the support services available to succeed, the individual is more confident and more likely to accomplish meet their educational goal. Isbell et al. (2019) suggested that institutional support services help veteran students navigate the admissions process and gives them the confidence to be successful. Veterans can benefit from participating in civic engagement and volunteering as it enables them to be more socially connected and gives them more access to social support networks (Albright et al., 2020).

Currier et al. (2017) in their qualitative study focused on 502 participants—251 veteran students and 251 nonveterans. Their exploratory analysis revealed that the veteran students were more likely to seek support at a VA medical hospital or Vet Center. Currier et al. insinuated that as the U.S. military reduces its forces and the number of overseas combat operations, colleges and universities should be prepared to provide mental health support services to a substantial number of veterans who are transitioning to adult learner. Smith et al. (2017) conducted a study to assess how well veteran students function as adult learners compared with their civilian counterparts. Four hundred and forty-five civilians and 61 veteran students participated in the 10-month study and completed online surveys. Smith et al. concluded that individuals who have experienced

trauma will have more difficulty transitioning as an adult learner. Based on these findings, Smith et al. concluded that it is not uncommon for veteran students to feel alienated during their transition to adult learner and that trauma influences the veteran student's sense of connecting on the college campus and that colleges and universities should provide the necessary support services to assist the veteran student.

Zogas (2017), in their study, also acknowledged the need for veteran student support services and intersected the social and medical problems listed among the challenges servicemembers face during their transition to adult learner to show the many ways that the transition can be disorienting and difficult. Zogas recognized that health and stress can affect the veteran student and stated that:

It is practically impossible to draw meaningful boundaries between mental health concerns, physical health concerns, and social concerns as they manifest in veterans' lives. Consider, for instance, a veteran who is having trouble finding work and enrolls in school. Perhaps back pain makes it difficult to sit for hours in a college classroom, in the company of classmates who are a decade younger, and perhaps exhaustion from insomnia makes it difficult to study effectively. Are these medical problems? Are they combat-related problems? The more holistic idea of "transition" is useful for thinking about veterans with problems like this.

(p. 8)

Massa and Gogia (2017) explored longitudinal data collection on student veterans. They concluded that "statewide longitudinal data systems should do more than quantify and provide evidence of accountability with state and federal programming" (p.

8). They also concluded that support services with better veteran student representation and classification are necessary to measure whether support services for this nontraditional population are effective.

MacLean (2018) conducted a 3-year qualitative study that included a community college, a 4-year college, and seven other postsecondary institutions. Fifty veterans were interviewed and the ethnographic approach was used to observe veterans at events, meetings, and in classes. MacLean (2018) concluded that colleges have responded overwhelmingly to develop support services to assist the veteran student with their successful transition to adult learner.

The post 9/11 educational benefit provides financial support to veteran students. However, the veteran student may need to coordinate with the campus financial aid office for support assistance on submitting the required forms to the VA. A more in-depth understanding of BAS students is needed to determine whether the student is attending college using veteran's benefits, parental status, degree program, and a measure of economic circumstances that denotes whether the student received any form of need-based financial aid at any point during their enrollment.

In a study by Meza et al. (2019), the extent to which support programs at Washington State served the intended population was explored. Meza et al. (2019) surmised that additional research is needed to determine whether veteran student at that particular site are using financial support from their veteran's benefits. College and university faculty and staff understand the need for support among women veteran



students and its high priority; however, among higher education, the support process for safety and health continues to evolve (Albright et al., 2019).

### **Literature Review for Position Paper Recommendations**

#### **Provide Gender-Specific Support Services**

Dodds and Kiernan (2019) conducted a qualitative study to examine the lives of women veterans. As a result of the study, it was concluded that the current body of literature does not fully explore women veterans and the unique challenges they face. In addition, women veterans have some needs that are uniquely different from their male counterparts owing to the need for gender-specific services (Dodds & Kiernan, 2019). Sander (2012) noted that during their transition from active duty to adult learner, many women veterans experience feelings of isolation and face challenges such as having to reinvent themselves. Colleges and universities need to be aware of these gender-specific concerns and work to better serve the female veteran populations on their campuses (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Policy and Planning, 2007).

#### **Create Military-Friendly Environment**

As active-duty servicemembers, women veterans become accustomed to their peers looking like them and having the same goal, which is to uphold the constitution of the United States. However, once these women veterans transition from active duty and transition to adult learner, it is not uncommon for them to feel isolated (Smith et al., 2017). According to Chen et al. (2019), veteran students are a vulnerable population and colleges and universities should ensure the adult learning environment is conducive to meeting their educational goals. It is important that colleges and universities create a

military-friendly environment. Among the services available in a military-friendly environment are support services to assist veterans with navigating the admissions process (Isbell et al., 2019). Williston (2017) implied that having spaces where veteran students can hang out together on college and university campuses may encourage retention among veteran students.

According to Trahan et al. (2019), factors such as the veteran students' age and maturity level may alienate them from their class peers. Having special events on Memorial Day and Veterans Day to celebrate veterans and having veteran representation among the senior faculty and staff would be instrumental in creating a military-friendly environment and help to mitigate some of those feelings of isolation. Eichelberger et al. (2017) demonstrated that veteran students may not speak out in class or seek support if they perceive that the adult learning environment is not veteran friendly.

### **Create a Mentor Program**

The military resource director at the local study site said mentors do not have to necessarily be students, but they do need to be veterans. A mentor can serve several purposes for the woman veteran student: it keeps her academically accountable, it gives her an ally—particularly during her first year in school, and it may provide her an advisor. Headden (2009) assessed that veteran mentors understand their veteran student mentees and the stresses they face and the mentors can offer support in a way that nonveterans cannot. Because they share some common experiences, veteran mentors can meet with their veteran mentees one-on-one and establish relationships that will help them to understand their mentees' goals and experiences (Castro, 2015). Mentoring these

veterans students can serve dual purposes: help the students feel connected and improve their academic outcomes, according to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005).

### **Track Veteran Students Progress From Enrollment Through Graduation**

Evans et al. (2015) indicated colleges and universities should consider implementing a program to track its women veteran students. The students would be entered into the program's system upon admission to the college or university. The system would capture data on why women veterans attend college, whether they are full or part-time students, and whether they seek assistance from their academic advisors or the veterans affairs office for veteran-related issues. The information would add to the body of knowledge regarding why some women veteran students are able to successfully meet their educational goals (Evans et al., 2015). The data also would help colleges and universities in providing the most effective assistance for women veterans who are not successful in meeting their educational goals.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

It is necessary that leadership in higher education communicate with veteran students and faculty and staff to determine the best way to support students in meeting their educational goals. Leaders and department chairs should collaborate often on ways to update their curriculums to ensure they are meeting the needs of these nontraditional students. This literature review suggests ways that the local site can assist women veteran students with meeting their educational goals. Wilson et al. (2016) noted that many colleges and universities are willing to support this population with succeeding. One way these leaders can determine whether their programs are effective and monitor the

retention rate among women veteran students is by implementing and/or modifying a tracking system that tracks these students upon their admission.

The literature review for the position paper cites literature that is relevant to and supportive of each recommendation. Conducting the review enabled me to understand how the recommendations connected to the literature. I was able to see what research had been conducted and to identify gaps. As a result, I was able to suggest recommendations and add to the body of knowledge.

The findings in Section 2 suggest women veteran students are more inclined to complete their educational goals and to have increased retention rates when there are support systems in place to assist them with overcoming transitional challenges such as personal, financial, or academic; when they self-certify as a veteran; and when they are self-determined. Ironically, none of the literature I reviewed indicated that such a tracking system was in place.

### **Project Description**

The problem of the study is that some self-identified women veteran students are not meeting their educational goals at the local study site. This project description identifies data collected from the findings. The project description includes an overview of the project, steps of how the project was conducted, and the project's clear goals, methods, and objectives (Alred, et al., 2011). The summary of the study findings showed that the women veteran students faced challenges during their transition from active duty and made adjustments as an adult learner. Other findings showed that the women veterans believed in themselves, were proud of serving their country, and believed self-

certifying as a veteran was beneficial. In addition, the findings showed that the women veterans students believed the local study site met their needs and believed having access to services through SVA was beneficial.

The position paper for stakeholders and faculty and staff at the local study site is the project that was best suited based on the study findings. A position paper was chosen for this project because it was the best project to convey the outcome of the study findings. The position paper was the best project for this study because based on the study's findings, it allows the reader to see that the problem is valid and defensible. The position paper also can be used to transfer knowledge regarding the local problem. Sanders (2005) identified how to write a position paper to express one's views, which in this case, would be why some self-identified women veterans are not meeting their educational goals. A position paper will provide information on the perceptions of women veteran students to stakeholders and faculty and staff at the local study site. The position paper will help stakeholders and faculty and staff with deciding what support services are needed to assist women veterans meet their educational goals. The position paper is divided into four sections: Introduction, which includes the background of the problem and summary of data analysis and findings; Evidence from both literature and research; Recommendations; and a Summary/Conclusion.

### **Needed Resources and Existing Support**

Several resources are needed to present this position paper to the stakeholders at the local site. The primary resource needed to submit this position paper to the faculty and staff at the local study site is access to the stakeholders. Invitations to the meeting

will be sent to the stakeholders via email, and I will follow up with a phone call to confirm their attendance. I will solicit the assistance of the military resource director to secure an appropriate meeting location at the local site and to ensure the location has audio/visual capabilities. In addition to sending copies of the position paper to the stakeholders to read before the meeting, I will have extra copies available during the meeting.

### **Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions to Barriers**

The COVID-19 pandemic may preclude a face-to-face meeting; however, programs such as Zoom and Skype will make it possible to explain the position paper. A virtual meeting may be more amenable to the attendees because it does not involve travel. If that is the case, I will set up the virtual meeting and provide the access link for all attendees. I will distribute electronic copies of the position paper to attendees before the meeting, whether it is held virtually or face-to-face, and I will have additional copies available on the day of the meeting. Another possible barrier may be loss of computer access. To resolve this issue, I will have audio access and/or an additional computer in place to serve as backups. If time becomes a barrier for any or all of the attendees, I will schedule alternative dates, as necessary.

### **Project Implementation and Timetable**

The steps to implement the project are as follows:

1. Present the project initially during the spring 2022 semester and field questions from faculty and staff.

2. Conduct a follow-up meeting during the fall 2022 semester to address any questions not answered during the initial meeting and to assess what changes, if any, were implemented.
3. Conduct another follow-up during the spring 2023 semester and assess what changes were made and the impact the changes had on the veteran students' retention.
4. Prepare to schedule another meeting, if necessary.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

My role is to present the position paper to the stakeholders at the local study site. At some time during the spring 2022 semester, I plan to email a copy of the position paper to the military resource director and brief the stakeholders and faculty and staff on the position paper and be prepared to address any questions they may have. There will be a question and answer window at the end of the presentation. If some of their questions require a follow-up, I will plan to schedule a date and time amenable to the majority to meet and provide feedback. At some point during the fall 2022 semester, I intend to circle back with the local study site's military liaison to see what changes if any, have been implemented. The military resource coordinator at the local study site will help with contacting the stakeholders and faculty and staff and with locating a conference room for the meeting. This individual has been my contact with the local study site from the beginning.

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

Rossi et al. (2018) said the evaluation plan provides the overall approach to the evaluation and clarifies the intent of the evaluation. A formative evaluation plan will be used for this project. The goal is to present the plan to the key stakeholders and receive their feedback. The key stakeholders include the site's military resource director, the college president, and the vice president of academic affairs, who will subsequently determine whether to implement changes based on the plan. The site's current programs can be improved using the feedback, and periodic feedback will ensure programs remain effective. According to Linfield and Posavac (2018), formative evaluations seek ways to improve current programs. I want to improve the current programs to assist future women veteran students with meeting their educational goals.

The position paper will focus on how the local study site can implement some of the findings to assist self-identified women veterans who are not meeting their educational goals with being able to do so. The formative evaluation plan will follow these steps:

1. Receive feedback via email from the key stakeholders after the initial meeting in spring 2022 and address any questions. The purpose of the feedback is to determine whether the key stakeholders accepted the recommendations, accepted the recommendations with revisions, or rejected the recommendations.
2. Follow up in fall 2022 to check whether there are changes in the veteran services at the site and whether the changes were effective.



3. Conduct a follow-up during spring 2023 to check whether additional changes have been made to the veterans' services.
4. Schedule another meeting, if necessary.

The goals of this project on self-identified women veteran students transitioning successfully to adult learner are to provide the local study site's stakeholders with information on the perceptions of why some women veteran students are able to meet their goals, the support service they perceived was beneficial, and the support services they wished were available. The project can support and assist self-identified women veteran students with meeting their educational goals at the local study site. Additional goals of the project are to identify possible ways for stakeholders to assist self-identified women veterans with adjusting to being an adult learner, identify ways to increase interaction between staff and self-identified women veterans students, and identify ways to increase retention rates among self-identified women veteran students.

I hope the project's recommendations will give the stakeholders a broader lens to assess the support needed to retain these self-identified women veteran students. Moreover, it is my hope that the site will implement some, if not all the recommendations, as they have proven to work for some self-identified women veteran students, as reflected in the suggestions by the participants and recommendations in the literature review. The primary goal of the project is to help the self-identified women veterans who are not meeting their educational goals to be able to do so.

## **Project Implications**

If more women veterans are able to successfully transition from active-duty military to adult learner on a college campus, they will be able to reap some of the benefits of getting their degree, such as more employment opportunities. This social change will positively impact their quality of life because with the increased salaries, they will have financial peace of mind and improved self-esteem.

The project may benefit the stakeholders by giving them a wider lens from which to assess the women veteran students' needs. The position paper may help the local study site to assess its current support services, such as financial aid, and then modify them as needed.

One example of this project's implications is the financial impact it will have on the participants. The financial aid office undoubtedly is aware of the social challenges these women veteran students face when their forms are submitted to the VA late, and subsequently they receive their education benefits late. In addition to the stress of not knowing whether they will be allowed to remain in school, there is the stigma of embarrassment. Knowing that the local site has support systems in place to mitigate these type issues would encourage other women veterans. The findings from this study could benefit self-identified women veteran students for generations to come.

## **Summary**

The position paper identifies recommendations to help the site equip the self-identified women veterans for success. The mentors will assist the self-identified women veteran students with navigating life on campus or with navigating their online course.

Some of the findings reflect methods self-identified women veteran students used during successful transition. Other findings reflect new methods recommended to assist self-identified women veteran students with being successful. Having an SVA on campus gives these veteran students a sense of community and of belonging. Section 3 also includes the rationale, a review of the literature for the project, the project evaluation plan, and the project implications. The rationale described why the position paper was chosen as the project and how the summary addresses the study's problem. The Literature Review presented current literature that was related to the study and explored how the position paper appropriately addressed the problem. The project evaluation plan listed the steps for the formative evaluation, and the project implications summarized the possible social impact the project would have. Section 4 consists of reflections, project strengths, and conclusions for this study and explains how the position paper will give the local study site's stakeholders the opportunity to consider new programs to assist self-identified women veterans with meeting their educational goals.

#### Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Colleges and universities have made progress in providing resources to support the woman veteran student; however, there is room for improvement. In this section, I reflect on my writing experience but also the research experience, particularly the data collection and analysis stage. It was interesting to hear the participants' perceptions on why they were successful. This section also includes the project's strengths and limitations and a discussion of my experience as a scholar, practitioner, and agent of social change. The section ends with concluding comments.

##### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

I chose the position paper as the project for this study. The position paper was the most effective tool in this case to highlight the findings from the data analysis. In the position paper, I provided the study overview, suggested recommendations based on the findings, and highlighted resources the participants perceived as most effective in helping them to meet their education goals (i.e., mentors). Bala et al. (2018) said the benefit of a position paper is that it examines a specific problem and suggests an approach to the problem.

One project limitation was that I partnered with only one organization for the study. Another project limitation was there was minimal existing research available on this topic. Partnering with at least one other site could have strengthened the study's findings. Despite the limitations, the project's participants appreciated having a format to speak their truth. I hope that the findings from the project will assist the local study site with helping all women veteran students enrolled to meet their educational goals.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

The local problem was that some women veteran students transitioning from active duty to adult learner were unable to meet their educational goals. An alternative approach to researching this problem could have been to expand the sample to several other colleges and universities. I also could have conducted a focus group interview as the instrument to collect data instead of individual interviews. However, I am not convinced a focus group interview would have yielded such transparent responses. I say that because even during the interviews, participants asked who would see the Zoom video and whether actual names would be used in the study. An alternative approach would be to interview women veteran students who were not successful in completing their educational goals, but I did not pursue that approach. Another approach would be to interview the staff/faculty who served veteran students.

An alternative solution to the local problem would be to track the progress of the self-identified women veteran students and ensure the faculty and staff are supporting them administratively and academically. Another alternative solution would be to partner veteran faculty and staff members with women veteran students as academic mentors. These mentors would be in addition to the peer mentors.

### **Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change**

I am a writer-editor by profession. The doctoral journey, however, challenged me on a different level. I had to learn scholarly writing, and roughly midway through the program, I had to switch from APA version 6 to APA version 7. I was forced to see things through a different lens, which enabled me to grow. Regarding scholarship, I

discovered theorists and theories and how to expand on current research. Belenky et al. (as cited in DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011) mentioned that the lack of research in this area is similar to silencing women who never really had a voice. This study contributes to the current research, and it is my hope that research will continue to be conducted on this topic. As a result of this study, I have acquired the skills necessary not only to be a scholarly writer but also to be a better researcher.

The operational tempo of the doctoral process was daunting and intimidating, especially in the beginning. I was surprised at the amount of research and writing necessary to develop the project. Listening attentively to the participants and analyzing the data carefully helped tremendously with developing the project. As I began the data collection, the project started to develop and the themes emerged. Although I often referred to the checklist, it still was not readily apparent that the genre of a position paper was the obvious choice for the project. However, the more I wrote and analyzed the data, it became more apparent that the position paper was the obvious choice for the project. While conducting this project study, I researched the local problem and provided realistic solutions to solve it.

Developing the position paper was interesting. I had not written one before, so it was challenging using literature to identify best practices. Fortunately, I was able to do so. It was not difficult to establish a relationship with the women veteran students. As I too am a women veteran student, there was already an initial connection. I shared some of my experiences as an undergraduate with them. A formative evaluation will give me the opportunity to communicate recommended improvements to stakeholders.

Leadership is sometimes defined as being able to influence individuals and/or a situation to accomplish a task. Change is not always easy, and challenges can make it more difficult, particularly when the obstacles are not physical but emotional or psychological. As a leader and doctoral student, I had to take ownership of and responsibility for this study if I wanted to complete it. I had to set priorities to meet deadlines. My initial expectations were unrealistic. However, as time went on, my chair helped me to set realistic deadlines for myself, and my disappointment lessened. There were some times during this journey when I felt isolated, and I was glad for the residencies. The two I attended allowed me to establish long-term relationships with others in my cohort and to learn from Walden University faculty and staff. There were also times when I had to sacrifice attending an event or outing, hence the priorities. To remain accountable, a member of my cohort and I conducted periodic check-ins. I also did weekly check-ins with my chair. Both accountability measures—those with my cohort member and with my committee chair—proved to be invaluable in keeping me motivated and on track.

The more I evolved into a scholarly writer, the more I relied on the university library. I actually attended a webinar on how to use the library. As basic as it sounds, it was extremely helpful on the most effective way to conduct searches. The writing center was another very useful resource. I applaud Walden University for setting students up for success. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, resources—whether for research, writing, library, or other needs—were readily available.

There were times when I had to encourage myself. It was not always easy finding the balance between work, family, church, and school. Having a routine helped, but sometimes, admittedly, I would get out of the routine. Fortunately, I was able to reset and continue. I am at this point in the journey because I was able to adapt and adjust.

### **Self-Analysis as a Scholar**

This quote sums up my definition of the goal of an education: “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education” (Carson et al., 1992, p. 17). As a scholar on this doctoral journey, I contributed to the body of knowledge by providing significant information to the current research. I was taught at a young age about the importance of giving back to one’s community. Giving someone the gift of education is giving them something no one can ever take from them. Reflecting on my journey as a scholar, I learned that scholars are intentional in their research, they are patient, and they are persistent. As a scholar, I had to develop good study habits and organizational skills. I also had to be a good time manager. This process has given me the confidence to seek other opportunities to continue my professional growth as a researcher and an adult educator.

### **Self-Analysis as a Practitioner**

As a practitioner, I will be able to collaborate with institutions of higher learning on their proven success methods for women veteran students. To be an effective practitioner, I will need to remain knowledgeable on not only the changes in higher education as they pertain to women veterans but also challenges that these women face



during their transition. As part of my passion to serve in the community, I welcome opportunities to mentor individuals both professionally and nonprofessionally. Mentors, who are also a type of practitioner, have an opportunity of establishing relationships with their mentees, earning their trust, and guiding them through this journey call life.

Merriam (2009) referred to practitioners this way: an individual notices a problem, conducts a study, collects data, analyzes that data, and summarizes the results. As a practitioner, I learned that you cannot answer the problem without first researching the problem.

### **Self-Analysis as a Project Developer**

The position paper was the most effective project based on the study findings. Although I had never written a position paper, it was not that difficult to process. I reflected on the findings of the participants to determine the best way to approach the project. As an editor by profession, I understand the importance of the bottom line up front format because your audience may not have the luxury of time to read an entire article. If you have a position, the audience expects you to state your position and to be able to support your position with evidence (McGregor, 2019). I stated the local problem and suggested an approach to the problem. The position paper will give not only stakeholders but also readers who may be interested in the topic an overview of the study without their having to read the entire document.

### **Reflection on the Importance of the Work**

Lim et al. (2018) stated that a faculty and/or staff member's daily interaction with a student veteran is critical for that student's socialization as a civilian. I learned that

when women veterans transition from active duty to adult learner, this is a life-changing event. They are not the same people they were before enlisting into the armed forces. Many of them have been in combat environments. Some may be suffering from visible and nonvisible disabilities. Being able to transition successfully as an adult learner can enrich their lives by allowing them to reap the benefits of getting their degree. Some of these benefits include increasing their employment opportunities and being in an environment to build relationships with veterans and traditional students. “A college education is strongly connected to success in the labor market. Not only do more jobs in the labor market require advance degrees, but the demand is projected to outstrip the supply” (Mukamal et al., 2015, pp.18-19). This social change could have a positive impact on their quality of life.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

As women veterans transition to adult learner, it is important that they are socialized on the college and university campuses. This means they will become acclimated into the campus culture and not feel alienated. The findings revealed that the participants perceived that being socialized attributed to their successful transition. Being socialized also enables the women veteran students to establish relationships with not only students but also faculty and staff and to share some of their experiences as a member of the armed forces. As a result, the stakeholders may better understand the needs of the women veteran students. Based on the study’s findings, I have recommended several options on how to support the women veteran students with their successful transition.

Women veterans represent the fastest growing group of veterans. The total population of this group is expected to increase at an average rate of about 18,000 women per year for the next 10 years. In 2015, they represented about 9.4% of the total veteran population, and in that same year, more than 150,000 used their education benefits (National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Saunders et al. (2021) noticed the lack of research for this population and the need to gain a better understanding of how to effectively support this population. Future researchers may consider this research question in their study: How does the dearth of research on women veteran students' successful transition to adult learner impact the body of knowledge on this nontraditional student? The mixed methods design would be appropriate because it allows the researcher "to build on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data" (Creswell, 2010, p. 535). In such a study, researchers could conduct interviews to collect qualitative data, then administer a questionnaire to collect quantitative data to analyze separately. Those same future researchers may consider writing an executive summary to convey their findings. Because of my passion about seeing this population well served and set up for success, I would be interested in conducting research to see whether the amount of research has increased.

### **Conclusion**

As I conclude this doctoral study, I think about my research journey. I began the journey knowing that I embodied who I was studying: a woman veteran student who had transitioned from active duty to adult learner. I knew first and foremost that I had to remove any biases I had formed. Although each participant's transition was successful,

the findings of the study reveal that their transitions were not without challenges. Self-determination, pride in serving their country, and strong family support were among the recurring perceptions for their successful transition. The participants also voiced their pleasure at having their voices heard in the study.

In the position paper, I discussed the problem and suggested recommendations to the problem that may assist the stakeholders at the local site with helping the number of women veteran students meet their educational goals. The recommendations are to provide gender-specific support services, create military-friendly environment, create a mentor program, and track veteran students' progress from enrollment through graduation. The goal of the suggested recommendations is to establish options for the faculty and staff to assist self-identified women veterans with adjusting to being an adult learner, identify ways to increase interaction between the faculty and staff and self-identified women veterans, and identify ways to increase retention among self-identified women veterans.

If stakeholders implement at least some of the recommendations listed in the position paper, perhaps future women veterans may be able to avoid some of the challenges that the participants faced. Moreover, the retention rate among those women veteran students whose transitions have not been successful may increase if some of the recommendations are implemented. Further, I hope this study contributes to current research and helps this deserving population not only at the local study site but also nationwide.

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## Appendix: The Project

### Position Paper

Women veterans are among the fastest growing population of veteran students pursuing postsecondary education degrees, and in 2015, over 149,000 women veterans used their post 9/11 GI benefits, according to the National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics (2017). They also are overrepresented relative to their male counterparts among the overall veteran student population (Albright et al., 2019). Research regarding the successful transition of this demographic from active duty to adult learner, however, still has gaps. Southwell et al. (2018) surveyed 199 veteran students in this study and that acknowledged that few studies exist to determine whether the current college and university veteran student support programs are effective. Further, Saunders et al. (2021) after interviewing 10 women veterans during their study, stated the “current literature on student veterans, particularly women veterans, often implies a binary, gender-essentializing framework and terminologies “ (p. 3). Ghosh et al. (2019) during their exploratory study of 134 veterans and Norman et al. (2015) having interviewed 31 veteran students noted that veteran students face many challenges adjusting to being an adult learner. Eakman et al. (2019) interviewed 162 veterans in a nonexperimental, cross-sectional correlational design study and insinuated that it is not uncommon for veteran students to experience mental health conditions that may affect their transition. Moreover, Currier et al. (2017) suggested that colleges and universities be prepared to provide mental health support to a sizeable number of veterans who are transitioning to adult learner. Bedford et al. (2018) studied 46 student veterans and suggested the

electronic problem-solving treatment (ePST) may be a viable option for veteran students transitioning to adult learner who are experiencing mental health challenges. As a way to support veteran students who may be experiencing mental health issues, Gonzalez and Elliott (2016) hinted that some colleges and universities are offering their faculty and staff training on mental health issues. Hammond (2017) suggested that although veterans are entitled to their post 9/11 educational benefits, navigating the process can be challenging and some veteran students become discouraged and give up, thus not completing their educational goals. According to Lewis (2020), women at West Point also found themselves being faced with transitional challenges.

Having the post 9/11 GI benefits is one reason women enlist in the military; however, the problem is that some self-identified women veterans are not meeting their educational goals, and subsequently not taking advantage of the benefit. Receiving their degree will not only have a financial impact on these women, as it will make them more marketable, but it will also have a social impact on them. They will be able to experience increased levels of civic engagement, such as volunteering. They also will be able to experience increased societal benefits (Baum et al., 2013).

The purpose of the position paper is to present the findings and recommendations of the study that explain the perceptions of 10 self-identified women veterans. These women are alumnae and current students of a medium-sized co-ed 4-year public university in an urban setting. The university has an annual enrollment of roughly 6,300, and approximately 77% are full time. The university offers programs that range from certifications to doctorates. Informed by the theory of Schlossberg (2011) and Mezirow

(1978), the research question of this basic qualitative study focused on the perceptions of self-identified women veteran students regarding their success to transitioning from active duty to adult learner.

The following themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) challenges faced during transition from active duty, (b) belief in self-success, (c) pride in serving their country, (d) self-identifying as a veteran, (e) meeting the needs of women veterans, (f) adjustments made as an adult learner, (g) Student Veterans of America.

The following recommendations were created as a strategy to assist self-identified women veteran students with meeting their educational goals:

- Provide gender-specific support services
- Create military-friendly environment
- Create a mentor program
- Track veteran students from enrollment through graduation

### **The Problem**

Almost 280,000 women have served post-9/11 in Afghanistan and Iraq (Disabled American Vets, 2010). In 2015, more than 149,000 women veterans used their post 9/11 GI education benefits, according to the National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics (2017).

The problem, however, is that some women veterans are unable to take advantage of those earned benefits because they face challenges such as being a single parent, higher divorce rates, and unemployment (Iverson et al., 2016; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015; Reppert et al., 2014). Hamrick and Rumann

(2011) pinpointed that even though researchers have begun to focus on the increased number of veterans enrolling in institutions of higher education, comparatively few studies exist on how female veterans are affected when they transition from active duty to adult learner.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is based on Schlossberg's (1981) theory of adult transition and Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning. These theories are critical to understanding the women veteran students' perception on their success. Schlossberg (1981) focused on how adults cope with various transitions in their lives to include births, deaths, promotions, and completion of goals, such as postsecondary degrees. Mezirow's theory (1997) focused on transformative learning. This theory applies to women veteran students in that it explores how the women veteran students cope with the disorienting dilemma of transitioning from active duty to adult learner.

### **Purpose and Design**

The purpose of my study was to identify methods that self-identified women veterans at the local study site use to successfully meet their educational goals. I used a basic qualitative design, which according to Merriam (2009), explores uncovering phenomena instead of simply understanding the cause and effect of a situation. The research question was: What are the perceptions of self-identified women veterans regarding their success to transitioning from active duty to adult learner? I conducted virtual open-ended, semistructured one-on-one interviews with 10 current students from

the local study site. The sampling procedure was purposeful criterion-based sampling (Lodico et al., 2010), and included women veterans who were over 18 years old. The sample represented various majors and different branches of the armed forces. I obtained permission from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the local study site's IRB to collect data for the study. All participants signed an informed consent form before participating in the study. The form described the voluntary nature of the study, its background, confidentiality, risks, and contact information.

### **Results**

I transcribed the participants' interviews using Otter.ai and analyzed them by initial codes that were later grouped into categories and lastly themes. As I coded the data, I remained focused on how their responses addressed the research question. One of the participants indicated that being able to integrate some of her military experiences into some of her college assignments increased her morale, and subsequently encouraged her to remain in school. As a result of the analysis, these themes emerged: challenges faced during transition from active duty, belief in self-success, pride in serving their country, self-identifying as a veteran, meeting the needs of women veterans, adjustments made as an adult learner, and Student Veterans of America.

#### **Challenges Transitioning From Active Duty to Adult Learner**

Bergman and Herd (2017) suggested that as many veterans leave active duty, their goal is to transition to adult learner, which will help fill the need for the lack of educated workers. Fortney et al. (2017) implied that the U.S. military is an environment that is highly structured, and veteran students sometimes find it difficult to transition from that

environment to the less structured environment on a college or university campus.

MacDonald (2018) explored the best practices for what nontraditional students need based on the varied issues they face in reentering a classroom and acknowledged that the woman veteran student is among the fast-growing nontraditional student population and that their struggles to remain in school may differ significantly from their traditional student counterparts. The participants in the study experienced various challenges during their transition to adult learner. All participants, however, did not face the same challenges. Some of the recurring challenges mentioned were fear of failure, fear of leaving the military, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants, having experienced successful military careers, communicated that they feared failing academically. Participant 2 stated that “she had struggled academically and was put on academic probation at one point.” Fortunately, she was able to take a break, reset, and get on track. Participant 2 revealed that during a conversation with one of her professors, she was not asked directly whether she was going to complete her postsecondary studies but “more so about life, about what we want, about what we know we deserve, about what we know we can tackle, and it was like a light-bulb moment.” Other participants also communicated experiencing light bulb moments when encouraged by faculty, which they perceive as being instrumental to their successful transition.

### **Belief in Self-Success**

Cate et al. (2017) noted that postsecondary success meant meeting your educational goals. The participants stipulated that their belief that they could succeed was not automatic or instant. There was not a single factor that drove their belief but myriad

factors such as a determination to succeed, a positive work-life-school balance, family and faculty support, and pride in serving their country. Regarding a determination to succeed, participant 3 said, “I had no choice; it was a goal. And because it was a goal, I was hard on myself. There was no ifs, ands, or buts, I was completing it.” Participant 5 said, “I never doubted that I couldn’t compete it, but there were some challenges in a particular class.”

### **Pride in Serving Their Country**

Participant 5, a retired colonel, was commander of a unit. She said, “the military trains you as a leader no matter what. Whatever your job is, you are being trained to lead in that job.” The participants perceived their roles as leaders and pride in representing their respective military branches as key to their successful transition to adult learner. Consequently, being able to successfully transition to adult learning gives them that same pride, and according to Albright et al.(2020), increases the likelihood of them participating in civic engagements..

### **Self-Identifying as a Veteran**

Participant 1 said, “I feel like self-identifying is something that I did not realize I did. It was like second nature.” She also stated that, “self-identifying is like claiming your veteranship...even during icebreakers.” The participants perceived that self-certifying gave them access to resources they may not otherwise have had.

Participant 3 informed the local study site that she was a veteran using her post-9/11 benefits but that she was unsure of the balance of her educational benefits. The site worked with her, and she was able to complete her semester with no interruptions.

### **Meeting the Needs of Women Veterans**

Participant 7 said, “I think the site met the needs of women veterans and the reason I say that is because after I had enrolled, I encountered and was actually in class with several veterans.” Participant 7 went on to say, “I think they were addressing the needs because and especially in the arena that I was in; it was more technology-focused and most of the females I acquainted with were also women veterans in that particular field.” Walsh (2017) expressed that colleges and universities could meet the needs of this population by implementing specific services to assist women who veteran students who have deployed.

### **Adjustments Made as an Adult Learner**

The participants perceived that their successful transition as an adult learner was tied directly to whether they could make some adjustments. Participant 5 said, “it was an adjustment getting off work on time to get to class.” Another adjustment the participants faced was learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants’ classes were all held online, and classes were not readily available as faculty and students were learning to navigate the uncharted waters. Participant 10 said, “I’m a tactical learner; I have to do stuff. Going in the classroom was extremely important for me. However, I made the adjustment and am completely doing it.”

### **Student Veterans of America**

The Student Veterans of America (SVA) organization has more than 1,500 chapters. Its goal is to advocate for the student veteran regarding programs and services to ensure their postsecondary education success (SVA, 2016). The SVA also has a



legislative arm that advocates for the preservation and evolution of the GI Bill. The research findings revealed that the participants perceived that being a part of the local study site's veteran organizations was instrumental in their access in several ways. Being involved with the SVA gave them access to advisors and or counselors equipped to address student veterans' needs, whether academic or personal.

Most importantly, the participants perceived that being part of the SVA attributed to their successful transition because they felt like they had an ally and they felt connected with like-minded individuals and did not feel alienated in the classroom. Participant 1 said, "my biggest challenge was just like, adapting to being around not just civilians but a bunch of 18 year olds." The SVA provided an opportunity to engage with and encourage other student veterans experiencing these feelings to assist with a successful transition.

### **Recommendations**

I determined the recommendations based on the research study findings, the theoretical framework, and the literature reviewed. The goals are to identify ways for the faculty and staff to assist self-identified women veterans with adjusting to being an adult learner, identify ways to increase interaction between the faculty and staff and self-identified women veterans, and identify ways to increase retention among self-identified women veterans. I propose that the local study site consider the following recommendations to assist the self-identified women veterans:

- Provide gender-specific support services
- Create military-friendly environment

- Create a mentor program
- Track veteran students progress from enrollment through graduation

### **Provide Gender-Specific Support**

Women veterans face many challenges during their transition from active duty. There are some needs that are common to both men and women veterans during their transition from active duty to adult learner. However, some gender-specific needs for women veterans transitioning to adult learner do exist. Sander (2012) noted that many women veterans experience feelings of isolation during their transition from active duty to adult learner. Among the challenges they face is having to reinvent themselves as adult learners on college campuses. The support systems they knew while on active duty no longer exist. Higher education institutions need to be aware of these gender-specific concerns and attempt to address them to better serve the female veteran populations on their campuses (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Policy and Planning, 2007). Dodds and Kiernan (2019) examined the lives of women veterans in their qualitative study using a scoping review methodology. They concluded that current literature does not wholly examine the full complexity of women veterans and their difficulties. They also determined that women veterans have some needs that are uniquely different from their male counterparts and should be addressed accordingly. Consequently, the need for gender-specific services is very much needed. I recommend that the local site implement gender-specific support services such as orientation classes, recurring social hour, etc. to help mitigate this challenge.

### **Create Military-Friendly Environment**

According to Smith et al. (2017), it is not uncommon for veteran students to feel alienated during their transition to adult learner. Veterans are part of the self-sufficient, self-contained organization, called the U.S. Armed Forces, that has a culture all its own. This population is driven by military orders (Department of the Army, 2019). These individuals go to war together and learn to depend on one another in life and death situations. Women veterans are a small minority of that self-sufficient, self-contained U.S. Armed Forces. Unfortunately, having such a close comradeship with a group of individuals for an extended period and then transitioning from active duty and leaving that environment to go to a college campus can be a culture shock. Chen et al. (2019) noted that student veterans are a vulnerable population and that colleges and universities should ensure the environment is conducive to their successful transition to adult learner. According to Isbell et al. (2019), college and university support services help veteran students navigate the admissions process. Williston (2017) implied that having peer spaces on college and university campuses may encourage retention among veteran students.

I recommend the local site create a military-friendly environment to assist women veteran students with their transition by having special events on Memorial Day and Veterans Day and ensuring there is veteran representation among the senior faculty and staff. I also recommend having a building, conference room, or something similar where veterans can relax between classes and get to know one another. Trahan et al. (2019) proved that factors such as the veteran students' age and maturity level may alienate them

from their class peers. I recommend having a space for the veteran students to mitigate that issue. Given that, another recommendation is to have veterans assist veteran students with enrollment and admissions. Another reason for the recommendation is because Eichelberger et al. (2017) demonstrated that veteran students may be reluctant to seek support if they do not perceive the environment is military friendly. Lastly, I recommend the local site have permanent veteran representation of student organizations, such as student government.

### **Create Mentor Program**

I recommend that the local site establish a mentoring program for the women veteran students. There was a general consensus among the study participants that having a mentor was critical to their success as an adult learner. A mentor can serve several purposes for the woman veteran student: it keeps her academically accountable, it gives her an ally—particularly during her first year in school, and it may provide her an advisor. Mentors do not have to necessarily be students, but they do need to be veterans, according to the local study site's military resource director. Veteran mentors understand the stresses their peers are facing and can offer support to new veteran students in a way that nonveterans cannot (Headden, 2009). Veteran mentors can meet with their veteran mentees one-on-one and establish relationships that will help them to understand their mentees' goals and experiences and to assist them with tools for success (Castro, 2015, p.35). If the site works with its local Veterans Administration, some of the veterans employed there can serve as mentors. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) illustrated that

mentoring students in college helps them feel connected and improves their academic outcomes.

### **Track Veteran Students From Enrollment Through Graduation**

The local site does not capture data on why women veterans attend college, whether they are full or part-time students, or whether they point out veteran-related issues to their academic advisors or the veterans affairs office, according to the military resource director. Without some sort of way to track the veteran students, it is difficult to ascertain whether the current veteran student programs are effective.

Having a vehicle to capture this information will enable the site to track the veteran student's progress and/or identify where the needs are (Evans et al., 2015). I recommend that the site implement a tracking system to capture information such as whether the student is a veteran, their program of study, any special needs required, and their assigned mentor. This record should be created during admissions and follow the veteran student through graduation. Sander (2012) implied that women, particularly, tend to play down their status as a veteran or do not mention it at all. One reason women veterans tend to play down their status as veterans is because they are attempting to re-identify with being a woman after being in a male-dominated environment for an extended time (Dodds & Kiernan, 2019). To avoid possibly embarrassing the veteran student, I recommend incorporating these type of questions during the college application process.

### **Summary**

The GI Bill was designed to reward veterans for serving their country by paying for their college education and making them marketable in the work force. Unfortunately, for some, the reward is not easy to obtain. The study revealed that although the participants in this study faced challenges, they were able to overcome them and obtain the seemingly elusive GI Bill, and subsequently complete their educational goals. The challenges identified by the participants included finding a work-life balance, navigating the VA red tape, and overcoming feelings of isolation after leaving the military. If the site decides to implement the recommendations of the study, three goals would be accomplished: the faculty and staff would have the tools to assist women veteran students with adjusting to being an adult learner; (b) the interaction among the faculty, staff, and students may increase, subsequently creating a military-friendly environment; and (c) the veteran students would have the tools to meet their educational goals and subsequently retention rates would increase.

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